

Human Trafficking: A Call for Action Research

Rituparna Bhattacharyya[†]

Abstract

Since the year 2000, 25 November has been observed as International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women to make the public aware of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Human Trafficking is one of the most brutal forms of VAWG. This brief communication in the form of an editorial discusses the despicable issues linked to human trafficking, calling for action research.

Keywords: Human Trafficking; Traffickers; Modern Slavery; Forced Labour; Prostitution

[†] Adjunct Professor, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, India; Visiting Professor, University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India; Editor-in-Chief (Joint), *Space and Culture, India*; Independent Research Consultant; Senior Fellow, Advance HE (formerly Higher Education Academy), United Kingdom and Training and Development, Alliance for Community Capacity Building in North East India, United Kingdom.

Email: rituparna.bhattacharyya@accb.org.uk

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Introduction

25 November is designated as International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, aimed at raising awareness about the scale of violence women all over the world face in their daily lives. In 1999,¹ the decision to observe 25 November by the United Nations as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women² stemmed from the horrific assassination of the Mirabal Sisters³ on 25 November 1960 simply because of their roles and activism. They fought for their rights against the dictator and military commander Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina (24 October 1891 – 30 May 1961) of the Dominican Republic, who ruled from August 1930 till May 1961.

Different forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG), however, refuse to die. Elimination of Violence Against Women defines violence as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”⁴ To be more precise, VAWG is an umbrella phrase encompassing several forms of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. These include—intimate partner violence (battering, psychological abuse, marital rape, femicide); human trafficking (slavery, sexual exploitation); sexual violence and harassment (rape, unwanted sexual advances, forced sexual acts, forced marriage, child sexual abuse, stalking, harassment in the streets, and cyber-harassment); child marriage and female genital mutilation (United Nations, n.d.). During the COVID-19 pandemic, VAWG emerged as a 'shadow pandemic' (UN Women, 2020; see also

Singh and Bhattacharyya, 2020). This editorial discusses one of the heinous crimes —human trafficking—a multi-billion-dollar industry — estimated to be more than \$150 billion in illegal business (Niethammer, 2020), which is pervasive across all cultures worldwide, of course, in varying scales. Indeed, human trafficking as a form of modern-day slavery is a gross violation of human rights and poses significant challenges to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (Bauloz et al., 2022). There are several interlinkages between Sustainable Development and counter-trafficking—elimination of human trafficking warrants eradication of poverty (Goal 1), and work towards gendered equality (Goal 5) to accomplish increased opportunities for decent work (Goal 8) and access to justice (Goal 16) (Bauloz et al., 2022). The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that more than 25 million people across the world have fallen victim to human trafficking. The facts and figures presented in Table 1, retrieved from the *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage* (2022), reinforce this.

Disturbing as it is, *The Global Slavery Index* (2023) reveals that among the six G20 nations, India ranks first in engaging the highest number of people (11 million) in modern slavery, followed by China with 5.8 million. Russia, with 1.9 million, ranks third; Indonesia, fourth with 1.8 million; Türkiye, fifth with 1.3 million; and the sixth position by the United States with 1.1 million. The index further reports that in 2021, the G20 nations had imported goods worth about US\$468 billion produced by modern slavery. While Table 2 illustrates the scale of modern slavery, Table 3 presents the spending of G20 countries on some of the goods via the engagement of modern slavery.

¹ International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. General Assembly. United Nations.A/RES/54/134. 7 February 2000. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/271/21/PDF/N0027121.pdf?OpenElement>

² Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. General Assembly, United Nations. A/RES/48/104.23 February 1994. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N94/095/05/PDF/N9409505.pdf?OpenElement>

³ Mirabal sisters were four sisters from the Dominican Republic. Out of the four, three sisters — Patria, Minerva and María Teresa questioned the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina by engaging in various activities against his dictatorial regime.

⁴ International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/en/days/elimination-violence-against-women>

This brief communication tries to shed light on some of the disturbing issues linked to human trafficking, especially child trafficking. It begins with a discussion of human trafficking (including child trafficking) in the Indian context. Following

this, it shows how Nedan Foundation, an NGO based in Kokrajhar, Assam, has been working for the last 20 years to combat human and child trafficking.

