

Research Paper

## Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Human Trafficking Patterns and Vulnerabilities across India

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified social and economic instability across India, contributing to a surge in human trafficking cases. This study investigates the patterns of human trafficking during the pandemic, offering a comprehensive analysis of its impact nationwide. Utilizing quantitative methods, the research draws on secondary data, particularly statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). The findings reveal a rise in trafficking incidents prior to the nationwide lockdown; however, post-lockdown data indicates a notable decline in both reported victims and rescue operations. The study further highlights the pandemic's significant influence on immoral trafficking while emphasizing the growing involvement of organized crime networks in trafficking activities. **Methodology:** The study utilizes a quantitative research design, focusing on a percentage-based comparison of trafficking trends over two years. It analyzes secondary data obtained from the NCRB and other official sources to examine variations in trafficking incidents before and after the pandemic-induced lockdown. **Results:** The analysis demonstrates an initial increase in trafficking cases before the lockdown, driven by heightened vulnerabilities due to economic distress. Conversely, the lockdown led to a substantial decrease in reported cases and rescues, potentially due to restricted movement and stricter law enforcement. **Conclusion:** The research underscores the COVID-19 pandemic's dual impact—amplifying vulnerabilities to trafficking while temporarily curbing activities through mobility restrictions. Future studies should evaluate the effectiveness of anti-trafficking measures implemented during this period and examine broader implications for human rights protection in India.

**Keywords:** *Trafficking, Pandemic and Lockdown*

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Human trafficking is a multifaceted and intricate issue that demands a multidisciplinary approach to effectively address it. Any examination of the root causes of human trafficking must consider factors unique to India, including its socio-economic landscape and poverty levels. As a grave violation of human rights, strategies aimed at eradicating trafficking should adopt a human-rights-based framework, prioritizing victims' needs and well-being (Mapp et al., 2014). Trafficking occurs globally and tends to intensify during emergencies. Individuals may be trafficked either transnationally—crossing international borders—or domestically within a country. While it affects individuals of all genders and age groups, trafficking has a pronounced gendered aspect, with women and girls comprising the majority of identified victims or survivors (Asongu et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed unprecedented challenges worldwide, significantly disrupting daily life. In India, a nationwide lockdown was enforced, leading to profound physical, psychological, social, and economic consequences. The trafficking industry was also affected during this period, as criminal networks were compelled to alter their operations due to transportation restrictions and limited mobility (Giammarinaro et al., 2020).

Thus, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. Investigating the impact of COVID-19 on human trafficking patterns across India.
2. Assessing the causes of human trafficking and evaluating law enforcement efforts in India during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs quantitative data analysis to examine and interpret a phenomenon, aiming to understand how specific events significantly influence trafficking. The primary research objectives are to describe and uncover, describe and investigate, or describe and clarify a phenomenon. This research focuses on human trafficking in India and its effects during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data for this study were gathered through a review of secondary sources, specifically two years of records from the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB). The data aims to highlight overall increased efforts compared to the previous reporting period, taking into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across the two years analyzed (2019 and 2020) based on existing literature, without engaging in direct field data collection.

#### ***Victim Trafficking Cases:***

In 2019, victim cases made up 57% of all reported incidents. However, this percentage fell to 47% in 2020. This decline could be linked to the widespread effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which imposed strict social distancing measures, led to the closure of many institutions, and resulted in extended lockdowns. These restrictions likely disrupted trafficking operations, restricted regional movement, and reduced opportunities for offenders to exploit vulnerable individuals. As a result, the decrease in reported cases during 2020 may not necessarily signify a drop in trafficking activities but rather highlight the difficulties victims encountered in seeking assistance and reporting incidents due to pandemic-related constraints.

