The Nexus of Trafficking, Cybercrime, and Conflict

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Abstract

The nexus between trafficking, cybercrime, and conflict is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive understanding of the underlying socioeconomic, political, and technological factors. This study examines the causes perpetuating the exploitation of people due to social constructs, systemic inequalities, and policy gaps, while also analysing the legal gaps in definitions and systemic exclusions that facilitate vulnerability in trafficking. The digital economy has significantly impacted the landscape of cybercrime and human trafficking, creating a bidirectional relationship where cyberspace is utilised to generate trafficking victims, and trafficked individuals are coerced into participating in cyber-scams. This study highlights the evolving nature of these criminal activities, their adaptability to new technologies, and their potential to fuel armed conflicts. Comparative GDP analysis between conflict-prone and stable countries identifies the economic and social vulnerabilities that contribute to human trafficking. This study also examines the case of Laos and the rising cases of human trafficking and cyber slavery, emphasising the need for bilateral cooperation and proactive measures to dismantle trafficking networks. While demonstrating intent, existing legal frameworks in India have limitations in enforcement, necessitating an integrated approach to law enforcement. The study underscores the importance of rethinking development strategies to address the systemic roots of vulnerability and prioritise equity, intersectionality, and systemic change. Addressing human trafficking requires a paradigm shift that recognises the diversity of victims' experiences and addresses systemic policy gaps through comprehensive reforms and collaborative efforts at the national and international levels.

Introduction

The intersection of trafficking, cybercrime, and conflict is complex and multifaceted, with each strand influencing and exacerbating the others. Unstable societies after the armed conflicts often result in amplifying existing drug cultivation and trafficking, while the narcotics industry strengthens insurgent movements and weakens state capacity (Cornell, 2007). This crime-rebellion nexus can create vested interests in the continuation of armed conflict, as criminal involvement may generate an economic function of war for insurgent groups (Cornell, 2005). Cybercrime has introduced new dimensions to trafficking with no geographical boundaries that make tracing much harder. Cyberspace is being utilised to trap potential trafficking victims, and trafficked individuals are being coerced into participating in cyber scams on behalf of the actual traffickers whose identity is hidden. This bidirectional relationship between cybercrime and human trafficking represents a crucial part of the evolution in organised crime (Sarkar & Shukla, 2024). As human traffickers have moved beyond traditional methods of human trafficking with no geographical limitations to include educated individuals, particularly men, highlights the flexibility of traffickers in leveraging new skill sets (Sarkar & Shukla, 2024). While cybercrime requires our immediate attention to act, research suggests that a relatively smaller number of countries host the major cybercriminal threats (Bruce et al., 2024). The interconnectedness of trafficking, cybercrime, and conflict exhibits significant challenges for law enforcement, social workers who are rescuing the victims, and policymakers. The evolving nature of these transnational organised crime activities, their willingness to adapt to new technologies and situations, and their potential to be fuelled by armed conflicts necessitate a comprehensive and collaborative approach to address this nexus effectively.

This research paper aims to examine the causes that prolong the exploitation of vulnerable populations due to socially constructed norms, system inequalities, and policy gaps. We also evaluate the legal gaps in definitions and systemic exclusions that open the door for vulnerability in trafficking. A nuanced understanding of the problem at hand can be understood by analysing the social, economic, and gendered dimensions of trafficking that enable us to build a comprehensive policy to address systemic vulnerabilities that enable exploitation.

Trafficking and Technology

Trafficking has become a more complex problem to tackle with multiple layers, with technological development, exploitation of vulnerable populations, economic inequality, and transnational criminal ecosystems intersect. Technological advancement has improved our lives for the better and has also created a fertile ground for cyber-enabled crimes. The digital infrastructure of trafficking has evolved to a different stage where wrongdoers are protected by anonymity on the internet through a marketplace like "Silk Road," through which they have access to data that they could use to their advantage (Phelps and Watt, 2014). The following figure presents the top categories that are available on Silk Road:

Top 20 categories of items available worldwide on Silk Road.[a]

Category	#. Items	Pct.
Weed	3338	13.7%
Drugs	2207	9.0%
Prescription	1784	7.3%
Benzos	1193	4.9%
Books	955	3.9%
Cannabis	880	3.6%
Hash	821	3.4%
Cocaine	633	2.6%
Pills	473	1.9%
Blotter	441	1.8%
Money	406	1.7%
MDMA (ecstasy)	393	1.6%
Erotica	385	1.6%
Steroids, PEDs	376	1.5%
Seeds	375	1.5%
Heroin	370	1.5%
Opioids	344	1.4%
DMT	343	1.4%
Stimulants	292	1.2%
Digital goods	261	1.1%

[a] This table is being displayed with the permission of its author, Nicolas Christin.

