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REVIEW OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN PAKISTAN: EXPLORING CAUSES, CHALLENGES, AND STRATEGIES FOR ERADICATION

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ABSTRACT

Human trafficking in Pakistan is a serious issue that involves the exploitation of men, women, and children for various purposes, including forced labor, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude. Factors such as poverty, illiteracy, lack of employment opportunities, and weak law enforcement contribute to its persistence. Victims are often trafficked within the country, although some are transported abroad, particularly to the Middle East. Pakistan also faces challenges related to bonded labor, a practice where individuals are forced to work to repay debts, often under inhumane conditions. Despite government efforts to combat trafficking, including the enactment of anti-trafficking laws and national action plans, enforcement remains weak due to corruption and limited resources. International organizations and NGOs are actively working to raise awareness, support victims, and strengthen local capacities to address the issue. However, significant challenges remain in eradicating human trafficking and protecting vulnerable populations in Pakistan.

Keywords: Child trafficking, Forced labor, Sexual exploitation, Smuggling networks, Pakistan.

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INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking is a global issue that severely affects countries like Pakistan, where the combination of economic hardship, social inequality, and weak law enforcement creates fertile ground for this illicit trade (Gul et al., 2022). In Pakistan, human trafficking manifests in several forms, including forced labor, sexual exploitation, and child trafficking. This dark reality is often hidden behind the country's larger socio-political challenges, but its impact is deeply felt by vulnerable populations, especially women, children, and migrant workers (Mustafa et al., 2023). Despite local and international efforts to combat it, human trafficking in Pakistan remains a persistent and evolving crisis (Joiya & Quddus, 2022). One of the primary causes of human trafficking in Pakistan is widespread poverty. Economic deprivation drives many families to seek work in urban centers or abroad, often through unregulated and unscrupulous channels (Zahid, 2023). Traffickers exploit this desperation, luring individuals with promises of well-paying jobs only to trap them in conditions of forced labor, domestic servitude, or sexual exploitation. Labor trafficking is widespread in Pakistan's agriculture, brick kiln, and textile industries, where bonded labor continues to thrive despite legal prohibitions. Workers, often entire families, are coerced into working to repay inflated debts, a cycle that can last for generations (Stammers, 2022).

According to Lohana et al. (2021), another contributing factor is gender inequality, which leaves women and girls particularly vulnerable to trafficking. Pakistan's deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and limited opportunities for women make them easy targets for traffickers. Many are forced into prostitution, domestic servitude, or marriages abroad under pretenses. Additionally, child trafficking for labor and

sexual exploitation is a significant concern (Government of the United States of America, 2020). Children are often forced into begging rings, domestic servitude, or sold into marriage. Trafficking for organ removal has also been reported, adding another grim layer to this complex problem (Idrees et al., 2023). Pakistan is both a source and destination country for human trafficking. Internally, rural-to-urban migration plays a key role in the movement of trafficked persons. Internationally, many Pakistanis, particularly from impoverished regions, are trafficked to the Middle East, where they face exploitation in construction, domestic work, or forced prostitution. Conversely, foreign nationals, especially from Afghanistan and Bangladesh, are trafficked into Pakistan, often to work in exploitative labor conditions (Joiya & Quddus, 2022). Despite the scale of the problem, law enforcement efforts to combat human trafficking in Pakistan are inadequate. Corruption, lack of resources, and limited training for law enforcement officials hinder effective prosecution of traffickers. Although Pakistan has ratified various international agreements, such as the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, enforcement of these laws remains inconsistent. Victims, particularly those from marginalized communities, often face significant barriers to justice, including social stigma, fear of retaliation, and lack of legal support (Nawaz et al., 2023).

Human trafficking in Pakistan requires a multifaceted approach. Strengthening legal frameworks, improving law enforcement capacity, and raising public awareness are essential. Moreover, tackling the root causes, such as poverty, unemployment, and gender inequality, is crucial to reducing vulnerability to trafficking. International cooperation and NGO support also play an important role in assisting victims and preventing future exploitation cases. Only through sustained efforts can Pakistan hope to mitigate the devastating impact of human trafficking on its people (Islam, 2024).