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<b>Victim Trafficking Cases</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	6314	57%
02	2020	4709	43%
Total		11023	

<b>Victim Trafficking Male Cases</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	2519	56%
02	2020	1912	43%
Total		4431	

<b>Victim Trafficking Female Cases</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	3795	57%
02	2020	2797	42%
Total		6592	

The data presented in the two tables indicate that gender differences in trafficking cases in India are relatively minimal. However, a notable observation is that the percentage of both male and female trafficking victims was higher in 2019 compared to 2020. This decline in reported cases during 2020 can be attributed primarily to the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown. Restrictions imposed during the lockdown significantly disrupted normal reporting mechanisms, as victims had limited access to professionals such as teachers, doctors, and social workers, who often play a crucial role in identifying and reporting cases of trafficking (Todders et al., 2021).

Additionally, underreporting remains a persistent issue, as many victims refrain from approaching law enforcement authorities. This reluctance stems from multiple factors, including a lack of awareness about legal rights and protections, as well as a deep-seated fear of retaliation by traffickers. Victims may also face social stigma, which discourages them from coming forward and seeking justice. Consequently, the actual scale of trafficking may be far greater than what is reflected in official statistics, highlighting the need for strengthened support systems, awareness campaigns, and community-based interventions to improve reporting and victim assistance mechanisms.

### ***Rescued Cases***

The data from the two years reveals a higher percentage of rescued victims in 2019 compared to 2020 in terms of gender distribution. This disparity can likely be explained by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a nationwide lockdown and varying restrictions in different states with each wave of the virus. The second wave, which struck in April and May, not only caused a health crisis but also imposed severe economic challenges, making it harder to rescue victims.

<b>Victim Rescued Cases</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	6345	57%
02	2020	4612	43%
Total		10957	

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<b>Victim Rescued Male Cases</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	3793	57%
02	2020	2777	43%
Total		6570	

<b>Victim Rescued Female Cases</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	2484	56.6%
02	2020	1903	43.3%
Total		4387	

The disparity in the gender distribution of rescued victims between 2019 and 2020 can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to nationwide lockdowns and state-specific restrictions. During the second wave, which peaked in April and May 2020, mobility restrictions, increased health risks, and economic hardships hindered rescue operations. According to reports from organizations like the National Crime Records Bureau, the lockdowns disrupted rescue missions, limiting access to vulnerable populations. Additionally, economic strain led to reduced funding and personnel for victim support programs, making it more difficult to carry out rescues, especially in remote areas.

### *Determinants of Human Trafficking: An In-Depth Analysis*

#### **Child Labour**

<b>Child Labour</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	1141	44%
02	2020	1452	56%
Total		2593	

Children in India endure some of the most severe forms of child labor, making them one of the most vulnerable groups globally, along with those subjected to forced labor. Providing support to these children, as well as adult workers, their families, and communities, is essential. In 2020, the incidence of child labor increased by 56% compared to 2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic. This surge can be attributed to the economic upheaval caused by the pandemic, which left many families in financial hardship. As parents lost their jobs or faced reduced incomes, children were often forced to work instead of attending school to help support their families. The closure of schools and other institutions during lockdowns further limited children's access to education and safe recreational activities. At the same time, pandemic-related restrictions hindered access to crucial support services like social welfare programs and child protection systems. Consequently, many children became more susceptible to exploitation, resulting in a significant rise in child labor during this period (ILO, 2020).

#### **Sexual Exploitation:**

Sexual exploitation and prostitution are among the most recognized and well-documented forms of trafficking. A significant number of child prostitutes in India are girls from Nepal and Bangladesh. Around 15 percent of individuals enter prostitution before the age of 15, and 25 percent do so between the ages of 15 and 18. Religious prostitution is practiced in different regions of India and Nepal. The Devadasi system is common in southern India, and

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there are also reports of temple prostitution occurring in areas like Uttar Pradesh and Orissa. Emergencies and disasters, such as the COVID pandemic, are known to heighten the risk of child abuse by undermining child protection services and disrupting preventative strategies. Our findings also indicate a decline in the percentage of sexual exploitation cases in 2020 compared to 2019.

