

Caste, Class, Gender And The Structural Vulnerability Of Girls To Human Trafficking In India

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ABSTRACT

Human trafficking is still considered an exploitative practice in India, especially among girls who are affected by poverty, marginalization, gender inequality and lack of socioeconomic prospects. In this research, an attempt was made to study the vulnerability of girls to human trafficking through an examination of the interrelated issues of caste, class and gender. A qualitative research design was chosen, whereby secondary sources of data were utilized through academic literature, governmental reports, laws and institutions. Using an intersectional vulnerability framework, how issues such as discrimination based on caste, poverty, poor education, unstable job situation, migration and gender inequality contributed to making girls vulnerable to human trafficking was assessed. It was found that vulnerability was not generated by a single cause but a result of several factors. Caste-based exclusion would prevent access to opportunities, whereas poverty and economic instability might make the people more dependent on hazardous employment or migration practices. Gender disparity would reduce the freedom of girls, restrict their mobility, and would affect their decision-making ability. The study concluded that the legal measures and institutional response would provide an essential platform for prevention and protection against trafficking, although the effectiveness of such interventions would be hindered due to under-reporting, lack of accessibility, lack of coordination, and neglect of structural problems. An intersectional approach including legal intervention and education, economic opportunity, safe migration, social protection, and rehabilitation is required for the prevention of trafficking in India.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Girls, Caste, Class, Gender Inequality, Structural Vulnerability, Intersectionality, Poverty, Social Exclusion, India

1. INTRODUCTION

Human Trafficking is an act of exploitation, which includes the recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring or receiving of persons for exploitation purposes. In India, trafficking has been linked strongly with poverty, gender disparity, caste discrimination, migration, unemployment, lack of education and social security. Girls face increased risks due to age and gender barriers that make them economically independent, mobile, unaware about their rights and unable to exercise decision-making power. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 has criminalized human trafficking under Section 143. Exploitation of the victim takes place by force, threats, abduction, deception, abuse of vulnerability and inducement. Human trafficking occurs despite having legislative actions and institutions. Hence, it is important to understand the factors that put girls at risk of human trafficking¹.

1.1 Background of Human Trafficking in India

¹ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime art. 3(a), Nov. 15, 2000, 2237 U.N.T.S. 319.

Human trafficking in India takes place through several channels such as sexual exploitation, forced labor, domestic servitude, forced begging, and forced marriages. According to the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023², there is a broad legal definition for human trafficking and exploitation. Some of the factors contributing to vulnerability to human trafficking include poverty, unemployment, lack of employment opportunities, illiteracy, migration, and social marginalization. The people belonging to poor communities and women and children might have higher risks of being victims of human trafficking due to poverty and low social status. But poverty or caste alone cannot be considered as the cause of human trafficking; these factors can be the situations taken advantage of by human traffickers.

1.2 Human Trafficking and the Vulnerability of Girls

Girls may have specific vulnerabilities related to being children and females which may affect their freedom of action, movement, economic self-reliance and capacity to perceive deceiving recruitment. Being poor, insecure at home, having little or no education and employment opportunities may contribute to dependency on recruiters and/or intermediaries. Traffickers may lure vulnerable girls through job offers, marriage proposals, educational opportunities or improved living conditions. Vulnerability of girls must not be regarded as a feature of the girls themselves, but rather as a result of social, economic and institutional environment in which they find themselves. Evidence from government and institutions about involvement of children in trafficking victimizes supports the need for a child-focused preventive approach.

1.3 Caste, Class and Gender as Structural Determinants

Caste, class and gender determine how people gain access to education, work, money, relationships and protection. Caste discrimination might limit access to opportunities by historically underprivileged groups, while class poverty might generate economic coercion as well as dependence on uncertain jobs or migration. Gender discrimination may restrict access to mobility and resources of girls as well as their decision-making powers. All of these aspects can interplay in order to heighten vulnerability to trafficking especially where girls encounter more than one form of discrimination at once. Caste, class and gender should not thus be viewed as stand-alone causes of trafficking but rather as intersecting structural factors affecting access to opportunities and risks within society.

