

# Deconstructing the Myth of Women Who Have Been Forced into Sex Trafficking in India

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## Abstract

Trafficking of Women in India is a grave issue that has affected millions of women and girls, and the numbers have only been increasing daily. With more frequent occurrences of natural calamities and global pandemics like COVID-19, people from marginalized communities have become more vulnerable alongside the increasing cases of trafficking and exploitation of women post-pandemic period. Traffickers are increasingly expanding their avenues in establishing connections with vulnerable and marginalized people, especially from rural areas prone to the vagaries of nature and where economic opportunity is abysmal; most often, traffickers take to different roles to lure unsuspecting potential victims like posing as agents in the name of providing good jobs in large and metropolitan cities.

Despite the seriousness of the issue, the majority of the masses mostly remain uninformed or prefer to stay aloof from it due to the issue being a topic of taboo. The paper shall attempt to deconstruct several myths and hearsay surrounding forced sex trafficking in India as a crucial step in addressing this multifaceted dimension of the problem of sex trafficking. It focuses on socioeconomic vulnerabilities, psychological coercion, social stigmatization, and limited choices that often propel women into the sex industry. The article has been framed to bring insights into the nuances and challenges faced by women; it highlights the importance of trauma-informed care, education, community awareness, and collaborative efforts in social work interventions. The integration of these holistic approaches is necessary to realize the goal of breaking the cycle of exploitation, with an aim to offer the victims an opportunity to reintegrate into society and rebuild their lives. The paper is based on the study of women trafficked from rural hinterlands of Indian subcontinents for sexual exploitation to various metropolitan cities of India. It attempts to comprehend the intricacies of their life and the complex nature of the problems they face through the continuum of *source-transit-destination* of trafficking syndicates.

**Keywords:** Trafficking, Trafficking of Women, Sex Industry, Prostitution

## Introduction

“It was ten pounds a time, straight sex, eight minutes. Then the maid would knock on the door, and if he wanted to stay longer, it was extra money; plus if he wanted you to take your top off, it was an extra. You always had six or seven waiting to come in; the door never stopped, and it was a twelve-hour shift. The inside of my thighs used to Kill” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 672).

Trafficking of women is one of the horrendous issues that threaten the dignity of women through time and space. This menace has been going on for centuries; in the ancient period, it was in the name of tradition, whereas now it is a human rights issue. Trafficking of human beings is an international crime and a violation of fundamental human rights (Government of India 2008).

India ratified the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on Trans-National Organized Crime (also called the Palermo Protocol) in May 2011. The said Convention defines trafficking, as per Article 3, as *“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012)

*Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.* " (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012)

Despite there being laws in India which criminalize trafficking in person, women and children have often been victims of these crimes that take place. The laws have often been violated by different agencies involved in the vicious circle of trafficking, making it difficult to stop the trafficking of a person completely.

### **The Reality of Sex Trafficking**

India is a source, destination and transit country for sex trafficking. Ninety per cent of India’s trafficking problem is internal. The most vulnerable people trafficked and forced into the sex industry are those from the most disadvantaged social strata- lower caste Dalits, members of tribal communities, religious minorities, and women and girls from excluded groups. The impact of poverty has affected the lives of people very negatively. It needs to be understood that in this twenty-first century, the impact of globalization and the neo-liberal market has transpired more rapidly because the poor have become poorer. These compel them to confront more challenges to earn a decent living (Department of State- United States of America, 2015).

2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2023
5,788	5,900	2,278	2,260	1,714	2,189	6,533

According to the data provided by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB),

The trafficking numbers have kept fluctuating as during COVID-19, the government could not track the numbers, and people also did not report cases. The other main reason for the increase in number was India sharing the border with Bangladesh and Nepal. Bangladesh and Nepal is known human trafficking hubs, and the natural calamity in Nepal in 2015 led to more girls being trafficked in India in 2016. Similarly, after the pandemic, people migrated to India looking for better job opportunities, leading to an increase in numbers for trafficking. In India, Telangana, Maharashtra, and Assam recorded the highest number of trafficking cases in 2021, and geographical locations, especially cross-border trafficking, are the major reasons behind increased trafficking (The News Minute, 2022).