<b>Sexual Exploitation</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	1997	58%
02	2020	1466	42%
Total		3463	

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges that strained child protection systems, leading to an increased vulnerability of children to abuse. Lockdowns, school closures, and economic instability disrupted existing prevention mechanisms, leaving children isolated in environments where abuse could go undetected. This disruption could have contributed to an increased risk of various forms of abuse, including neglect and physical abuse, as families faced heightened stressors. However, our findings indicating a decline in sexual exploitation cases in 2020 compared to 2019 may suggest that while certain types of abuse were exacerbated, others became less visible due to restricted mobility and limited access to public spaces. This decline may also reflect underreporting or the closure of services during the pandemic, rather than an actual decrease in cases. This observation warrants further investigation into the reporting mechanisms and the potential long-term impact of the pandemic on child protection. The lack of social care and monitoring during lockdowns may contribute to the underreporting of sexual exploitation and child abuse. In France, during the lockdown, maternity ward consultations and child welfare services were limited to emergencies. Parent-child meetings with a social worker were suspended, and daycare centers for disabled children were closed. Unfortunately, some instances of child abuse during this period may remain undetected, as the families were not officially considered "at-risk," and the children have not yet returned to school (Seddighi et al., 2021).

### **Domestic Servitude:**

Domestic servitude is a type of human trafficking that is hard to identify because it takes place in private homes. As a result, domestic workers are more prone to mistreatment and exploitation compared to other workers. These workers may be expected to be on call at all hours, enduring conditions that are intolerable and facing abuse, humiliation, discrimination, and punishment (Kartusch et al., 2011).

<b>Sexual Exploitation</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	364	30%
02	2020	846	70%
Total		1210	

The data reveals an increase in domestic servitude in 2020 compared to 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic period saw a significant deterioration in the situation, with reports of heightened domestic violence in numerous countries. This is a troubling sign of the deteriorating living conditions faced by trafficking victims, particularly those

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subjected to domestic servitude or sex slavery, forms of exploitation that predominantly impact women and girls (Bouché et al., 2020). The increase in domestic servitude and violence during the COVID-19 pandemic can be attributed to several factors. Economic instability, with widespread job losses and financial insecurity, disproportionately affected vulnerable groups, making women and children more susceptible to exploitation. Lockdowns and social distancing measures confined individuals to their homes, isolating victims of trafficking and making it harder to seek help. The closure of businesses, schools, and community centers, along with strained social services, weakened safety nets, leaving trafficking victims without essential support. Additionally, gender-based violence surged, as women and girls were often trapped in abusive relationships, with economic stress and isolation exacerbating the risk. Traffickers exploited these circumstances, forcing many women and girls into domestic servitude or sexual exploitation within household settings.

### Forced Marriage:

Girls who marry at a young age face both immediate and long-term consequences. They are at a higher risk of experiencing domestic violence and are less likely to stay in school. Child marriage also increases the likelihood of early and unplanned pregnancies, which can lead to serious maternal health complications and even death. Additionally, this practice often isolates girls from their families and communities, limiting their social participation and negatively impacting their mental health and overall well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic has further worsened the challenges faced by girls.

Forced Marriage			
Serial Number	Year	Total Number of Cases	Percentage
01	2019	207	53%
02	2020	187	47%
Total		394	

It's fascinating to observe that the rate of forced marriages declined in 2020 compared to 2019. The travel restrictions and physical distancing measures brought on by the pandemic significantly hindered girls' access to vital healthcare, social services, and community support, all of which are crucial in preventing child marriage, unwanted pregnancies, and gender-based violence. During lockdowns, girls and women faced additional challenges in reaching out to formal justice systems, which are often their last resort to stop illegal marriages (UNICEF, 2021). The reduction in forced marriages during this time might be attributed to the limitations on mobility and social interaction, making it harder for such marriages to take place, despite the increased vulnerability caused by the pandemic. However, these restrictions also meant that girls had fewer opportunities to access the protective resources that typically help prevent these harmful practices.