Source: PHELPS and WATT, 2014

Traffickers make use of these tools to exploit vulnerable sections of society, evade law enforcement, and expand their operations beyond the country's borders. Cybercrime enables trafficking by providing a platform for recruitment, coordination, and financial transactions, with no geographical limitations. Unlike the visible web, where social networks are freely accessed by the general public, major illegal dealings are executed on deep web platforms that provide a marketplace where it is easy to make business deals in cryptocurrencies, such as Bitcoin, that enable untraceable transactions. Due to its porous borders with other Asian

countries, such as the India-Myanmar border, and its location near the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos) and the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran), India is prone to drug trafficking and human trafficking. More vulnerable populations, such as refugees from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, are in a precarious position where they are easily caught in this trap.

The Digital Economy and Cybercrime in Trafficking

The digital economy has significantly impacted the landscape of human trafficking, creating a complex and bidirectional relationship between these illegal activities. Cybercrime and human trafficking have become increasingly interlinked in the digital era. Cyberspace is being utilised to identify and generate victims of trafficking, while trafficked individuals are being coerced into participating in cyber scams (Sarkar & Shukla, 2024). This bidirectional relationship represents an evolved version of organised crime, where technology facilitates human trafficking, and conversely, trafficking becomes a means to execute cybercriminal activities. The complex convergence of these two domains has led to a notable increase in victims of both cybercrime and trafficking (Sarkar & Shukla, 2024). Interestingly, the digital market economy has also influenced the evolution of cybercrime markets. These markets have transformed from unruly, scam-ridden platforms to mature, regulated mechanisms that greatly favour trade efficiency, mimicking legitimate online marketplaces like eBay (Allodi et al., 2016). The digital platform provides a suitable environment for criminals to exploit vulnerabilities in systems for their own benefit by being anonymous (Sabillon et al., 2016).

The increasing number of cybercrimes, facilitated by new technologies, applications, and networks, including the Deep Web, has contributed to the expansion of illegal activities in cyberspace (Sabillon et al., 2016). Interestingly, the Internet and related communication technologies have empowered individuals relative to traditional organised crime groups like gangs or mafias (Goldsmith & Brewer, 2014). This shift allows criminals to commit crimes more autonomously through self-instruction and limit their involvement in particular networks, a concept referred to as "digital drift" (Goldsmith & Brewer, 2014; Holt et al., 2018). Many well-educated individuals are becoming victims of this, blinded by their dream to lead a better life abroad, underscoring the vulnerability of the victims and the seamless execution of traffickers in reeling them in (Sarkar & Shukla, 2024).

Several other digital platforms, such as The Onion Router and crypto trading markets, allow the sale of illegal goods without being identified. As everything is done online, bitcoins pave the way for anonymous transactions, making it tough to trace the financial flows linked to trafficking. The evolving nature of this system has made monitoring, identification, and intervention significantly harder, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The digital platform acts as a double-edged sword that can be used fraudulently by anyone; this demands a balance between privacy rights and public safety. Facebook, a social media app, has a policy that allows data tracking through cookies for marketing when we log in as a user, often unnoticed by Facebook users. These data can be accessed by anyone and misused through the black market without our knowledge. Economic vulnerability is one of the root causes of trafficking in young populations, as it changes the perception of seeing the foreign job opportunities (Barner et al., 2014). Populations from developing countries in South Asia are targeted with the promise of a better lifestyle abroad through a well-planned and implemented process of reeling them outside the country. Many youths, predominantly from rural areas in Southern Indian states such as Tamil Nadu and Northern Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar, are becoming victims of trafficking (Trafficking in Persons Report, 2024).