A study done by National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of India, Trafficking of Women and Children in India, the largest study on the issue across 18 states, concluded that 73% of women in situations of commercial sexual exploitation had their first sexual intercourse before the age of 18, making them a child victim of sexual assault (as the law stands today in Protection of Children from Sexual Offence Act, 2012) assault (Bachpan Bachao Andolan, 2012), and 84% were victims of trafficking through

the promise of jobs and/or marriage (thereby making them victims of abduction through deceit, kidnapping through enticement, amongst other crimes).

In a report on Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE) report by Satyarthi's NGO, Global March Against Child Labour, the lower estimate of the size of the commercial sexual exploitation industry in India is \$35 billion, around 2 per cent of the GDP. *"This black money,"* Satyarthi said, *"propels the most heinous crimes against girls and women."* (Punj, 2017) The organization highlighted the case of a trafficker from Jharkhand who was found with INR 66 crore for allegedly having 'placed' some 10,000 girls from Jharkhand, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh in 'work'. *The money movement in the trade is astounding. Global March Against Child Labour estimates that brothels make anywhere between Rs 1.5 crore and Rs 14.4 crore per year, while the industry as a whole generates well in excess of Rs 2 lakh crore in illegal money.*

Sex trafficking is a deeply troubling issue in India, with an estimated 20-30 million sex workers in the country. These women often come from marginalized communities, face poverty, and lack access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Many have been coerced or lured into the industry due to circumstances beyond their control.

Contrary to the popular notion of physical captivity, a significant number of women in the sex industry are not forcibly held against their will. Instead, they may be victims of psychological, emotional, and economic coercion. Factors such as poverty, lack of education, familial debts, or domestic violence can push them into the trade, making them vulnerable and trapped in a cycle of exploitation.

### Deconstructing Myths on Sex Trafficking

Human trafficking is a complex and pervasive issue surrounded by numerous myths and misconceptions. The deconstruction of the myth is essential for informed intervention and support for victims. Sex trafficking is a very misunderstood and stigmatized issue and there are constant myths. To address the problem of sex trafficking, it is crucial to deconstruct these myths and focus on the facts:

1. **Victims come from all backgrounds:** Trafficking affects people of all genders, ages, and socio-economic backgrounds, dispelling the notion that it only happens to vulnerable populations.
2. **Not all are immoral:** Victims of sex trafficking are not engaging in sex work willingly due to moral deviance. Many are coerced or manipulated into this situation against their will.
3. **It's not about money:** Contrary to popular belief, the majority of victims do not choose sex work for financial gain. They are often trapped in a cycle of exploitation and economic desperation.
4. **No pleasure involved:** Victims do not derive pleasure from their experiences; they endure physical and psychological trauma.
5. **Desperation is the driving force:** Many individuals end up in sex trafficking due to desperation, limited options, and a lack of support systems.

Contrary to the belief that sex work is primarily a matter of choice or immoral behavior, many victims find themselves ensnared in the trade due to coercion, manipulation, or desperate circumstances. The pervasive myth that criminalizing sex work can solve the problem often overlooks the complex root causes. Instead, decriminalization may be a crucial first step in addressing the psychological and social needs of both victims and the wider community. This hidden and underground industry affects individuals from all backgrounds, necessitating a collective awareness and commitment to combat this issue. Beyond the immediate exploitation, the health implications extend to spreading sexually transmitted infections, calling for preventive measures and health remedies. Moreover, the impact of sex trafficking ripples

through families and relationships, emphasizing the need for thoughtful, inclusive approaches at both policy and community levels. Recognizing the pivotal role of social workers in supporting survivors and facilitating their reintegration into society is paramount, underlining the need for a multi-faceted approach to tackle the complexities of sex trafficking.