Table 1: Human Trafficking, Modern Slavery and Forced Labour

2021 data unravels that 49.6 million people were living in modern slavery. Out of this forced labour accounted for 27.6 million while 22 million were victims of forced marriage.

Out of 27.6 million in forced labour, 17.3 million victims were exploited in the private sector; 6.3 million victims were coerced into commercial sexual exploitation, and 3.9 million were victims of state-imposed forced labour (see, Table 2).

In forced commercial sexual exploitation, the number of women and girls stands at 4.9 million and in other economic sectors, the number of forced labourers stands at 6 million.

Ironically, 12% of children are coerced into forced labour. And over half of these children are victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

15.1 million—the highest number of people coerced into forced labour are found in Asia and the Pacific region. At the same time, the Arab States have the highest prevalence of forced labour, which stands at 5.3 per thousand people.

Source: Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage (2022). International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipecc/documents/publication/wcms_854733.pdf

Table 2: The Scale of Modern Slavery

Most Prevalent				Least Prevalent			
It is reckoned that modern slavery is prevalent in the following countries in the highest forms stemming from state-imposed forced labour, weak governance and the effect of conflict.				The following countries bear the lowest prevalence of modern slavery. This is due to their strong governance and robust government responses to modern slavery.			
Country	Rank	Prevalence Rate*	# of people	Country	Rank	Prevalence Rate*	# of people
North Korea	1	104.6	2,6,96,000	Switzerland	160	0.5	4,000
Eritrea	2	90.3	320,000	Norway	159	0.5	3,000
Mauritania	3	32.0	149,000	Germany	158	0.6	47,000
Saudi Arabia	4	21.3	740,000	Netherlands	157	0.6	10,000
Türkiye	5	15.6	1,320,000	Sweden	156	0.6	6,000
Tajikistan	6	14.0	133,000	Denmark	155	0.6	4,000
United Arab Emirates	7	13.4	132,000	Belgium	154	1.0	11,000
Russia	8	13.0	1,899,000	Ireland	153	1.1	5,000
Afghanistan	9	13.0	505,000	Japan	152	1.1	144,000
Kuwait	10	13.0	55,000	Fiinland	151	1.4	8,000

Source: The Global Slavery Index. Walk Free. <https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/#the-scale>

*Estimated number of people in modern slavery per 1,000 population

Products	Amount of Spending (in US \$ Billion)
Electronics	243.6
Garments	147.9
Palm Oil	19.7
Solar Panels	14.8
Textiles	12.7

Source: The Global Slavery Index. Walk Free. <https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/#the-scale>

Mapping the Trafficking Landscape of India

Growth will remain meaningless unless it is inclusive and promotes [the] development of marginalised sections of society. We are committed to work[ing] with organisations like BBA towards eradicating all forms of exploitation through strong deterrents and rehabilitation mechanisms for victims.

There is no bigger crime than [the] slavery of children... I appeal to everyone sitting here to work together to make childhood safe.

The above two statements were made by Shri Shankar Aggarwal, Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Employment and Srimati Stuti Kakkar, Chairperson, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) about seven years ago, on 27 May 2016, at the Consultations *Eradication of Bonded Labour and Trafficking of Children* held at Constitution Club in New Delhi, India, which was organised by Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA), an anti-trafficking and anti-slavery grassroots movement under the architect of Nobel Peace Laureate, Kailash Satyarthi (Combating Trafficking in India, n.d.). Yet, human trafficking remains a significant problem. In the past four decades in India, BBA has rescued 1,27,000+ children from the clutches of child labour, trafficking, and slavery (BBA, n.d.).

Historically, in the pathways of migration, nefarious elements of human trafficking have always existed (Bauloz et al., 2022). India remains a three-structured trafficking hub—a prolific geographical space for the traffickers, a trafficking transition and a destination (especially for the countries of South Asia—Nepal and Bangladesh). The international borders of South Asia—the porous border between India and Bangladesh, India and Myanmar, between India and Nepal, and between India and Pakistan, etc. serve as fructuous surreptitious routes to all forms of trafficking (including human) (for details in human trafficking, please refer to Ghosh, 2015; Richardson et al., 2009).