### Actions related to law enforcement:

Trafficking victims come in many forms, and the perpetrators behind this crime are equally diverse. Traffickers can be foreign nationals or U.S. citizens, and they can range from family members, partners, and acquaintances to strangers. They may operate independently or as part of organized criminal groups. A common misconception is that traffickers are always male; however, there have been cases in the U.S. where women have been prosecuted for trafficking. Traffickers can be involved in various roles such as pimps, gang members, diplomats, business owners, labor brokers, and owners of farms, factories, and companies. It is also fascinating to observe how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected law enforcement's ability to address trafficking crimes.

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<b>Person Arrested</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	4798	50%
02	2020	4966	50%
Total		9764	

<b>Person Charge-sheet</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	3297	48%
02	2020	3661	52%
Total		6958	

<b>Person Convicted</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	306	75%
02	2020	101	25%
Total		407	

<b>Person acquitted/ discharged by the court</b>			
<b>Serial Number</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Number of Cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
01	2019	1145	62%
02	2020	715	38%
Total		1860	

Our analysis revealed a decline in certain key criminal justice metrics in 2020 when compared to 2019. Specifically, the percentage of individuals arrested, charge-sheeted, convicted, and discharged by the court was notably lower in 2020. This trend could reflect several potential factors, such as changes in law enforcement practices, shifts in crime rates, or even disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have affected judicial proceedings and law enforcement operations. It is important to further investigate these variations to understand the underlying causes and their implications on the overall functioning of the criminal justice system.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many criminal activities moved online, taking advantage of the increased time people spent at home or operating in more hidden ways. This shift has made crime detection and investigation more difficult, as victims are less visible to authorities. Judicial systems have experienced delays, with processes like case adjudication and compensation claims being postponed, resulting in delayed justice for victims. Deadlines for filing cases may have been missed, and evidence collection has been hindered, affecting the efficiency of judicial and investigative procedures. The pandemic-related restrictions also obstructed international cooperation among law enforcement agencies. With borders closed and communication channels disrupted due to movement limitations and a focus on public health, collaboration became more challenging. Additionally, law enforcement officers and service providers may have lacked adequate protective gear and were often hesitant to engage with vulnerable individuals due to fears of contracting the virus, especially when dealing with those in unstable living conditions (Bouché et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic presented a variety of challenges for both the criminal justice system and law enforcement, including the shift to online platforms that made it easier for

criminals to evade detection, and the strain on the judicial system that caused delays in adjudication and hindered evidence gathering, further complicating the pursuit of justice.

### CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted human trafficking, with lockdowns leading to a decline in trafficking cases, particularly in terms of gender representation. Vulnerable populations were unable to be rescued, and human trafficking became a result of societies and economies failing to protect the most at-risk individuals and enforce laws. Many cases went unreported, and victims were not identified by NGOs or government organizations. The lockdown also hindered law enforcement efforts, allowing traffickers to escape. It is crucial to ensure that, while prioritizing public health, the rule of law remains in place. Anti-trafficking efforts must continue to uphold human rights, ensuring access to healthcare and social support without discrimination. Law enforcement should remain vigilant and adapt to emerging crime patterns, while service providers must be flexible in responding to the evolving needs of communities.

### Limitations and Implications

The findings of this study should be considered within the context of its limitations. Specifically, the scope of the research is confined to India, and it relies on data from particular sources, which means the results may not be universally applicable to all forms of human trafficking or to other geographic regions. Moreover, while this study provides valuable insights into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human trafficking, it does not address the effectiveness of specific anti-trafficking measures and strategies. Future research could explore these interventions in greater detail, as well as investigate how the pandemic has influenced other dimensions of human rights within the region, thus offering a more comprehensive basis for future policy recommendations.

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