Unlike traditional narratives of falling into the trap as victims due to poverty, migration status, and well-educated individuals lured for better employment opportunities, new avenues for traffickers to target victims have emerged irrespective of socioeconomic status. Individuals who have a lack of understanding of digital dangers fall prey in digital interactions. The same technology that enables human trafficking can be leveraged to prevent, detect, and respond to trafficking. From the usage of AI-powered monitoring mechanisms to blockchain technology for transparency, technology can be used to stop trafficking before it occurs. With the help of blockchain technology, especially in the recruitment stage, fake recruitment of educated people and other deceptions can be prevented, as transparent records of the whole procedure enable us to track the movements of individuals. This prevents the exploitation of workers in global supply chains by disrupting traffickers' access to legitimate markets. To disable trafficking networks, existing measures need to shift from reactive to proactive, technology-driven approaches. The cycle will continue until trafficking routes are identified in great detail with the help of technology to catch perpetrators. However, the use of technology must hold some ethical considerations.

Tackling jurisdictional issues and legal hurdles is one of the major challenges in combating cybercrime (Holt, 2018), which could potentially make it difficult for law enforcement to address trafficking activities conducted through digital means. In order to effectively combat human trafficking, there is a need for collaboration between legal and technological sectors to establish standardised norms and processes for digital evidence collection and processing (Rakha, 2024). Additionally, the development of robust legal frameworks and digital forensics in criminal investigations is crucial in addressing these evolving challenges (Ombu, 2023; Rakha, 2024; Ukwen & Karabatak, 2021).

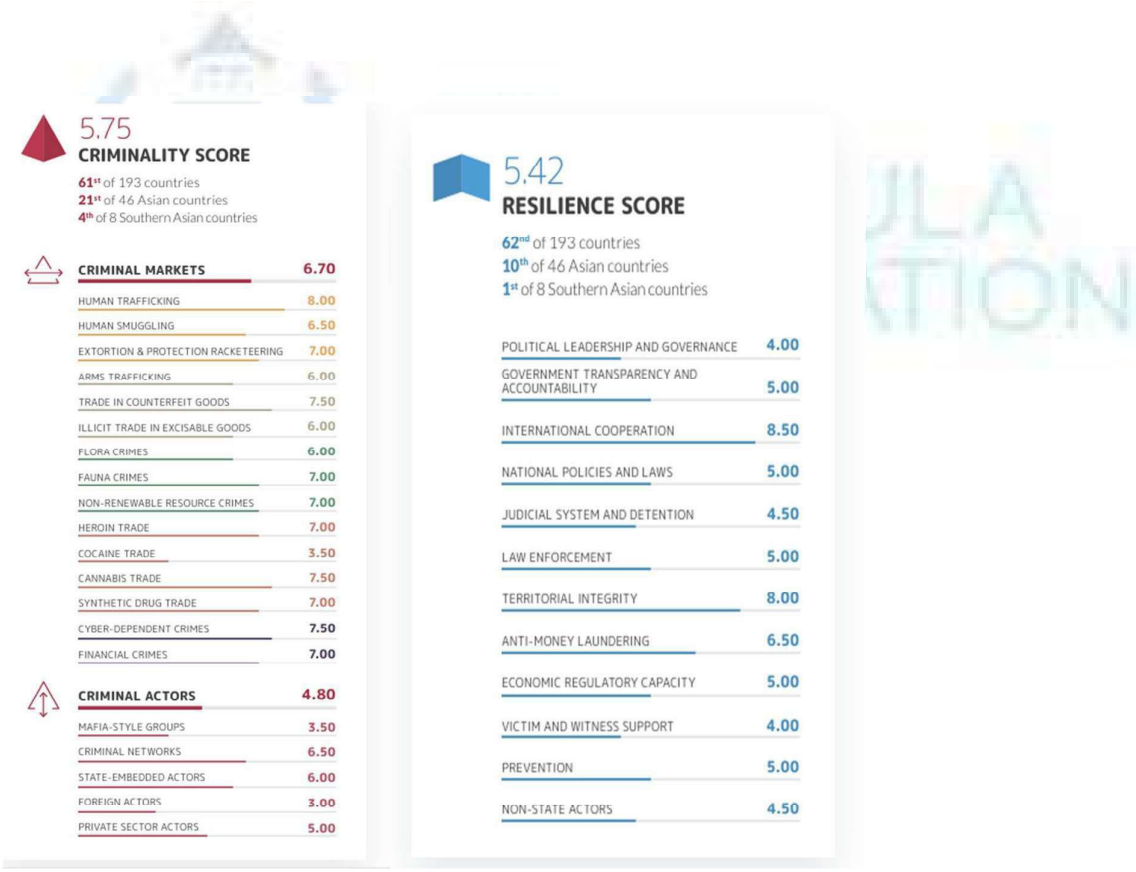
Transnational Crimes in India: The Drug and Human Trafficking Crisis