Research Justification

Human trafficking in Pakistan is a severe issue driven by a complex interplay of socioeconomic, legal, and cultural factors. The widespread poverty and high unemployment rates in the country create an environment where individuals are more susceptible to exploitation. Many traffickers prey on the desperation of those seeking better economic opportunities, luring them with false promises of jobs or improved living conditions. This economic vulnerability is a primary factor contributing to the high rates of trafficking, particularly among women and children. Legally, Pakistan faces significant challenges in combating human trafficking. The existing legislation is often inadequate or poorly enforced, and issues such as corruption and a lack of resources further hamper efforts to address the problem effectively. Law enforcement agencies struggle with limited capacity and training, which undermines their ability to combat trafficking networks and support victims.

Cultural practices also play a role in perpetuating human trafficking in Pakistan. Traditional practices such as child marriages and bonded labor systems make specific populations particularly vulnerable to trafficking. These cultural norms can often normalize or obscure the abusive practices associated with trafficking, making it more difficult to address. Pakistan needs a multifaceted approach that includes strengthening legal frameworks, improving enforcement mechanisms, raising public awareness, and implementing socioeconomic development programs. Addressing these issues will be crucial in reducing the prevalence of trafficking and protecting vulnerable populations.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the historical background of human trafficking in Pakistan.
2. To identify and analyze the leading laws that govern human trafficking in Pakistan.
3. To identify the key challenges regarding human trafficking in Pakistan.
4. To explore the opportunities for minimizing human trafficking in Pakistan.
5. To identify and propose effective prevention and intervention strategies.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic review methodology, with research objectives established accordingly. A comprehensive literature review was conducted (Komba & Lwoga, 2020). Research findings were categorized based on their content (Hiver et al., 2021; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), and classified information was incorporated into the study by organizing it into headings (Gan et al., 2021; Pawson et al., 2005). The evaluation of classified information and titles formed the basis of the study (Page, 2021; Rahi, 2017), ensuring the integrity of the research subject and its contents (Egger et al., 2022; Victor, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human trafficking is a global issue and a grave violation of human rights, affecting millions of people each year (Gozdziak, 2021). Pakistan, as a transit, source, and destination country, faces significant challenges in combating human trafficking. The phenomenon involves the illegal trade of individuals, particularly women and children, for purposes such as forced labor, sexual exploitation, organ trafficking, and involuntary servitude (Khan et al., 2022). This literature review examines the existing scholarship on human trafficking in Pakistan, its root causes, impacts, policy responses, and research gaps.

Conceptualizing Human Trafficking

Human trafficking, as defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons through the means of force, coercion, or deception for exploitation. In Pakistan, trafficking is intertwined with deeply rooted social, economic, and political issues such as poverty, lack of education, gender inequality, and poor law enforcement mechanisms.

Root Causes of Human Trafficking in Pakistan

Socioeconomic Factors: Poverty is identified as the leading cause of human trafficking in Pakistan. According to Ortega et al. (2022), a significant portion of the population lives below the poverty line, making individuals vulnerable to exploitation. Families often sell children or agree to exploitative conditions in exchange for economic relief. The rural poor are particularly susceptible due to limited education and employment opportunities. **Cultural Practices and Gender Inequality:** Cultural practices such as child marriage, bonded labor, and forced marriages play a crucial role in perpetuating human trafficking. As noted by Cameron et al. (2023), the patriarchal structure of Pakistani society often results in the exploitation of women and children. Women who face significant restrictions on education and employment are often coerced or forced into trafficking networks. Children, especially girls, are subjected to trafficking for sexual exploitation or forced labor within domestic and agricultural settings.

Migration and Trafficking: Pakistan also serves as a transit point for traffickers who exploit migration flows. Migrants seeking better economic opportunities fall prey to traffickers. As discussed by Szablewska (2022), a large number of Pakistani migrants, particularly those headed to the Middle East for work, become victims of labor trafficking. Smugglers promise employment but deliver individuals into situations of forced labor or slavery-like conditions, especially in countries with weak labor laws.

Forms of Human Trafficking in Pakistan

Sex Trafficking: Sex trafficking is a pervasive form of human trafficking in Pakistan, targeting primarily women and girls. According to Lazzarino et al. (2024), trafficking networks exploit young girls from rural areas, promising jobs or marriages but forcing them into prostitution in urban centers or trafficking them internationally. Sex trafficking is compounded by the stigma associated with reporting sexual exploitation, further silencing victims. **Labor Trafficking:** Bonded labor is a major form of labor trafficking in Pakistan, especially in the brick kiln, agriculture, and carpet industries. According to Tunio and Somroo (2024), families often become trapped in generational debt bondage, where they are forced to work in exploitative

conditions to repay loans that can never be fully cleared. Children born into such circumstances are often forced into the same bonded labor practices, perpetuating the cycle of exploitation.