1.4 Intersectionality and Structural Vulnerability

The intersectional lens is an effective way to understand the ways in which different disadvantages interact with each other. A girl's vulnerability could be determined at once by such factors as gender, caste, poverty, age, education, geographical location and migration. Thus, for instance, poverty may lead to migration, discrimination by caste may limit job prospects, and gender may restrict her decision-making autonomy. In combination, such factors can result in increased vulnerability. Structural vulnerability in this research is defined as unequal exposure to the risk of trafficking because of structural inequalities rather than personal attributes. Such a paradigm shifts the focus away from blaming victims to examining the structure of society that produces unequal vulnerabilities³.

² The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, No. 45 of 2023, § 143, India Code.

³ Rochelle L. Dalla et al., Structural Vulnerabilities, Personal Agency, and Caste: An Exploration of Child Sex Trafficking in Rural India, 35 *Violence & Victims* 307, 307–30 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1891/VV-D-19-00048>.

1.5 Statement of the Problem

In spite of laws and systems put in place, human trafficking remains an issue affecting girls in India. Previous debates have been focused on traffickers, methods of recruitment, and the processes in place to address human trafficking in terms of law, while less attention is paid to structural factors leading to vulnerability among some girls. Factors such as poverty, exclusion based on caste, gender discrimination, lack of education, precarious work and migration may combine in a certain way to lead to exploitation. In this regard, the main question addressed in this research is to look at how caste, class, and gender influence the vulnerability of girls in relation to human trafficking in India.

1.6 Rationale and Significance of the Study

This research is important because trafficking cannot be tackled by criminal measures only. The understanding of the dynamics of interactions of caste, class and gender with respect to poverty, education, employment and migration may lead to identification of the factors that make girls vulnerable to exploitation. It also helps to develop more focused preventive and rehabilitative strategies for girls facing various disadvantages. From the perspective of academia, this research is important since it uses the idea of structural vulnerability for studying trafficking. From the practical point of view, the importance of education, livelihoods, social protection, migration and institutions along with laws is highlighted here.

1.7 Research Objectives

Objectives of the study are as follows:

- To study the impact of caste, class, and gender on vulnerability of girls to human trafficking in India.
- To analyze socio-economic and social conditions that give rise to pathways of human trafficking.
- To evaluate the legal and institutional responses and recommend ways of improving prevention and protection.

1.8 Scope of the Study

The study explores the structural vulnerabilities of girls for human trafficking in India, with particular emphasis on caste, class, and gender issues. The variables considered are poverty, social exclusion, gender inequalities, education, employment, migration and institutional safety nets. The study takes into account all the major types of trafficking and exploitation as defined in the legal framework of India and explores this problem at a national level although regional or community level information may be incorporated when appropriate. The research is based mainly on scholarly articles, government statistics and legislative frameworks. This study does not try to explore all types of trafficking or all types of victims but rather focuses on the structural factors that affect the vulnerability of girls⁴.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem of human trafficking in India is now being viewed in the literature not simply as a crime but also as a social issue involving inequalities in society and the economy. Caste, poverty, gender inequality, family situations, and lack of socioeconomic opportunity have been identified as

⁴ Rochelle L. Dalla et al., A Life-Course Perspective of Sex Trafficking Among the Bedia Caste of India, 54 *Advances in Life Course Research* 100517 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2022.100517>.

crucial components of trafficking vulnerability. Nevertheless, these components have mostly been studied in isolation or in specific societies, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how these vulnerabilities can impact girls.

Dalla et al. (2020)⁵ explored child sex trafficking in rural India on the basis of structural vulnerability, individual agency and caste. Their results indicated that caste-related disadvantages, financial dependency of the families and lack of alternatives led to the continuation of exploitation among the Bedia women and girls. This research was quite significant since it took into consideration the link between structure and agency instead of viewing the victims as passive.