The 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: India places India under Tier 2 as "The Government of India does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so."⁵

In the chapter entitled *Forced Victims or Willing Migrants? Contesting Assumptions About Child Trafficking*, Goździak (2016, p.23) argues that [t]rafficked children are rarely taken by force. Parents of "trafficked" children do not have to search for them because they know exactly where they have taken their children or whom they have paid to smuggle their children across international borders." While this claim is valid, however, in India, trafficking is highly linked to missing children (Bhattacharyya, 2017; Sen and Nair, 2004) and kidnapping. Only two decades

⁵ 2023 *Trafficking in Persons Report: India*. Office To Monitor And Combat Trafficking In Persons, US Department of State.

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/india/>

ago, in their joint report titled *Trafficking in Women and Children in India 2002-2003*, Sen and Nair (2004) established the link between missing children and trafficking. It is indeed distressing to witness that a child in India goes missing every 8 minutes (Bhattacharyya, 2017; see Figure 1), signalling that a majority of missing children can never be found as they are murdered for their organs in the business of illegal organ trade. While young women, girls and boys fall victim to trafficking, the percentage of young girls and women falling prey to kidnapping and trafficking, thereby going missing, is far greater than that of boys.

Appalling evidence further suggests that the rate of conviction of the traffickers is meagre, indicating that the country's anti-trafficking legislations is staggeringly weak. *The 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report* of the US Department of State further presents the following:

India's 28 states and eight union territories had primary responsibility to investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes. Overall anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts across the country, especially against bonded labor, remained inadequate compared to the scale of the problem. During the reporting period, the National Crime and Records Bureau (NCRB) issued its 2021 Crime in India Report. In 2021, the government reported [an] investigation of 2,189 trafficking cases under the IPC, compared with 1,714 trafficking cases in 2020. The government did not report what sections of the IPC were included in these statistics. In 2021, the government completed prosecution in 201 trafficking cases, convicted 64 traffickers in 32 cases, and acquitted 520 suspects in 169 cases. The acquittal rate for trafficking cases was 84 percent. This compared with the government completing prosecution in 463 cases, convicting 101 traffickers in 49 cases, and acquitting 715

suspects in 414 cases in 2020, with 89 percent of cases resulting in acquittal. Four of India's 36 states and territories reported nearly half of all trafficking cases in 2021, most likely due to more sophisticated reporting in those states and territories rather than larger trafficking problems.¹

A 2013 study published in the *Journal World Development* entitled *Does Legalized Prostitution Increase Human Trafficking?* probed the impact of legalised prostitution on human trafficking inflows into high-income countries. For this, the scholars examined cross-sectional data from 116 countries to analyse the effect of legalised prostitution (sex work) on the influx of human trafficking. In addition, they reviewed case studies of Denmark, Germany and Switzerland to investigate the longitudinal effects of legalising or criminalising prostitution. One of the major findings of the study was that the countries that legalised prostitution (sex work) faced far higher incidences of human trafficking than those countries where prostitution is considered illegal (Cho et al., 2013). In India, prostitution in private space is regarded as a legal activity, but the various entities, such as those agents running an organised brothel and other connected activities, which includes prostitution rings, pimping or soliciting sex work, are illegal (Yasir, 2021).⁶ According to the data collated from the UNAIDS (n.d.), as of 2022, in India, 982,000 were engaged as sex workers across the country, out of which 157,400 were in the age group 15-19 (as of 2019), and 534,200 belonged to the age-group of 20-24 in 2019 (UNAIDS, n.d.). Of course, not all sex workers have been coerced into the trade of sex work via trafficking; evidently, extreme forms of multi-dimensional poverty play a crucial role in driving sex workers into the business of sex work.

Importantly, as discussed above, the relationship between trafficking and migration remains highly complex. Ethnographic observations reveal that several interlinked indicators often

⁶ *The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956*. wcd.nic.in. [104 of 1956][30 December 1956.].

