



Online ISSN: 3006-5879 Print ISSN: 3006-5860

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63468/jpsa.4.2.51>

Vol. 4 No. 2 (2026)

<https://journalpsa.com.pk/index.php/JPSA/about>



Recognized by: Higher Education Commission (HEC), Government of Pakistan

The broader social, economic, and political consequences of human trafficking, considering the impact on individuals and societal systems

Dr. Muhammad Altaf Tahir *

Tamgha-e-Imtiaz (Military), Adjunct professor In Department of Criminology
University of Karachi
draltaftahir@gmail.com

* Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

Human trafficking is one of the most serious forms of transnational organized crime and a major violation of human rights, affecting millions of individuals worldwide. It involves recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of people through force, coercion, deception, or abuse of vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation. This study examines the broader social, economic, and political consequences of human trafficking, with particular focus on its impact on individuals and societal systems. Using a secondary qualitative research methodology, the study analyzes academic literature, international organization reports, government publications, and human rights documents to explore how trafficking operates as both a criminal enterprise and a structural social problem.

The findings reveal that human trafficking causes severe social harm, including physical abuse, psychological trauma, social exclusion, family disruption, and increased vulnerability to re-trafficking. Economically, trafficking weakens labor markets, promotes exploitation, expands informal economies, and contributes to long-term poverty and inequality. Politically, it undermines state authority, weakens the rule of law, increases corruption, and challenges institutional legitimacy. The study also highlights how trafficking is closely connected to migration pressures, gender inequality, globalization, and governance failures.

The research concludes that human trafficking should not be viewed solely as a law enforcement issue but as a multidimensional challenge affecting human security, sustainable development, and social justice. Effective responses require stronger victim protection, improved governance, international cooperation, and long-term structural reforms addressing poverty, inequality, and exploitation.

Keywords: Human trafficking; forced labor; sexual exploitation; social consequences; economic consequences; political consequences; organized crime; migration; human rights; governance; structural inequality; victimization; labor exploitation; transnational crime; human security

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking is now one of the most pressing issues of international crime and human rights. It is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons using force, fraud, coercion, abuse of power or deception for the purpose of exploitation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2022). The forms of exploitation include forced labor, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, forced marriage, organ trafficking, and child labor. Unlike the smuggling of migrants, which often ceases once the smuggled person has been transported, human trafficking involves continued exploitation and control. This is significant because trafficking is not just a crime but a human rights abuse that occurs over time. Human trafficking is a global problem, involving millions of people and generating astonishing profits for traffickers. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that in 2021, almost 27.6 million people were in situations of forced labor and forced marriage, with women and children bearing the brunt of these practices (ILO, Walk Free, & International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022).

The private economy alone profits billions of dollars each year from forced labor exploitation, with trafficking being one of the world's most lucrative forms of organized crime, second only to drug and arms trading (ILO, Walk Free, & IOM, 2022). These figures show that human trafficking is not a niche problem, but a systemic global challenge that is inextricably linked to inequality, migration, labor exploitation and poor governance. Human trafficking has significant social impacts. Human trafficking victims suffer from physical and sexual abuse, psychological trauma, social stigma, and chronic health issues. Some victims may experience discrimination and stigma when reintegrating into their community, especially in cases of sexual exploitation. Human trafficking also impacts communities and families by eroding trust, disrupting family dynamics, and leaving vulnerable groups at greater risk (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

Where trafficking is hidden in many societies, it goes untreated and becomes a generational problem. Human trafficking also has a negative impact on the economy by destabilizing legitimate labor markets and increasing exploitation, while encouraging informal and illegal economies. Competition is distorted by forced labor, which allows traffickers and exploitative employers to profit from free (or underpaid) labor. Trafficking also contributes to the loss of revenue to governments due to tax evasion and the growth of informal economies. In the developing world, trafficking reinforces poverty by keeping vulnerable people in a cycle of exploitation and dependency (Shelley, 2010). Trafficking undermines economic growth and increases inequality. Politically, human trafficking undermines the state, undermines the rule of law, and highlights governance problems. Trafficking networks may be

transnational, exploiting corruption, weak border security, and weak law enforcement. In some instances, government officials may collude with bribes, fraudulent documentation, or apathy. This erodes public trust and state and international efforts to respect and uphold human rights. Moreover, trafficking has emerged as a key concern in international affairs, migration management, and security, particularly in conflict, displacement and poverty-stricken areas (UNODC, 2022).