Organ Trafficking: Another alarming dimension of trafficking is organ trafficking, particularly the illicit trade of kidneys found that impoverished individuals are often coerced into selling their organs in exchange for money, with traffickers manipulating legal loopholes to facilitate the illicit organ trade. This form of trafficking is less visible but has severe health and social repercussions for the victims (Stammers, 2022).

Legal and Policy Framework

Pakistan has taken various legislative steps to address human trafficking. The Prevention and Control of Human Trafficking Ordinance, 2002 is the primary legal framework that defines and criminalizes human trafficking (Mustafa et al., 2023). The ordinance lays down provisions for protecting victims, but critics argue that its implementation remains weak. Additionally, Pakistan has ratified international agreements such as the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol). However, enforcement remains challenging due to corruption, lack of capacity, and insufficient resources.

Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs have played a crucial role in combating human trafficking by providing services for victim rehabilitation, advocating for stronger legislation, and raising awareness (Mustafa et al., 2023). Organizations like Sahil, Aurat Foundation, and Shirkat Gah have made significant strides in protecting women and children from trafficking networks, offering legal aid and rehabilitation services. However, limited resources, a hostile political environment, and cultural resistance to interventions often undermine these efforts (Zahid, 2023).

Gaps in Research

Despite growing awareness and policy attention, several gaps persist in the study of human trafficking in Pakistan. First, there is a lack of reliable data on the scale of the problem. The clandestine nature of trafficking makes it difficult to obtain accurate statistics, leading to an underestimation of its prevalence. Second, most studies focus on sex trafficking and bonded labor, leaving gaps in understanding other forms such as organ trafficking, child soldiers, and trafficking for forced marriages. Moreover, there is limited research on the long-term rehabilitation and reintegration of victims, especially in the context of psychological trauma and social stigmatization. According to Baig et al. (2024), survivors often face significant barriers in returning to normal life due to the stigma attached to their experiences, particularly women who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation.

Historical Background of Human Trafficking in Pakistan

Human trafficking in Pakistan has deep historical roots, influenced by poverty and social challenges. During British rule (1858-1947), forced labor and exploitation were common, which laid the foundation for trafficking. After Pakistan's independence in 1947, economic hardship and limited access to education made many people vulnerable to exploitation. Women, children, and marginalized communities became targets for forced labor, bonded servitude, and sexual exploitation. In the late 20th century, conflicts in neighboring Afghanistan led to increased internal displacement and worsening trafficking as criminal groups exploited vulnerable populations. Trafficked individuals were forced into domestic work, sex trade, and labor in industries like brick kilns, agriculture, and textile factories. Human smuggling to the Middle East also surged during this period.

Although Pakistan has passed laws such as the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (2018) to combat trafficking, enforcement remains weak due to corruption, limited resources, and sociocultural factors like patriarchy and child marriages. These issues continue to make trafficking difficult to eradicate. Today, Pakistan remains a source, transit, and destination country for trafficked individuals. Ongoing national and

international efforts are needed to tackle this persistent problem and provide protection for vulnerable populations at risk of trafficking.

Leading Human Trafficking Protection Laws in Pakistan

Human trafficking in Pakistan is a pressing issue, and the country has taken significant legal steps to address it. Key legislation includes the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, 2018, which is the cornerstone of Pakistan's efforts to combat human trafficking. This act criminalizes all forms of trafficking, whether for labor, sexual exploitation, or organ trade. It outlines comprehensive measures for victim protection, enforcement, and penalties for traffickers. The Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2018 mandates severe punishments, including up to 10 years of imprisonment and heavy fines for traffickers. It emphasizes protection and rehabilitation for victims, ensuring their access to medical, legal, and psychological assistance. The law also provides mechanisms for the repatriation of trafficked victims, particularly when they are exploited abroad.

Another pivotal law is the Prevention of Smuggling of Migrants Act, 2018, which focuses on combating the smuggling of individuals across borders. It complements the Trafficking Act by criminalizing the smuggling of migrants for financial or material benefit and ensures protection for smuggled individuals, distinguishing them from criminals.

The Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) also plays a significant role in curbing human trafficking. Section 369(A) to Section 374 of the PPC penalizes the kidnapping, abduction, and forced labor of individuals, especially women and children. The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1992 further prohibits bonded labor, a form of human trafficking prevalent in rural areas of Pakistan. The Constitution of Pakistan 1973, Article 11 also prohibits Slavery and forced labor.