<https://web.archive.org/web/20150502184617/http://wcd.nic.in/act/itpa1956.htm>

play their roles in pushing an individual into the trafficking trade— failure in love, desertion by a husband or boyfriend, divorce by husband, young widows, young boys, girls, and women [(un)married] going abroad as migrant labours and falling victim to this trade. Evidently, from Bangladesh, millions of women and children are trafficked to the Middle East as unskilled migrant workers, who often end up in the sex business, and in a few cases, some go missing. Further, the impacts of rapid climate change and human-

made challenges— frequent cyclones, earthquakes, flooding, famine (drought and food scarcity), torrential rain, river erosion, intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts, war, etc. compel a colossal number of impoverished people to migrate to the cities either within the country or outside (especially Middle-East, South-East Asia and other countries of South Asia) in search of a better life, often falling prey into the vagaries of trafficking.



Figure 1

Source: Nedan Foundation, Kokrajhar, Assam

Nevertheless, no one can deny that in India, the relationship between (il)legal sex work and trafficking is historically far more nuanced and complex. The 2022 Bollywood biopic, *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali and produced by Bhansali and Jayantilal Gada, portrays how Ganga Jagjivandas Kathiawadi, a 16-year old, Bollywood aspirant and a daughter of a barrister from Kathiawar was beguiled by her pimp boyfriend, Ramnik Lal during the 1950s

and sold into a brothel in Bombay (now Mumbai). Similarly, amidst its various controversies, the film *The Kerala Story* is a stark reminder of how young girls and women are cajoled, trapped and exploited (Sebastian, 2023). The high-profile case of British-born Shamima Begum, who was trafficked to Syria at the age of 15 to join the Islamic State group (known as IS, ISIS and ISIL), further buttresses the

plot of *The Kerala Story* (Sandford and Durbin, 2022).

Sex work is indeed a lucrative business but highly unregulated in India, contributing illegally to the economy each year by about US\$8 billion (Sehgal and Patni, 2023), thereby unlocking the road to the imbroglia landscape of trafficking. Figure 2 paints the reported cases of only 13 states; however, hundreds and thousands of cases might go unreported across the country. In the words of the Nobel Peace Laureate, Kailash Satyarthi then, which was voiced a decade ago:

It is a shocking revelation that 360 billion USD or 21 lakh crores Indian rupees are generated by enslaving young girls in brothels and homes, that is equivalent to one-fifth of the country's GDP. This black money propels capital corruption and [the] most heinous crimes against girls and women. The dream of development and [the] scandal of child slavery cannot co-exist. Time is running out. It is now or never.

Kailash Satyarthi, Chairperson, Global March Against Child Labour⁷

It is rebarbative to observe that while sexual trafficking carries an age-old history, trafficking for slavery, forced surrogacy, illegal adoption, terrorism, and coerced marriage is a modern trend (Baruah, 2023; Baruah, 2012; Bhattacharyya, 2017). For instance, in the first weeks of May 2023, a celebrity doctor couple in Assam— Dr Waliul Islam, a surgeon, and Dr Sangeeta Datta, a psychiatrist were arrested along with their domestic help on alleged charges of child abuse of their three-year-old girl (Kashyap, 2023). Initially, there was an impression that this celebrity couple are parents of three children—the first is a girl child, and the two three-year-olds are twins—a girl and a boy— born via surrogacy. However, upon police

interrogation, it came to surface that the three-year-old children were not twins but were illegally adopted. Therefore, although the doctor couple has been charged under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (Pocso) Act, the question is, were these two three-year-old children kidnapped or trafficked or both—first kidnapped and then trafficked to sell them for illegal adoption?

It is also vexatious to witness the emergence of 'Bhonti' (Younger Sister) culture. *Bhonti* culture is used as a vehicle to illicitly sell young girls from tea gardens and the regions mired in ethnic conflicts of Assam as domestic workers in Arunachal Pradesh (Baruah, 2023). CNN further bolsters this observation in their project titled *Freedom Project: Ending Modern-Day Slavery*:

...young girls from tea plantations are easy targets. They live in poverty, have very little education, and their parents are often saddled with debt.