While there has been increased international recognition of the problem through instruments like the Palermo Protocol (2000), human trafficking is still difficult to address due to its invisibility and links to structural inequalities. Many policies to combat human trafficking prioritize law enforcement and prosecution, but pay less attention to prevention, protection, and the socio-economic drivers. This leads to reactive rather than proactive solutions. This research explores the social, economic and political impacts of human trafficking, particularly in relation to the effects of trafficking on individuals and societies. It proposes that trafficking should not be considered simply a criminal justice problem but rather a complex issue that undermines human security, sustainable development, and institutional legitimacy. The study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of trafficking as both a symptom of, and driver of, structural inequality in modern societies by critically examining these interrelated effects.

Background and Context

Trafficking has emerged as a multidimensional global issue in the 21st century, intertwined with migration, poverty, crime, gender inequality, and governance. While there have been forms of trafficking throughout the ages, the rise of globalization, technology, armed conflict and economic inequality have led to growth and complication of trafficking. Now, trafficking has become a transnational criminal phenomenon that impacts both the developing and developed world, which means it is global rather than a local social issue (UNODC, 2022). The contemporary definition of human trafficking is largely drawn from the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol), which was adopted by the United Nations in 2000.

Trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons through coercion, deception, abuse of vulnerability or force for the purpose of exploitation (United Nations, 2000). This definition included trafficking as both a crime and a human rights violation, with a focus on victim protection, prosecution and prevention. The Protocol has led to many countries enacting anti-trafficking laws; however, it is unevenly implemented. There are various forms of human trafficking, including forced labor and sexual exploitation.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that millions of people worldwide are forced to work, mainly in domestic work, agriculture, construction, manufacturing and the sex industry (ILO et al., 2022). Women and girls are disproportionately impacted by sexual exploitation and forced marriage, whereas men and boys can be trafficked for forced work. Children are at high risk due to poverty,

displacement, family disruption, and lack of education. This highlights that trafficking is not gender or age specific but impacts various groups in different ways.

Migration is central to human trafficking. Victims are often migrants seeking opportunities for economic advancement or escaping war, political upheaval, and environmental disasters. Undocumented migration routes increase risk as migrants may rely on smugglers, unscrupulous recruiters or labor agents. Once they are forced into exploitative work, victims may lose control over their mobility, passports, and earnings.

Trafficking risks are higher in places of war and displacement, such as in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, with weaker institutions and legal frameworks (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). Human trafficking continues to be a major issue in South Asia, given poverty, gender discrimination, child labour and porous borders. Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal struggle with internal and cross-border trafficking issues for domestic work, forced marriage, bonded labor, and sexual exploitation. In Pakistan, trafficking is associated with forced labour in brick kilns, agriculture, domestic work, and illegal migration.

Women, children, internally displaced people and irregular migrants are often targeted because of a lack of economic opportunities and effective legal protections (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Political factors also contribute to trafficking. Bribing police, weak justice systems, and lack of victim protection measures undermine efforts to combat trafficking. In some instances, traffickers operate with the complicity (or at least inattention) of local authorities, making it difficult to prosecute. Internationally, trafficking is increasingly framed in relation to migration, border and national security. But this may at times overshadow the humanitarian and socio-economic aspects of trafficking.

While international instruments and national action plans are in place, trafficking persists because its underlying causes - poverty, inequality, unemployment, conflict and discrimination - remain unaddressed. This raises the question that trafficking should not be seen as a crime committed by an individual but also a reflection of structural problems in society and the state. This is crucial for assessing the long-term impacts and formulating policy solutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a rich body of literature on human trafficking from criminology, sociology, international relations, human rights and development studies. While trafficking is frequently framed as criminal justice matter, its social, economic and political implications are increasingly emphasized. Literature shows that trafficking is both a symptom and driver of inequality, poor governance and exclusion. This review critically synthesizes theoretical understandings, global empirical evidence, socio-economic impacts, political dynamics, and regional factors of human trafficking, outlining major debates and gaps in research relevant to this study. 4.1 Theoretical Insights into Human Trafficking Several theoretical perspectives are needed to understand human trafficking since this is not a unidimensional

phenomenon.

The most pertinent of these is the theory of structural violence proposed by Johan Galtung (1969), which suggests that social structures and institutions can cause harm by denying individuals their basic needs. Structural factors such as poverty, gender inequality, lack of education, and discrimination make people vulnerable to traffickers. In this regard, trafficking is not just an individual wrongdoing but a symptom of structural injustice. Another critical concept is strain theory (Robert K. Merton, 1938).