Dalla et al. (2022)⁶ explored the issue of trafficking of women for sexual purposes among the Bedia caste from a life course approach. It was found out that caste affiliation, lack of income generating options, family obligations, and lack of educational opportunities contributed to the sustained participation in the commercial sex trade. The results highlighted how vulnerability could be perpetuated over time.

Rana (2021)⁷ explored the underlying dimensions of sexual trafficking of girls in Central India and stressed the role of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and community-specific sociocultural traditions as some of the vital contributory factors. This study was highly relevant to the current study since the focus was on girls and the way in which the practice of trafficking could be rooted within the context of local socio-economic dynamics. **James and Ranganathan (2021)**⁸ emphasized that vulnerability can be examined via intricate intersectional dynamics, while taking into account the role of agency of the victims. This qualitative study revealed that the issue of trafficking is influenced by various social and individual conditions.

Acharya and Behera (2025)⁹ studied the issue of trafficking of women and girls into marriage in India and discussed how gender inequality and socioeconomic insecurity were associated with exploitative marriages. Their research contributed to the existing knowledge about the nature of trafficking in that it showed that trafficking did not have to involve sexual exploitation.

2.1 Research Gap

The literature reviewed generated considerable information on caste, poverty, gender, socioeconomic insecurity, and survivor agency; however, there was still a lack of coherence in research related to specific communities and forms of trafficking. There were no adequate connections made between the role of caste, class, and gender as interlinked structural forces

⁵⁵ Dalla, R. L., Panchal, T. J., Erwin, S., Peter, J., Roselius, K., Ranjan, R., ... & Sahu, S. (2020). *Structural vulnerabilities, personal agency, and caste: An exploration of child sex trafficking in rural India. Violence and victims*, 35(3), 307-330

⁶ Dalla, R. L., Roselius, K., Johnson, V. J., Peter, J., Panchal, T. J., Ranjan, R., ... & Sahu, S. (2022). *A life-course perspective of sex trafficking among the bedia caste of India. Advances in life course research*, 54, 100517.

⁷ Rana, U. (2021). *Understanding the hidden aspects of sex trafficking of girl children in Central India. Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(9), 256-270.

⁸ James, N., & Ranganathan, S. (2021). *Of vulnerability and agency: Perspectives from survivors of sex trafficking in India. Indian Journal of Human Development*, 15(1), 117-127.

⁹ Acharya, A. K., & Behera, S. S. (2025). *Exploitation and trafficking of women and girls for forced marriage in India. Global Society*, 39(4), 550-570.

determining the vulnerability of girls to human trafficking in India. Therefore, the current research sought to fill this void by investigating how these dimensions interacted with poverty, education, employment, and migration as pathways leading to trafficking.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design used for the research was qualitative and descriptive, with the aim of looking at the structural vulnerabilities that girls face in regard to being trafficked in India. The methodology used was informed by the aims of the research and was aimed at understanding the combined effect of caste, class, gender, poverty, education, work and migration on the vulnerabilities of trafficking.

3.1 Research Design

This research was conducted based on the descriptive and analytical research design. The descriptive part of the research entailed looking at the primary social, economic and demographic characteristics that lead to the trafficking of girls, whereas the analytical part of the research involved exploring how caste, class and gender combined to generate vulnerability¹⁰.

3.2 Research Approach

Qualitative research method was chosen for the study as the concern was with the social structure and the path to trafficking and not the estimation of trafficking through a survey. The intersectionality perspective was employed in understanding how caste, class, and gender intersect with other variables like poverty, education, employment, and migration.

3.3 Sources of Data

Secondary data was used mostly in the study. The data and evidence were obtained through research papers published in peer-reviewed journals, books, scholarly sources, reports by the Government of India, publications by the National Crime Records Bureau, laws and legislations, reports of international institutions and other institutional sources. The literature reviewed in the study includes literature on vulnerability due to caste, child trafficking, gender discrimination, poverty, forced marriage.