Slavery is non-existent and forbidden, and no law shall permit or facilitate its introduction into Pakistan in any form.

1. All forms of forced labor and traffic of human beings are prohibited.
2. No child below the age of fourteen shall be engaged in any factory, mine, or other hazardous employment.
3. Nothing in this Article shall be deemed to affect compulsory service
4. Any person undergoing punishment for an offense against any law or
 - a. Required by any law for public purpose:
 - b. Provided that no compulsory service shall be of a cruel nature or incompatible with human dignity.

Challenges and Opportunities for Human Trafficking Laws

Human trafficking is a major concern in Pakistan due to economic struggles, social issues, and insufficient law enforcement. The country acts as a source, transit hub, and destination for trafficking, where men, women, and children are vulnerable to forced labor, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude. A major issue is the ineffective enforcement of laws. Even though laws are in place, law enforcement agencies often lack the necessary resources, training, and motivation to enforce them. Corruption in these agencies can contribute to trafficking, making it harder to achieve justice. Additionally, factors like poverty, illiteracy, and gender inequality make vulnerable populations more at risk of being trafficked. Victim support is another area of concern. Many trafficking victims face stigma and lack access to shelters, counseling, and rehabilitation services. This makes it difficult for them to reintegrate into society and discourages them from seeking help.

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities to improve anti-trafficking efforts. International cooperation, especially with organizations like the United Nations, can provide support and resources to strengthen local law enforcement. Public awareness campaigns can help reduce vulnerabilities and

encourage the government to prioritize anti-trafficking measures. Furthermore, better coordination between federal and provincial governments and civil society can enhance the identification and support of victims. Legal reforms focusing on survivor-centered approaches, harsher penalties for offenders, and improved monitoring systems can lead to a more effective response to human trafficking in Pakistan.

Discussion

Human trafficking in Pakistan is a grave issue impacting countless individuals, particularly women and children. This illicit practice involves the illegal trade of people for purposes such as forced labor, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude. Several factors contribute to the persistence of trafficking in Pakistan. Poverty is a significant driver, as many people, especially in rural areas, lack viable economic opportunities, making them vulnerable to traffickers. Furthermore, limited access to education often leaves individuals unaware of their rights or how to seek help. Cultural norms can also exacerbate the problem, allowing discrimination and exploitation to flourish. The consequences of trafficking are dire. Victims often endure severe physical and emotional abuse, leading to long-lasting trauma. Families are shattered when loved ones are lost or exploited. Efforts to combat trafficking include government initiatives to strengthen laws, though enforcement remains a challenge. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international bodies are vital in raising awareness, supporting victims, and advocating for stronger protections. To effectively address human trafficking in Pakistan, a comprehensive strategy is essential, focusing on legal reform, education, and community empowerment to protect vulnerable populations and assist survivors.

The impact of trafficking is profound, as victims frequently suffer severe physical and psychological harm, which can lead to long-term trauma. Families are often devastated by the loss or exploitation of their loved ones. Addressing human trafficking requires a multifaceted approach, including legal reforms, educational initiatives, and community engagement to safeguard vulnerable individuals and support survivors.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Human trafficking in Pakistan is a pervasive and complex issue that affects countless individuals, particularly women and children. This crime manifests in various forms, including forced labor, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude. Victims are often deceived by false promises of employment and better living conditions, leading them into situations of exploitation and abuse. Factors such as poverty, lack of education, and inadequate law enforcement create an environment where trafficking can flourish. The government of Pakistan has recognized the severity of this problem and has implemented laws and initiatives aimed at combatting human trafficking. Measures such as the Trafficking of Persons (Prevention and Control) Act of 2018 signify steps towards addressing the issue. However, the effectiveness of these measures is hindered by corruption, insufficient resources, and societal stigma surrounding victims. Many individuals who fall prey to traffickers remain invisible, often too fearful to come forward for help. Community involvement is crucial in the fight against human trafficking. Local organizations are essential in raising awareness, educating communities about the risks, and supporting survivors. Empowering vulnerable populations through education and economic opportunities can significantly reduce their susceptibility to trafficking. Moreover, international collaboration is vital, as human trafficking often involves cross-border elements. Countries must work together to strengthen legal frameworks and share the best victim protection and rehabilitation practices. Addressing human trafficking in Pakistan requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses government action, community engagement, and international cooperation. Society can create a safer environment for at-risk individuals by fostering awareness and advocating for stronger protections. Ultimately, a collective effort is needed to eradicate human trafficking and restore dignity and freedom to its victims, ensuring that everyone can live without fear of exploitation.