Merton theorized that people could commit a crime when the legitimate means to pursue economic and social success are thwarted. Trafficking victims may choose to leave home or take dangerous jobs due to lack of opportunities. Likewise, traffickers may operate in areas where illicit economies become acceptable in the absence of formal opportunities. Trafficking studies are also heavily influenced by feminist theory, especially when it comes to sexual exploitation and gender-based violence. Feminist researchers suggest trafficking is inseparable from patriarchy and the commodification of women's bodies and gender inequality (True, 2012).

Sexual exploitation forced marriage and domestic servitude are more common among women and girls, as social conventions place them in financially and socially vulnerable positions. Likewise, theories of globalization can explain the transnational nature of trafficking. Heightened labor mobility, global economic inequality, and global criminal networks have provided opportunities for exploitation in supply chains and migration networks (Shelley, 2010). Trafficking reflects the global demand for cheap labor and commercial sex, and inadequate labor protections conceal exploitation. These framings show that trafficking is not just a criminal justice problem, but is entrenched in global systems of inequality, labor exploitation and institutional complicity.

Global Scope and Empirical Evidence

Trafficking is a global issue with nearly every country as a source, transit or destination country. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2022) notes that the patterns of trafficking differ across regions but forced labor and sexual exploitation are the most common globally. In 2021, the International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that 27.6 million people were in forced labor and forced marriage, underscoring the scope of forced labor (ILO et al., 2022).

Gender disparities are evident in trafficking, with women and girls making up a significant percentage of victims, particularly in sexual exploitation. But men and boys are becoming increasingly recognised as victims of forced labor in the construction, agriculture, fishing and manufacturing industries. Children are also being trafficked, especially in impoverished areas where they are used for labour, begging, domestic servitude, and war. Historical and empirical research reveals trafficking occurs in regions where governments are weak and people vulnerable. Conflict and refugee source areas are highly vulnerable, as family networks, education, and social protections are often disrupted (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). For

instance, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya and sub-Saharan Africa have all experienced conflicts that have exacerbated trafficking risks by displacing people into irregular migration streams.

Research also shows that trafficking is highly profitable. The ILO (2014) estimated that \$150 billion is generated in illicit profits from forced labour each year. This makes trafficking a lucrative business for organised crime, particularly when the number of trafficking cases investigated and prosecuted is low. This profit-loss ratio fuels trafficking networks around the world.

Social Consequences of Human Trafficking

Literature heavily stresses the social impacts of trafficking on individuals, families and communities. Exposure to physical abuse, sexual assault, malnutrition, unsafe work conditions, and lack of freedom are among the physical consequences. Trafficking also has long-term psychological consequences, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidality (Zimmerman et al., 2008).

It also has significant social stigma associated with it, especially for victims of sexual exploitation. In many cultures, blaming the victim is common and reintegration is hampered. Survivors are sometimes rejected by their families because of shame and ostracized by the community as immoral. This isolation increases vulnerability and risk of re-trafficking. Trafficking also affects families. Kids trafficked for work and/or sex are taken away from school, which affects their long-term potential and entrenches generational poverty. Parents whose children are trafficked suffer emotional and financial distress.

When forced migration is involved, communities can be destabilized by traffickers exploiting vulnerable families. Further, trafficking erodes institutional trust. In the absence of police securing justice for victims, or where police are seen as complicit, trust in law enforcement is undermined. This undermines social cohesion and decreases reporting. As a result, trafficking is not just an individual crime, but also a social travesty that undermines social security and human dignity (Shelley, 2010).

Economic Consequences of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking has devastating economic consequences at individual and societal levels. Individual victims lose the ability to earn an income, own assets and control finances. Compelled work keeps victims trapped in exploitation, unable to save and uplift their lives. Debt bondage, a prevalent trafficking tactic, maintains dependency and control. On a national scale, trafficking distorts labor markets and economies. Unscrupulous employers benefit from unpaid or underpaid labour, affecting competition and formal labour markets. This feeds into informal economies and state coffers (ILO, 2014).

According to Shelley (2010), trafficking should be viewed as an economic system based on inequality. Lack of good governance, high unemployment, and inadequate social and labour regulation allow exploitation to be profitable and acceptable. Trafficking in developing countries contributes to poverty rather than

reducing it by locking vulnerable groups into low-skilled and exploitative working conditions. Human trafficking also affects public expenditure. States need to fund policing, victim support, health services and social assistance. However, due to trafficking's hidden nature, efforts in prevention are under-invested relative to responses.