3.4 Study Population and Sampling

Because of the secondary nature of the research, there was no direct sampling of trafficked survivors or girls. The sample group for this research was composed of published sources on girls and women who were victims of human trafficking in India, especially among the socially and economically vulnerable segments of the population. The selected literature for the study was those pertaining to the issue of caste, class, gender, structural vulnerability, and trafficking.

3.5 Variables and Indicators of Structural Vulnerability

These were the major structural factors which were taken into account in the study. These were characterized by social exclusion based on caste, economic position of households, poverty, unemployment, educational deprivation, gender inequality, restricted mobility, migration, family insecurity and lack of institutional support. Vulnerability to trafficking was measured in terms of

¹⁰ Nisha James & Shubha Ranganathan, Of Vulnerability and Agency: Perspectives from Survivors of Sex Trafficking in India, 15(1) *Indian Journal of Human Development* 117, 117–27 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/09737030211003657>.

factors like exposure to deceptive recruitment, exploitation at workplace, sexual abuse, forced marriages, reliance on intermediaries and lack of institutional protection and rehabilitation¹¹.

3.6 Data Collection Methods

Information was gathered using a systematic review of appropriate secondary sources. The articles and institutional sources were selected based on their relevance to the objectives of the study. Information regarding structural factors, trafficking networks, vulnerable groups, laws and interventions by institutions was compiled and thematically organized. More weight was given to those sources which had addressed girls, caste-based vulnerability, economic deprivation and gendered exploitation in India.

3.7 Analytical Framework

An intersectional structural vulnerability framework was used for the research. This is because caste, class, and gender were seen as interrelated aspects, not separate ones. The framework looked at the interaction between social exclusion, economic instability, and gender inequalities to limit access to education, work opportunities, mobility, and protection. This was related to possible pathways into trafficking. The framework also addressed the issues of education, employment, and migration that may affect vulnerability or offer protection.

3.8 Data Analysis Techniques

The gathered data was analyzed through descriptive and thematic analysis. Relevant information was then grouped into main themes such as socio-economic vulnerability, discrimination based on caste, poverty, gender inequality, intersectionality, migration, education, and employment. Comparative analysis was carried out by comparing findings across sources and looking for commonalities and differences. The results were then analyzed in light of the research questions and literature.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

As the study is based solely on secondary sources, there is no direct engagement with the survivors of trafficking or any other vulnerable subjects. However, ethical concerns include representing the findings of the published sources truthfully, proper attribution of the authors of the sources, non-victim blaming and sensitive handling of information related to girls and trafficking.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The study analyzed the structures that made girls vulnerable to being trafficked in India. According to the results, the vulnerability to being trafficked did not emanate from one condition alone, but rather a combination of economic, social, caste-based, gender and institutional inadequacies and vulnerabilities. This led to the discussion of how the identified factors individually and collectively contribute to the process of exploitation¹².

4.1 Socioeconomic and Demographic Dimensions of Vulnerability

The socioeconomic conditions influenced the vulnerability of girls to trafficking. Poor socioeconomic backgrounds, lower income levels, lack of employment, poor education, unstable family background and poor geographic locations could limit the availability of safe prospects for

¹¹ Usha Rana, Understanding the Hidden Aspects of Sex Trafficking of Girl Children in Central India, 22(9) *Journal of International Women's Studies* 256, 256–70 (2021).

¹² A. K. Acharya & S. S. Behera, Exploitation and Trafficking of Women and Girls for Forced Marriage in India, 39(4) *Global Society* 550–70 (2025).

these girls. This could result in the girls becoming more dependent on family members, employers, or middlemen and being easily swayed by offers of employment, marriage or improved life conditions.