Most are descendants of the original bonded laborers brought in from other parts of the country by British colonial rulers. They live in the same impoverished circumstances as they did more than a century ago, with the same impoverished lifestyles.

Human trafficking and tea: What's the connection? (2016, 7 April).

It is arguable that the *Bhonti* culture is not specific to Arunachal Pradesh alone. Girls and young women from impoverished areas are sold as domestic slaves in affluent middle-class households across the country or as "bonded labourers for INR 5,000-INR 6,000; in brothels for INR 105000; and for forced marriage for INR 100,000" (Baruah, 2012; Bhattacharyya, 2017, p. 93). The amounts in INR might have changed in a decade, but the human trafficking quagmire

⁷*Economics Behind Forced Labour Trafficking: Comprehensive Case Studies of Child Domestic Labour and Commercial Sexual Exploitation* (2014). International Secretariat, L-6, Kalkaji, New Delhi, India. <http://globalmarch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Economic-Behind-Forced-Labour-Trafficking.pdf>. See, also, India's Union Labour

Minister Launches "Economics Behind Forced Labour Trafficking" Report And "Anthem Against Child Labour". Global March Against Child Labour. <https://globalmarch.org/events/indias-union-labour-minister-launches-economics-behind-forced-labour-trafficking-report-and-anthem-against-child-labour/>

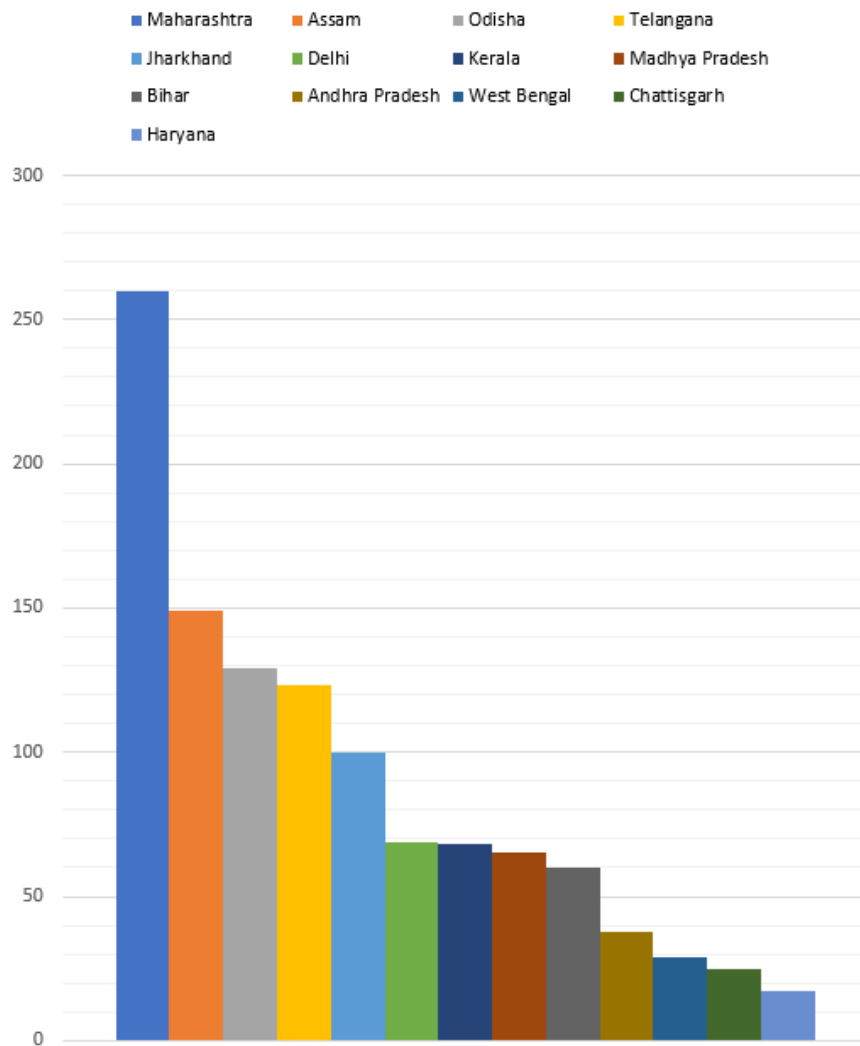
continues unabated. This observation resonates with the claims of the CNN Freedom project:

Traffickers approach the girls as placement agents, offering them work in cities such as Delhi. Police say young girls see placement agencies as a way to escape the cycle, lured by promises of good jobs and a steady income. Instead, they too often find themselves sold as domestic labor and denied wages, or forced to work in the sex industry. Police say hundreds of girls in tea districts fall victim to traffickers every year.