This results in a "reactive" state that invests more in responding to problems rather than preventing them. The global supply chain adds to the problem. Slavery has been found in farming, textiles, fisheries, and mining. Trafficking may also benefit consumers and corporations in importing countries through exploitative labour practices, prompting questions about the responsibilities of globalisation.

Political Consequences and Governance Failures

Trafficking also has political implications as it undermines state sovereignty, legal frameworks and state legitimacy. Trafficking often spans national borders, taking advantage of weak border security, corruption and lack of cooperation among states. These challenges state sovereignty and make law enforcement more difficult. Corruption is a powerful enabler. Police, border control, and local government may engage in bribery, document falsification and inaction to facilitate trafficking (UNODC, 2022).

These undermine the rule of law and trust in institutions. If they believe authorities are complicit, victims will be less inclined to report abuse or seek assistance. Trafficking also concerns migration politics. Trafficking is frequently linked with border security and irregular migration. Though security measures are necessary, excessive securitisation can result in policies that emphasise criminalisation of migrants rather than victim protection. This is especially problematic when victims are erroneously treated as illegal migrants.

At the global level, trafficking impacts foreign relations and aid. Nations can be criticised, sanctioned, or denied assistance if their trafficking prevention efforts are deemed insufficient. For instance, the U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report assesses government efforts against trafficking and affects reputation and foreign policy (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Therefore, trafficking is not just a domestic criminal justice problem, but also presents a governance, legitimacy and international relations challenge.

Human Trafficking in South Asia

Trafficking continues to plague South Asia due to high levels of poverty, gender inequality, labor exploitation and porous borders. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal suffer from both domestic and cross-border trafficking for forced and bonded labor, child exploitation and sexual exploitation. Pakistan's trafficking is intertwined with bonded labor in brick kilns, agriculture, domestic work, and irregular migration. Women and children are especially at risk of forced marriage, domestic servitude, and sexual exploitation, whereas men are trafficked for labor exploitation in foreign countries, particularly in the Gulf region (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Child labor continues to be a major concern, with traffickers luring impoverished families with offers of education or job opportunities. The trafficking of women and children between Nepal and India for sexual exploitation has also been well documented. Although there have been legal reforms, enforcement is poor due to corruption, the absence of victim services, and weak capacity. This highlights the need for social and economic change alongside anti-trafficking legislation.

Research Gaps and Contribution of the Study

Despite the vast amount of literature on trafficking, there are still gaps. The literature heavily focuses on criminal justice and victim recognition, while less is known about the long-term social, economic, and political implications for social systems, labour markets and governance. Research tends to focus on trafficking rather than its interconnections with other forms of structural injustice. There is also little attention to the simultaneous social, economic and political consequences. Typically, these studies concentrate on one consequence and ignore others. Economic exploitation results in social exclusion, which in turn affects political legitimacy.

This research builds on previous studies by looking at trafficking as a multifaceted issue that impacts individuals and society. Through a critical synthesis of the social, economic and political consequences of human trafficking, it offers a more comprehensive comprehension of trafficking as a threat to human security and sustainable development, as opposed to a criminal justice problem.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a secondary qualitative approach to investigate the social, economic and political impacts of human trafficking, and how human trafficking affects individuals and social systems. The study is qualitative because it aims to explore complex social, institutional and policy issues rather than quantify variables. The secondary nature of this research enables the study to build on the knowledge acquired from legitimate and credible sources without primary data collection. This study gathers data from academic journal articles, books, government reports, international organisation reports and human rights reports. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report are primary source of information. These reports offer current data on trafficking trends, victims' needs, policy and governance issues.

The study applies thematic analysis to uncover key themes around social, economic and political impacts. Cross-comparison between sources provides triangulation and enhances research validity. This helps to build a critical analysis of human trafficking as a crime and a structure.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis on secondary sources identifies three overlapping types of consequences of human trafficking: social, economic and political. These

consequences are simultaneous at both the individual level (victims and survivors) and the systemic level (families and communities, labour markets, state apparatuses, and international relations).

Social Consequences

At the personal level, victims generally suffer from extreme physical violence, sexual abuse, malnutrition, hazardous working conditions and curtailed mobility. Mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal ideation, are common in trafficking cases (Zimmerman et al., 2008). Those who have been sexually exploited experience a high degree of social stigma, with families and communities blaming and shunning the victim. This makes reintegration difficult and increases the risk of re-victimisation. At the familial level, trafficking alters family dynamics.