### Push and Pull Factors for Trafficking

Rather than solely viewing those involved in sex trafficking through a criminal lens, it's crucial to consider their origins and the factors that push and pull them into this dire situation. When we closely examine the sources from which victims come, we can gain insights into the push and pull factors that traffickers exploit. Many individuals are coerced into sex trafficking against their will and do not have the opportunities to escape this plight. It's essential to deconstruct the myth that these individuals willingly choose this path. Instead, a deeper understanding of the circumstances and vulnerabilities that lead people into sex trafficking is necessary to combat the issue effectively. By addressing the root causes and providing opportunities for those at risk, we can take a more holistic approach to prevention and support. The 'rural' push and urban 'pull' are instrumental in creating a conducive context for trafficking. The urban settings offer better opportunities for many among the rural populace. However, in such a context and taking advantage of the situation, various agents/ middlemen visit the village and find scope to induce families by offering money, job opportunities, and marriage proposals to lure women.

According to the study done by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the share of interstate trafficking is estimated to be around 89 per cent. The centres of commercial sexual exploitation identified during the study were the pink triangle between Agra, Jaipur and Delhi. Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra appeared to be the main states from where trafficked persons are sourced. The metro cities are the most frequent destination points. (Sen & Nair, 2005). The India's trafficking patterns indicate 90% of trafficking in person is domestic (i.e. intrastate and interstate trafficking), with only 10% taking place across international borders (Hameed, Hlatshwayo, Tanner, Turker, & Yang, 2010).

As far as trafficking within India is concerned, the Trafficking in Persons Report (2018) pointed out that ninety per cent of the women trafficked within India belonged to the most disadvantaged groups. The women trafficked into sexual exploitation, mainly from North-east India were brought to the metropolitan cities with the promise of jobs and were forced into prostitution as well as forced marriages (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011). A 2016 report by HAQ Centre for Child Rights revealed that 90 per cent of trafficking in India is internal, and that the victims were overwhelmingly from India's lowest economic and social strata. The HAQ report argues that increased trafficking between states is the result of better connections, more mobility and rapid urbanisation (India Today, 2017).

According to McArthur (1996), the low social status of women and bleak economic prospects has resulted in an increase in the trafficking of women. The conditions under which women are sold vary according to the spread of trafficking in the particular locale; the age of the girl; and the economic status of her family. Often, the traffickers target the countries' and places which have the most disadvantaged social economic strata, particularly targeting the most vulnerable sections of the society who are experiencing poverty or discriminated in the society.

Push Factors	Pull Factors
Poverty and economic desperation	Promise of higher income
Lack of employment opportunities	Deceptive job offers

Limited access to education	False promises of a better life
Social and political instability	Illusion of a glamorous lifestyle
Family or community pressure	Manipulative recruitment tactics
Gender-based discrimination	Lured by the prospect of love
Escape from conflict or violence	Human trafficking networks
Lack of social support and protection	Belief in a brighter future
Substance addiction	Demand for commercial sex
Psychological vulnerabilities	Control and coercion by traffickers

*Table 1 Push and Pull Factors*

## Conclusion

Mitigating sex trafficking is not very easy and requires a multi-faceted approach with the involvement of various stakeholders and Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs). Sex Trafficking has been going on for centuries; the trends and modus operandi have changed due to globalization and technological advancement. Various agencies working to combat sex trafficking, such as Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs), stakeholders and social workers, can work together to mitigate the issue. There needs to be enhanced training and capacity building of LEAs and stakeholders to recognize, investigate and respond to sex trafficking cases efficiently. Similarly, there is a need for coordination and collaboration of LEAs and NGOs to ensure holistic and coordinated responses to the cases. We need to safeguard and prioritize the victims.

Similarly, we need to constantly work on educating the public and making them aware of the realities of sex trafficking. Social workers can play an essential role in mitigating it and also play a very important role in supporting survivors and preventing future victimization. The role of social workers in this issue encompasses prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation. All in all, deconstructing the myths surrounding women forced into sex trafficking in India requires collective action from all segments of society. LEAs, stakeholders, and the public can contribute to a comprehensive approach that prioritizes prevention, protection, and rehabilitation, ultimately leading to a more just and compassionate society.

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