Transnational trafficking crimes in India have emerged as significant challenges with far-reaching implications. India has evolved into a major hub for human trafficking, serving as both a source and destination country for victims (Joffres et al., 2008). Annually, around 800,000 women and children are being trafficked across international borders, with 80% ending up in forced prostitution. India is both a supplier of trafficked individuals to Gulf States and Southeast Asia and also receives victims from Nepal and Bangladesh (Joffres et al., 2008). While human trafficking is often framed as an organised crime issue with multiple stakeholders involved, this perspective may overshadow its human rights implications for the victims. The criminalisation of human trafficking has become a global phenomenon, partly due to its framing as an organised crime problem rather than a human rights violation of human beings on a large scale stuck inside a system that is larger to trace (Simmons et al., 2018).

Approximately 40% of the world's opiate users are in South Asia, according to the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB). As India is located between the largest opium-cultivated regions, India has become a transit country for drug trade (Banerjee, 2024b). In 2023, Myanmar became the world's top opium producer, with illegitimate crop cultivation expanding from 99,000 acres to 116,000 acres. India is also a point of disembarkation for cocaine trafficking, but the cocaine market is smaller than that of other drug markets. Since trading is done through the deep web, anyone with the Internet has the probability of being engulfed. The top destinations for cocaine on the domestic front are the upper-class and urban areas in New Delhi and Mumbai. While metropolitan areas have become major consumers, it

is highly likely that as the Internet has penetrated even rural areas, they could also be exploited easily.

India holds the 61st rank out of 193 countries, with a Criminality Score of 5.75, indicating a sufficiently high prevalence of criminal activities, according to the Global Organised Crime Index (OCI, 2023). As you can see from the data below, India ranks 21st among Asian nations and 4th in South Asia, highlighting its regional vulnerabilities and challenges. The dangerous criminal markets score high rates of human trafficking (8.00), cannabis trade (7.50), and synthetic drug trade (7.00). Organised crime in India is multifaceted, and there has been an increase in international traffickers working through the domestic population. Anonymity with technology, clubbed with large networks working around the world, poses a severe threat to the citizens of all countries. Every nation must be committed to direct intervention in dismantling the trafficking networks, as not addressing the issue effectively puts the other person in another country at risk.



Source: Global Organised Crime Index 2023

India's Resilience Score of 5.42, ranking it 62nd globally, suggests a moderate institutional capacity to counteract criminal activities. High market demand in drug trafficking demands tackling factors that fuel these activities, such as socioeconomic inequality and unemployment. Drug trafficking does not limit itself to that alone; it also results in increasing incidents of narco-terrorism. As mentioned in the INCB Report 2023, Monika Ashish Batra, Deputy Director General of India's Narcotics Control Bureau, said, "Investigations indicate that proceeds of drug trafficking are increasingly being used to fund terrorism and to support armed groups." By breaching a country's borders, these illegal activities raise concerns about the state's ability to control borders and protect its citizens from external threats.

Structural Violence and Dependency Theory

Human trafficking is to be seen as an outcome of systemic global inequalities in society and the international system rather than a separate criminal act, which it's not; it involves multiple stakeholders working on different levels to lure people in to be exploited (Barner et al., 2014). In order to understand how the system perpetuates the vulnerabilities exploited by traffickers, we can premise the issue through the lens of dependency theory and structural theory. Dependency theory emphasises that the "core" nations (developed countries) exploit the "peripheral" nations (developing countries) for cheap labour and rich resources; this creates a never-ending cycle of economic dependence and underdevelopment for the developing countries in the global south. Owing to fragile global markets, peripheral countries face structural inequality that aggravates poverty and instability. These factors make individuals, particularly women and children, vulnerable to traffickers who exploit their desperation.

A Norwegian political scientist, Johan Galtung, who coined the term 'structural violence,' describes how systemic inequalities have an impact on individuals by denying them access to basic needs. When an individual is systematically affected by economic and political structures that deprive certain segments of society of their basic needs, it is structural violence (Christie, 1997). In terms of human trafficking, this manifests as economic deprivation and the denial of well-being and self-determination. These factors create vulnerabilities for common people that traffickers exploit, pushing them into circumstances where they become susceptible to trafficking. For instance, the socioeconomic elements that act as enabling factors of trafficking are often overlooked in legal responses, which tend to

focus on prosecution and protection rather than addressing the daily reality of socioeconomic inequality that is driving human trafficking (Chuang, 2006). Understanding the concept of structural violence is essential in recognising the root cause of trafficking in building preventive measures instead of focusing on what to do about it once the harm is done to individuals. Trafficking is a violence at a slow pace (Schwarz, 2022). Acknowledging these frameworks offers a better understanding of conceptualising trafficking as a gradual accumulation of systemic oppression rather than a single event that happens out of nowhere.