Further, age and gender increased the vulnerability of these girls. Generally, young girls were economically dependent and lacked the authority to make decisions. This could limit their ability to recognize misleading recruitment and seek help. Hence, the socioeconomic vulnerability extended beyond mere poverty to lack of access to education, employment, information, mobility and protection mechanisms.

4.2 Caste-Based Social Exclusion and Trafficking Risk

Caste-based exclusion became an essential structural element of trafficking vulnerability. Girls from socially excluded groups might experience limited access to educational opportunities, jobs, social networks, and institutional resources. This limitation of options might increase the likelihood of their reliance on informal labor or on social networks within their community.

Caste could have also been related to family and community practices. In the cases where exclusion and economic disadvantages persist through generations, girls inherited the situation that could have made them more susceptible to exploitation. Caste should be understood not as a direct and automatic cause of trafficking but as a structural condition that could affect access to options and protection.

4.3 Class, Poverty and Economic Insecurity

Insecure economic situations may lead to a scenario where both the girls and their families accept jobs that are risky for them and even migrate or get married on grounds of better job prospects. Insecure situations that include poverty, unstable incomes, unemployment, debts and non-existent livelihoods would put immense pressure on girls and their families to earn money elsewhere.

Poverty also influenced the ability of the families to deal with trafficking situations. Families with few economic means may not be able to access legal help, transport facilities and even rehabilitation options as well. It is important to address economic insecurity as part of prevention strategy¹³.

4.4 Gender Inequality and Girls' Exposure to Exploitation

Gender inequality played an important role in the exposure of girls to exploitation through restrictions to their mobility, lack of equal educational opportunities, lack of economic autonomy and gender-specific expectations, which could limit the freedom to make independent choices. These factors could make the girls more vulnerable to such abuses as sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, forced marriages and other forms of human trafficking.

However, gender inequality could also affect the response of girls to exploitation since social norms regarding obedience and family honor could deter reporting the abuse and seeking help. Yet, vulnerability could not be viewed as a complete lack of autonomy, because girls still could make choices under highly restricted conditions.

4.5 Intersection of Caste, Class and Gender

It was found that caste, class, and gender could all play their parts at once, and indeed could enhance each other. For instance, a young woman belonging to a socially marginal caste and

¹³ Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, *Strict Action for Crimes Against Women*, Press Information Bureau (July 23, 2025).

coming from an economically disadvantaged family could face discrimination in terms of caste, lack of money, and restrictions in terms of her gender all at the same time. This would severely limit her access to education, jobs, and institutional protection.

Therefore, the intersection of these factors was much better suited to explain the risk of trafficking compared to any one particular factor. Focusing on just one of these factors would result in overlooking the others. Hence, it is necessary to take an intersectional approach to understand the complexity of the situation¹⁴.

4.6 Pathways from Structural Disadvantage to Trafficking

Structural inequality might provide a slow path to trafficking. Conditions of poverty and marginalization might result in a lack of educational and employment options that would make migration or informal brokers necessary. These factors could expose girls to manipulation, coercion, enticement or abuse of authority.

The path was thus not always clear-cut. Various links could exist between structural inequality and trafficking, ranging from economic strain, family instability, migration, recruitment and lack of access to protection networks. The importance of recognizing the links between these factors was crucial since the prevention efforts could interfere in multiple ways other than simply stopping trafficking.

4.7 Role of Education, Employment and Migration

Education could play an essential role as a protective factor in increasing awareness, confidence, employment opportunities, and rights awareness. On the other hand, lack of education may enhance reliance on family networks or informal employment networks. Opportunities for employment may similarly serve to protect girls if they were secure and properly regulated.