Children forced out of school through forced labour or sexual exploitation miss out on future opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty. Parents bereaved by trafficking suffer long-term emotional and financial harm. Sometimes, return of trafficked children shames families, causing irreparable family tensions. On the community level, trafficking erodes trust and solidarity. If police are seen as corrupt or ineffective, community members are less likely to report trafficking or work with police. This tolerates exploitation and gives traffickers free rein. Conflict areas and refugee source countries are particularly vulnerable to social factors, as displacement undermines education, family structures and community protections (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

Economic Consequences

On the individual level, victims are disempowered, losing wages, financial independence and property. Debt bondage, a typical form of trafficking, guarantees long-term systems of dependency, as victims are unable to work off their (fictional) debt. This perpetuates a victim's exploitation, with no opportunity for economic advancement. At the market level, trafficking creates competition distortions. Labor traffickers enjoy unfair competitive advantages using free or low-paid labor, displacing legitimate employers who respect labour laws. This helps fuel the informal and illegal economy, eroding government revenues.

ILO (2014) found an estimated \$150 billion in illegal profits made from forced labor globally every year, highlighting the enormous scale of distortions within the global economy. For countries, trafficking reinforces poverty. In the developing world, vulnerable groups in low productivity and exploitative work settings are unable to save and invest in skills. Scarcity of resources also means governments must spend on law enforcement, rehabilitation of victims, health, and social protection (spending that could be used to facilitate development).

Trafficking is a hidden crime, which means preventive efforts are not as well funded as reactive measures, which are expensive. Economic impacts are complicated by global supply chains. Examples include agriculture, textiles, fishing, mining and manufacturing. Explaining the role of destination countries, consumers and companies may profit from exploitative labor practices, complicating the ethical

implications of unregulated globalisation.

Political Consequences

On the institutional level, trafficking undermines the authority of the state and the rule of law. Human traffickers take advantage of border inefficiencies, corruption, and a lack of coordination between agencies. Corruption is a powerful enabler: law enforcement, border and local authorities enable trafficking through bribery, falsification of documents, or lack of action (UNODC, 2022). This erodes trust in government and hampers anti-trafficking measures. At the institutional level, vulnerable judicial frameworks and limited victim support result in low prosecution rates. Lack of deterrent effects on traffickers means the profits from trafficking are attractive to organised crime.

In extreme cases, government officials are complicit, trafficking becomes legalised in some sectors or regions of the country. International relations and foreign aid are also impacted by trafficking. The U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report assesses governments' efforts against trafficking, affecting their global standing and diplomacy. Countries can be sanctioned or have foreign assistance cuts in response to perceived inaction. Trafficking is increasingly discussed within debates about migration and border security, but "over-securitisation" can lead to victimisation.

Fundamentally, trafficking continues to occur because the underlying causes of trafficking - poverty, inequality, lack of employment, war and discrimination - remain unsolved. The Palermo Protocol (2000) and national anti-trafficking laws have raised awareness, though this is patchy. In many anti-trafficking policies, criminal prosecution is overemphasised at the expense of prevention and protection, as well as the socio-economic causes.

DISCUSSION

The results confirm that human trafficking is not a crime control issue. Rather, trafficking is a multifaceted phenomenon that both results from and contributes to social inequality, poor governance and marginalisation. This section brings together the three consequence categories, and describes their relationships, theoretical and policy significance.

Interconnections Between Social, Economic, and Political Consequences

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is that social, economic and political consequences are interrelated. Economic exploitation (unpaid work, debt bondage) results in social exclusion (stigma, rejection by family), which results in political mistrust (women believe authorities are corrupt or uninterested in their welfare). Lack of political trust leads to non-reporting and non-compliance, enabling trafficking networks to thrive, which in turn leads to economic exploitation. This vicious cycle explains why trafficking continues despite regulations. For instance, a bonded laborer in a brick kiln in Pakistan (economic exploitation) may return to their village and face social ostracism (social consequence). If the local police are known to receive bribes from kiln owners (political consequence), they will not seek justice.

Without legal action, the victim is at risk of re-trafficking, and the corrupt economic practice persists. To end the cycle, we must act simultaneously on the three levels.

Theoretical Implications

Our results strongly endorse structural violence theory (Galtung, 1969). Poverty, gender inequality, low education, and discrimination are not simply context factors, but they are harmful mechanisms that disadvantage individuals by preventing access to basic needs and legal rights. Human trafficking is thus a symptom of injustice, rather than a crime. Our findings also support strain theory (Merton, 1938). Victims typically migrate and work in dangerous jobs because legitimate avenues are closed off. Smugglers and traffickers themselves live in environments where the underground economy is normalised.