For instance, women who are doing unpaid work domestically, over-represented in low-wage and uncertain employment, are disproportionately targeted due to the feminisation of poverty. Practices that are built over a period of time into cultural norms and patriarchal systems lead to vulnerabilities that persist in society (Gacinya, 2020). Gendered power structures within families, communities, and economies limit women's access to high-value education and employment opportunities, enabling them to become perfect targets for exploitation by traffickers (Peters, 2023; Pimentel, 2024). Exploitation is deeply embedded in gendered societal structures and institutions, creating a system of dependency that traffickers have enough people to exploit in this system. The intersection of structures with micro and macro interactions either reinforces the structural and institutional impacts on potential victims.

Women are disproportionately affected, where 70% of detected trafficking victims are women, with one-third of cases involving children, as per the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (2020). These intersecting oppressions are magnified by class hierarchies, rebellions, political strife, military regimes, civil wars, and short-lived governments, which are indicative of social inequality (Belen Villegas Pla, 2023). The United Nations have come up with six critical dimensions of social inequality: income distribution, asset distribution, employment opportunities, access to knowledge, political representation, and access to medical services. These elements create suitable grounds for human trafficking, converting it from a localised issue to an international-level exploitation crisis. As Weatherburn (2015) noted, human trafficking originates from gender inequality, characterised by limited employment opportunities, educational discrimination, and cultural submissions. Trafficking is complex, with a convergence of the overlapping identities of individual and external factors that intensify vulnerabilities. Policies addressing trafficking often fail to account for these complexities, oversimplifying victim narratives as stories of threats and rescue.

These theories enhance our perspectives and emphasise the need to target underlying environments that lead people from developing countries to accept dangerous labour migration assignments (Chuang, 2006), bring awareness to the issue, and proactively advocate for addressing basic economic, social, and cultural rights to combat trafficking. By recognising the comprehensive system involved (Cockbain et al., 2024), policymakers and legal practitioners can work towards more comprehensive and sustainable solutions to human trafficking.

Laos and the Rising Cases of Human Trafficking and Cyber Slavery

548 Indian nationals have been victims of human trafficking through cyber scam platforms in the Golden Triangle SEZ, and they have been rescued as of August 2024. By January 2025, the number of victims rose to 924, with 857 repatriated to India (Rajya Sabha, August 2024; India Today, 27 Jan 2025). The Laos government has been very helpful and has collaborated with the Indian Embassy in Laos in actively rescuing human trafficking victims. The involvement of Cambodia in this trafficking nexus is not ruled out. By unofficial estimates, there are nearly 30,000 Indians trapped as slaves in this cyber trafficking network from Laos. Unlike the conventional way of making the victims work on low-paying physical jobs, Indian nationals in Laos were coerced into running dating app scams and convincing Europeans and Americans to trade in cryptocurrency for their benefit (Ghazali, 2024). It has been identified that the involvement of Chinese international networks was there, highlighting the complexity of the cross-border threat for India. Despite the efforts of Indian officials, the problem persists, indicating weakness in the current approach. A victim recently rescued by NIA from a cyber-scam centre stated, “After some time, they would convince the target to invest in cryptocurrency trading. Many were duped in India this way.”

As India and Laos have had good diplomatic ties over the years, exhibited through various bilateral agreements focused on trade, education, and counter-drug trafficking cooperation. Yet, the number of trafficked Indians in Laos is huge, revealing a critical gap in bilateral cooperation. The existing agreements, such as the 2002 pact on drug demand reductions and prevention of illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs, showcase that both nations have the capacity to collaborate on transnational crimes. The absence of a specialised agreement on human trafficking limits the scope of coordinated action in executing large-scale operations. A formal agreement between India and Los will institutionalise collaboration, enabling

proactive measures such as intelligence sharing, a joint task force, and a coordinated attack on the trafficking networks. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has actively rescued victims by engaging directly with the Lao leaders to bring attention to the matter (Indian Express, 28 July 2024; INN, Aug 2024). However, diplomatic interventions that are effective in the short-term rescue efforts do not provide a solution, especially when the number of Indians stuck in Laos is unknown.