Recommendations

Strengthen Legislation: Enhance existing laws and ensure their strict enforcement to create a robust legal framework that effectively addresses all forms of human trafficking.

Increase Awareness Campaigns: Launch widespread public awareness campaigns to educate communities about trafficking risks and how to identify and report suspicious activities.

Enhance Victim Support Services: Establish and improve shelters, counseling, and rehabilitation services for survivors, providing them with the necessary resources to reintegrate into society.

Improve Law Enforcement Training: Provide specialized training for law enforcement officials on recognizing, investigating, and prosecuting trafficking cases effectively and treating victims with sensitivity.

Strengthen Economic Opportunities: Develop job training and employment programs to empower vulnerable populations and reduce their susceptibility to trafficking.

Promote Education: Enhance access to education, particularly for girls and marginalized communities, to equip individuals with knowledge and skills to protect them from exploitation.

Facilitate Community Engagement: Encourage local organizations and community leaders to take an active role in preventing trafficking and supporting victims, fostering a collaborative approach to combat this issue.

Enhance International Cooperation: Collaborate with neighboring countries and international organizations to share intelligence, resources, and best practices for combatting cross-border trafficking.

Establish Reporting Mechanisms: Create confidential and accessible hotlines for reporting suspected trafficking cases, ensuring that victims and the public can easily seek help.

Conduct Research and Data Collection: Invest in research to gather data on the scale and nature of human trafficking in Pakistan, which can inform policy decisions and help measure the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts.

Research Limitations

Research on human trafficking in Pakistan encounters several critical limitations that affect the understanding and response to this pressing issue. Firstly, the covert nature of trafficking makes it challenging to collect accurate data. Victims often fear retaliation or face societal stigma, leading to significant underreporting of cases. This reluctance to come forward hampers efforts to establish a clear picture of the scale of trafficking in the country.

Secondly, inconsistencies in legal definitions and frameworks across various provinces complicate the standardization of data collection. Government agencies frequently lack the necessary resources and infrastructure to effectively monitor and investigate trafficking cases, resulting in incomplete information. Non-governmental organizations, while vital in addressing trafficking, often operate under financial constraints, limiting their research capabilities.

Additionally, the interplay of socioeconomic factors, such as poverty and gender inequality, complicates the analysis of root causes, making it difficult to develop targeted and effective interventions. These challenges collectively hinder progress in combating human trafficking in Pakistan.

Research Implications

Human trafficking in Pakistan remains a critical concern, with thousands, especially women and children, being subjected to forced labor, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude. The research implications are pivotal in designing effective interventions. Detailed qualitative research is essential to comprehend the socioeconomic drivers, such as poverty, illiteracy, and gender disparity, which fuel trafficking. Studies should also investigate gaps within law enforcement and the justice system, focusing on why existing anti-trafficking policies are poorly enforced.

Additionally, attention must be given to the role of informal labor sectors, migration trends, and political corruption. The psychological and social consequences on victims must be thoroughly examined to develop comprehensive rehabilitation programs. Collaboration among universities, law enforcement agencies, and NGOs is vital to generating data-driven solutions for prevention, prosecution, and survivor support. Finally, research can help shape public awareness efforts aimed at vulnerable groups, equipping them to resist exploitation and strengthening community defenses.

Future Research Directions

Future research on human trafficking in Pakistan should address several critical areas to combat this issue effectively. First, there is a need for longitudinal studies that examine the socioeconomic, cultural, and political conditions contributing to human trafficking over time. Understanding how poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and gender inequality evolve and intersect with trafficking patterns can inform targeted interventions.

Second, research should focus on the implementation and effectiveness of Pakistan's anti-trafficking laws. Investigating why these laws often fail to protect vulnerable populations and hold perpetrators accountable is essential. It includes exploring the role of corruption, inadequate law enforcement training, and lack of victim support in perpetuating trafficking networks.

Third, another important area is the study of internal trafficking, particularly the movement of individuals from rural to urban areas for forced labor or sexual exploitation. It includes understanding the dynamics of informal labor markets and migration patterns. Furthermore, research on the psychosocial impacts on survivors is crucial. Studies that explore the mental health, reintegration, and rehabilitation needs of victims can guide the development of effective support systems. Lastly, research must explore the role of technology in both facilitating and preventing human trafficking. Investigating online trafficking networks and using digital tools in awareness campaigns and law enforcement could offer new prevention strategies.

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