Migration is an opportunity and a risk. Migration in itself does not imply trafficking, but risky migration in the absence of proper information, documentation, employment protection, or social networks may increase vulnerability to deception in recruitment. Improving mechanisms of safe migration, employment verification, education, and awareness may therefore reduce vulnerability of girls

4.8 Institutional and Legal Responses to Trafficking

The country had developed a legal and institutional infrastructure to deal with human trafficking. The "Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita," 2023¹⁵, specifically made trafficking illegal and offered increased protection in cases where the victims were minors. The institutional approach included Anti-Human Trafficking Units, law enforcement machinery, victim protection, and rehabilitation.

These approaches reflected the growing awareness that human trafficking needed not only a criminal justice but also a victim protection approach. However, their success would be contingent upon a coordinated effort of the police, welfare institutions, local government, educational institutions, and community organizations. Without such coordination, the legal protections could be meaningless.

4.9 Limitations of Existing Anti-Trafficking Interventions

¹⁴ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supra note 1, art. 3(a).

¹⁵ The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, No. 45 of 2023, § 143, India Code.

Notwithstanding the measures taken through laws and institutions, some limitations still persisted. Trafficking may have been under-reported due to stigmatisation, fear, social dependency, lack of knowledge and unwillingness to reach out to the law enforcement agencies. Girl children belonging to disadvantaged sections of the society would have had added difficulty reaching out to the police and the legal institutions, and accessing rehabilitation centres.

Another limitation was the focus on rescue and prosecution without adequately addressing the root causes of vulnerability. Absence of sustainable education, employment and livelihood generation would have made rescued girl children vulnerable to the same economic and social risks once again.

4.10 Discussion in Relation to Previous Studies

The results obtained were in conformity with those reported in previous literature studies. The importance of caste, insecurity and vulnerability across generations was emphasized by Dalla et al. (2020), Dalla et al. (2022). Poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and sociocultural context were mentioned as influencing girl-child trafficking by Rana (2021). James and Ranganathan (2021) proved that vulnerability and agency of the survivors went hand in hand. Gender and socioeconomic vulnerability in forced marriage-related trafficking was stated by Acharya and Behera (2025).

Indeed, the research reinforced the core thesis that the vulnerability of girls to trafficking is caused by the cumulative impact of caste, class, and gender discrimination rather than an individual one. Lack of economic resources may limit options, caste discrimination may limit opportunities, and gender discrimination may limit freedom. In such a way, education, job security, safe migration, and institutional support can minimize these vulnerabilities. Consequently, anti-trafficking measures should include not only legal enforcement but also minimizing social exclusion, economic insecurities, and gender discrimination¹⁶.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

However, from the research, it was clear that the vulnerability of Indian girls to trafficking was a product of the interaction of caste, class, and gender dimensions rather than one or two factors. Such social phenomena like poverty, exclusion due to caste discrimination, gender inequality, poor education, precarious employment, migration, and inadequate institutional protection could act together in limiting the choice of these girls and making them more prone to be exploited. However, what is clear from the findings was that although institutional and legal action was significant, such actions alone would not suffice to solve the root causes of trafficking. It was necessary to adopt an intersectional strategy which would include both legal and non-legal actions like education, economic opportunities, and rehabilitation.

5.1 Recommendations

- 1. Strengthen education and economic opportunities:** Increase education, skills, and livelihoods prospects for girls hailing from underprivileged backgrounds in terms of economic and social status.
- 2. Address caste and gender inequalities:** Include provisions to counteract caste exclusion and gender discrimination within trafficking prevention policies and programs.

¹⁶ Rochelle L. Dalla et al., *Structural Vulnerabilities, Personal Agency, and Caste: An Exploration of Child Sex Trafficking in Rural India*, 35 *Violence & Victims* 307, 307–30 (2020).

3. **Improve safe migration and institutional protection:** Monitoring of recruitment agencies, awareness on safe migration, and coordination between police, Anti-Human Trafficking Units, child protection and welfare organizations should be strengthened.
4. **Ensure long-term rehabilitation:** Educate and provide skills training, psycho-social support, livelihood help, and proper reintegration for rescued girls rather than just rescuing and putting them temporarily in shelters.

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