Can India Deploy Security Forces for Direct Action?

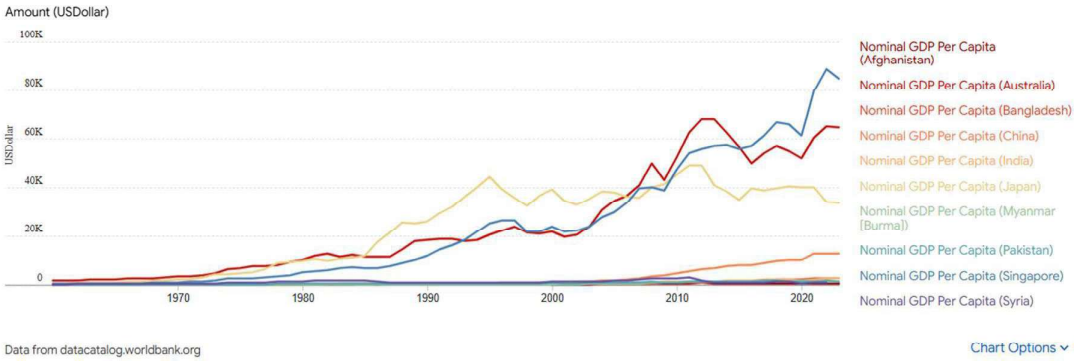
As radical as it may seem, deploying security forces and intelligence agencies from India might be a plausible solution to collaborate with Laos government officials to dismantle these trafficking networks. Previously, India has been successful in conducting small-scale operations with the help of the Laos government, but executing a large-scale operation is possible with diplomatic negotiations and cooperation. For this operation to happen, India would require approval from the Laos government to execute investigations, ensuring that Indian officials operate within an agreed legal framework without posing any threat to their sovereignty. Trust between both the countries and their dedication to combatting exploitation of vulnerable populations plays a crucial role in this being accomplished.

If both parties formally come to terms with each other, a specialised combined unit from both countries can be formed to track and neutralise traffickers by rescuing the victims and arresting the traffickers. Both countries can leverage technologies, such as cyber forensics, to trace recruitment sources in India and disrupt trafficking chains at their origin through shared intelligence. A one-time small rescue mission might not resolve the crisis; a long-term deterrent strategy needs to be developed, focusing on bilateral agreements, digital surveillance, rehabilitation for victims, and diplomatic pressure on Thailand and Myanmar to strengthen border security measures.

Economic Vulnerabilities: Comparative GDP Analysis

In order to identify the economic and social vulnerabilities that can contribute to human trafficking, a comparative GDP analysis between conflict-prone countries and stable countries could help us in understanding it better. For example, Afghanistan has a nominal GDP per capita of $416, while Myanmar (Burma) and Pakistan rank with $1,230 and $1,370,

respectively. Compared to other countries, India and Bangladesh seem to do better, with $2,480 and $2,550, respectively, but still remain below global averages. Conversely, in contrast to volatile countries, stable economies show much higher levels of wealth generation and distribution. Singapore has $84,700 GDP per capita, followed by Australia at $64,800.



Source: World Bank

Conflict, political instability, and lack of economic opportunities in nations such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Pakistan enable individuals more susceptible to exploitation and trafficking. Such economic disparities build vulnerable ecosystems that traffickers exploit. This imbalance in economic status and opportunity fuels global human trafficking. Addressing this necessitates policies and interventions that target the structural inequalities driving vulnerable populations towards exploitation, not giving more focus to victim rehabilitation after the damage is done. Investments in skill development, economic opportunity, social services, and conflict resolution in disadvantaged regions can mitigate the desperation that renders individuals, particularly women and children, vulnerable to traffickers.