Arguably, the Government of India’s demonetisation drive of INR 500 and INR 1,000 denominations from the financial system from midnight of 08 November 2016 has failed to tackle/suppress the circulation of black money and regulate corrupt practices (India Today, 2022). The failure of the inordinate effort to remove black money from the economy, *inter alia*, impels increased instances of VAWG (including kidnapping, trafficking and slavery). The following section discusses trafficking in Assam vis-à-vis the actions taken by Nedan Foundation, an NGO based in Kokrajhar, Assam.

Human trafficking and tea: What's the connection? (2016, 7 April).

Figure 2: Reported Cases of Human Trafficking of First 13 Indian States, 2021



Source: Statista Research Department, 10 July 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/633086/reported-human-trafficking-cases-by-state-india/#:~:text=Number%20of%20reported%20human%20trafficking%20cases%20in%20India%202021%2C%20by%20state&text=In%202021%2C%20over%20one%20thousand,country%20with%20over%20260%20cases>.

Actions of Nedan Foundation

During and in the aftermath of the Bodoland State Movement in the late 1980s and the 1990s, the conflict-ridden region emerged as a hotspot for trafficking. To tackle trafficking and save the children from the shackles of the traffickers, Dr Digambar Narzary, then a student of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, returned to his homeland to establish the Nedan Foundation (Figure 3). Under the leadership of Dr Narzary, from 2004 till mid-2023, Nedan has rescued 2005 women and children from various destinations of the country, including the 'red

light' areas of Siliguri, West Bengal. While the majority of these victims return to their own families/homes, in some cases, the families have refused to accept these returnee victims for various reasons—poverty, stigma and others. So, Nedan has built a Girls' Home (Figure 4) where these girls live and are making their lives and careers. Currently, this home is home to 28 girls aged 6-18 years. The home is self-sufficient in terms of some daily needs—fruits, vegetables, poultry, etc. In addition, Nedan helps the girls learn to weave, but challenges remain in terms of external funding and therefore, help and donations are welcome.



Figure 3

Source: Author



Figure 4: Girls' Home, Nedan Foundation

Source: Author

Nevertheless, the state of Assam occupies the dubious distinction of being one of the country's top states (Figure 2), from where one of the highest numbers of women and children are trafficked (Choudhury, 2017). Sadly, between 2017 and 2022, the number of trafficked children from the state stands at 759, including 77 from Guwahati alone. The breakdown of statistics further reveals that there were 574 girls and 185 boys trafficked altogether—25 in the age group of 0-5 years, 59 in the age group 6-10 years, 353 in the age group 11-15 years, and 322 in the age group 16-18 years (Batori24 Bureau, 2023). Nevertheless, and as discussed above, one can explicitly presume that due to illegality, the number of cases registered is far less than the number of victims.

The trafficking situation further worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic (Parashar, 2019). Although the latest statistics suggest that 368 trafficked victims were rescued from various

places in the country, 177 human traffickers were apprehended (Batori24 Bureau, 2023; Sadanand, 2022).

Conclusion

This brief communication has shed light on some of the persistent issues linked to human trafficking. To achieve sustainable development in real sense of the term, the discussion raises the more significant question of whether trafficking can be tackled entirely. Perhaps, yes. In contemporary society, the application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a part of everyday life as we tend to use everything 'smart'—smartphones, smart appliances, smart assistance (Siri, Alexa), smart homes, smart cameras and so on. So, I argue that AI can perhaps be deployed in collaborative pilot action research to tackle human trafficking in the trafficking landscape. If successful, the pilot

research can perhaps be replicated in other trafficking hotspots.

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