This implies that anti-trafficking measures will not be effective without parallel measures to increase economic opportunities and social protection. Feminist theory is corroborated by the gendered effects in terms of sexual exploitation, forced marriage and domestic servitude. Patriarchal frameworks commodifying women's sexuality and legitimizing economic subordination create gendered vulnerabilities that need to be addressed through gender-sensitive policies. Theory of globalization (Shelley, 2010) explains the transnational networks of trafficking and supply chain abuses. Demand for cheap labor and sex services fuels trafficking and a lack of international labour protections conceals exploitation. These insights complicate the simplistic view of trafficking as a problem of "bad guys" in poor countries.

Policy Implications and Research Gaps

Existing responses to trafficking continue to focus heavily on prosecution. Prosecution is essential but the findings reveal that without simultaneous efforts to address poverty, education, labour rights, social protection and corruption, trafficking will persist. To prevent trafficking, it is necessary to target the underlying causes, not the symptoms. Victim protection needs to be improved, especially social reintegration. Anti-stigma programs, psychological care and economic empowerment programs are crucial but not well resourced. Legal livelihoods, housing and social acceptance are necessary to prevent re-trafficking.

In terms of research, this study confirms that many studies isolate trafficking consequences. Research should create holistic models that map the interplay of social, economic and political consequences over time. Longitudinal studies tracking survivors for several years after exit would inform us about their long-term reintegration. Cross-country studies would also inform policy about effective interventions.

Limitations

This research is secondary qualitative. Direct information from survivors, law enforcement, and policymakers would be more valuable. But the thematic analysis of high-quality international sources delivers valuable insights that accord with existing theory. To conclude, human trafficking is not just the crime of the 21st century, but also a failure of humanity, which undermines human security, sustainable development, and legitimacy. To stop trafficking, we need to transition from reactive

criminal justice to transformative policies that address root causes of inequality, improve governance, and safeguard marginalised groups.

CONCLUSION

This research sought to understand the social, economic and political impacts of human trafficking, and particularly the impact of trafficking on individuals and societies. Through a secondary qualitative analysis of academic journals, reports from international organisations and government documents, the research has shown that the issue of human trafficking cannot simply be reduced to a crime. Rather, trafficking is a multifaceted problem that is both a symptom and cause of structural inequality, poor governance and social exclusion.

The study shows that social impacts - such as physical and psychological abuse, social stigma and family breakdown - are devastating and enduring. Trafficked individuals face stigmatisation and ostracism in their communities, which makes reintegration into society difficult and increases the risk of re-victimisation. Economic impacts include labor market distortions, market competition and the creation of vast illicit profits - estimated at \$150 billion per year. Governments lose revenue from tax evasion and must divert resources from proactive development to reactive law enforcement and victim care. Politically, trafficking undermines government legitimacy, reveals corruption, erodes the rule of law and public confidence. Trafficking networks can operate regionally with relative impunity due to low conviction rates and failure to address underlying issues.

Importantly, this study has demonstrated that social, economic and political impacts cannot be divorced. Economic exploitation leads to social exclusion, which leads to political distrust and de-legitimisation of institutions. Trafficking continues due to weak institutions, causing further exploitation. This is why trafficking continues to occur despite international focus and legislative efforts such as the Palermo Protocol.

The findings have theoretical implications. The results align with structural violence theory, strain theory, feminist theory and globalization theory, which all contend that trafficking is part of a larger system of inequality, rather than an aberration. Policies to combat trafficking and forced prostitution that rely solely on criminal prosecution, and overlook poverty, gender inequality, labor exploitation, corruption, and stigma, are likely to fail. To prevent trafficking, it is essential to tackle the underlying causes, and to protect victims, it is important to address not only legal issues, but also psychological distress, economic inequality and stigma.

Our research has limitations, including the use of secondary data and lack of primary data collection. Longitudinal and integrated approaches are needed in future research to examine dynamic social, economic and political effects. Cross-country comparisons of legal and economic systems would also help determine best policy approaches.

Ultimately, human trafficking is a threat to human security, sustainable development and institutional legitimacy. To effectively combat it, a transformative

approach is needed that shifts the focus from law enforcement to holistic policies that address structural inequality, enhance governance, protect vulnerable groups, and promote human dignity. Otherwise, trafficking will endure and the negative impacts will continue to be felt for generations.

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