In the context of political instability and inadequate law enforcement, Myanmar has emerged as a focal point for human trafficking, with scam operations proliferating in border regions such as Myawaddy. A notable instance is the case of Wang Xing, a 22-year-old Chinese actor, who was deceived into travelling to Thailand under the guise of a film opportunity. The "Star Homecoming" initiative, a grassroots-level intervention, identified approximately 1,800 Chinese nationals trafficked to Myanmar, with 93% being males aged 15 to 45. The majority of trafficking victims are driven by economic hardships, including indebtedness and

unemployment. According to the United Nations, hundreds of thousands of individuals have been trafficked into scam centres in Southeast Asia since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Only a small proportion of families were able to file missing person reports due to legal constraints surrounding trafficking, as Chinese legislation does not recognise men as potential trafficking victims (Liao et al., 22 Jan 2025). This legislative oversight has resulted in traffickers specifically targeting Chinese men. Exclusion based on gender, in this case, male, from trafficking victim categories has impeded effective intervention efforts. In this case, 93% of Chinese victims were male; there is a clear distinction with traditional trafficking narratives that predominantly focused on women and children, highlighting the necessity for gender-inclusive policies. There is a necessity for China to make legal reforms to broaden the definitions of human trafficking victims. This case study illustrates how trafficking thrives in policy gaps and underscores the urgent need for an immediate complaint mechanism to be formed for effective grassroots-level interventions to address systemic vulnerabilities.

Policy Innovations and Legal Frameworks

India's legal frameworks have implemented necessary modifications to address the evolving nature of cybercrime by targeting human and drug trafficking. Although these laws demonstrate the intent and capacity to address these issues, certain gaps in enforcement limit their efficacy. Under India's Bharatiya Nayaya Sanhita, which replaced the Indian Penal Code (IPC), Section 370 provides a comprehensive definition of trafficking, encompassing acts such as recruitment, transport, and exploitation through coercion, fraud, and abuse of power (ET Online, 2 Jul 2024). Addressing specific aspects of trafficking from the exploitation of trafficked victims to protecting the trading of minors for prostitution is covered under provisions such as Sections 370A, 372, and 373. Several other laws that specifically focus on the exploitation of minors and commercial sexual exploitation and are applicable to the exploitation of children and sexual offences are as follows: the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act and the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1986 (ITPA). Despite these many legal protections that are available to the public, there are many underreported cases due to societal stigma attached to it, mistrust towards officials, and insufficient awareness of legal mechanisms.

In India, some aspects of the tools used by traffickers, like recruitment through online platforms and the dissemination of illicit content, are currently addressed by the Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act). Cases where traffickers who had been collaborating with international stakeholders to illegally transport Indian youth from Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam to the Laos Special Economic Zone (SEZ) under the false pretence of employment opportunities in call centres were apprehended by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) on 13 May, 2024 (ANI, 10 December 2024). As per the investigations, the trafficked individuals were coerced into engaging in cyber fraud activities, including "credit card fraud, investments in cryptocurrency using fraudulent applications, and honey trapping." Individuals were forced to participate in cyber fraud facilitated through trafficking in order to conceal the identities of the perpetrators and evade detection.

Once the victim is being rescued, measures that facilitate the process to gain legal aid are lacking in the absence of systemic victim assistance programs that could help in accessing legal proceedings, travel support, and more, according to the Trafficking in Persons Report (2024). As for the foreign victims, repatriation procedures in India are complex; this often results in prolonged periods spent in shelters before repatriation.

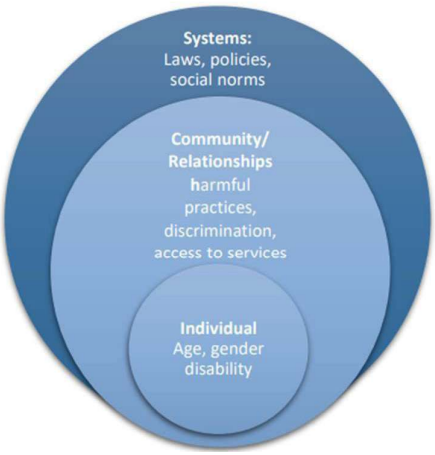
The advancement of technology has made the tracing of criminal activities increasingly challenging, necessitating the implementation of technological intervention strategies. This situation not only requires policy initiatives from India but also regional cooperation among South Asian and Southeast Asian nations. Such international cybercrime coordination provides a comprehensive approach to address the transnational nature of cybercrime in human trafficking and drug trafficking. Significant emphasis should be placed on enhancing cross-border digital forensics, advanced cryptocurrency flow tracking, and victim rehabilitation programs.

Rethinking Development Strategies

There are several anti-trafficking initiatives focused on catching traffickers and rescuing victims; a more nuanced approach must acknowledge how systemic inequalities shape individual experiences of trafficking. Interventions that are carried out do not address the fundamental economic or social factors that are contributing to trafficking. Instead, they result in re-traumatising survivors and disregard the systemic barriers they face. To effectively combat trafficking, strategies must transition from intervention to prevention.

Alternative models should strengthen an individual's economic and social status to ensure that they lead a sustainable livelihood; this addresses the root causes of vulnerability. This includes investing in education, secure internet space, access to affordable housing and healthcare, and targeted initiatives to reduce gender inequality. This approach will dismantle the power structure that sustains all kinds of trafficking. There are also oversimplified victim narratives in policy responses that reduce complex realities into victim and saviour dichotomies.

According to the Gender Policy Report (2023), current policies on human trafficking often prioritise intervention; they offer a fragmented approach that fails to address the systemic root causes of trafficking. To address this, we should focus on the following levels: individual, community, and systemic. The aim is to build a preventive measure to avoid creating environments that facilitate any kind of trafficking. Policies and community-level strategies focusing on this socio-ecological framework have the potential to address the complex web of factors contributing to this global issue.



Source: ICAT

The possibility of someone becoming a target of human trafficking is determined by age and gender. Unlike traditional perceptions that women and children are the primary targets, recent developments indicate that individuals of any gender and age may become victims of trafficking. In addition to the economic factors, cybercriminals exploit individuals lacking cybersecurity awareness, regardless of their educational background. In a society, discriminatory norms and restricted access to stable livelihoods render certain communities more vulnerable. Vulnerable populations, such as refugees in India, are easy targets for traffickers due to their precarious status. Such populations lack freedom of movement, asset

ownership, access to quality education, and limited employment opportunities. Leading a life from birth in refugee camps for generations with limited opportunities increases their desperation for a better life, making them susceptible to trafficking schemes. Refugees residing in India are not protected by any national law; India is neither a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor its 1967 Protocol, leaving them legally unprotected. This leads to limited government intervention for the protection of refugees. A Legal vacuum of this kind creates opportunities for exploitation due to their lack of documentation and inability to seek legal recourse.

Conclusion

The nexus of human trafficking and conflict facilitated by technological development and socio-economic disparities is a complex phenomenon. Very little progress had been made in this regard considering the size of the issue, due to lack of political will and inadequate legal support. Effective interventions need to follow a globalised, multidimensional approach involving various stakeholders that make use of technological innovation, targeted preventive measures, and economic development strategies. By comprehending and addressing the systemic roots of vulnerability, more effective and humane approaches to disrupt these networks can be developed. Trafficking has transcended national borders. Crimes operating in a globalised ecosystem require equally globalised and multidimensional responses at the regional level through bilateral engagements. India's engagement with Laos must evolve beyond reactive rescue missions. Depending on the readiness of both parties, a formalised agreement on human trafficking and cybercrime, followed by active implementation, is essential to prevent Indian nationals from falling victim to trafficking syndicates. As stated by Mr. Jaishankar, India’s minister for external affairs, "Appreciate the ongoing cooperation of the Laos PDR government in rescue and relief for our citizens. But cooperation must translate into long-term solutions (Indian Express, 28 July 2024);" temporary measures are satisfactory in the short term, but now it is imperative for India and Laos to commit to a comprehensive anti-human trafficking strategy with a long-term goal.

All forms of trafficking are deeply intrinsic in global structures of inequality and exploitation. Addressing trafficking requires a paradigm shift that prioritises equity, intersectionality, and systemic change globally, along with a community-level approach. The case of trafficked Chinese men highlights the limitations of gendered narratives that dominate global anti-

trafficking policies and interventions. China's legal framework that failed to recognise men as victims of trafficking has not only hindered effective rescue and rehabilitation but also enabled traffickers to operate with impunity. Systemic failures at the government level occur when legal and policy approaches are overly narrow, do not account for the diversity of victims' experiences, and do not allow for the willingness to change the policies as need arises. In order to address these gaps, policies and implementation processes need to recognise all trafficking victims irrespective of gender, citizenship status, and other socially constructed norms. A case study of China's experience with human trafficking presents a valuable lesson for global anti-trafficking efforts, particularly for broadening the understanding of victimhood and addressing systemic policy gaps. In conclusion, it is vital that trafficking be addressed through a globalised and multidimensional framework that resolves the drivers of social and economic inequality, and that an enhanced understanding of victimhood could improve overall policymaking.

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