

Girl Child Trafficking - The Lockdown Effect in West Bengal

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Abstract— Introduction

A child is a human being below the age of eighteen years and childhood is a precious time for any child in which he lives freely, safely and protected from abuse and exploitation. The status of a child, especially girl child has emerged as a fundamental question for the Indian society as they are often being considered to be a burden for their family as well for the society at large.

The family which is the primary agent of socialization and the 'care giving unit' of a child sometimes becomes the offender in a child's life.

Method

The study of girl child trafficking in West Bengal during the lockdown is based on secondary sources. Several cases were taken up to analyse and interpret the factors behind the problem and understand the possible solutions.

Results

The common causes of trafficking are forced marriages, child labour, domestic help and sexual exploitation. They mainly become victims either for flesh trade or for forced marriage. It is found during the lockdown the number of girl child trafficking in West Bengal has increased a lot due to job loss and subsequently the dislocations of the families due to the devastation caused by cyclone Amphan. So, taking advantage of the situation the traffickers who are always on the prowl in the rural areas, lured the families with promises of job and money.

Conclusion

To eradicate the problem, the role of the government administration, several NGOs, and mass media is very important. Even the role of the Panchayats is crucial in rural areas. It is also necessary to create awareness among girl child and their families. Hence, requisite legal action is important while

addressing the issue and making the girl child self-reliant.

Indexed Terms— girl child, family, trafficking, forced marriages

I. INTRODUCTION

A child is any human being below the age of eighteen years (The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). It is thought that childhood is a precious time for any child in which he/she lives freely, safely and protected from abuse and exploitation. But whether the scenario is like that is highly doubtful. All children have a right to get care and protection; to develop and grow to his/her full potential, regardless of their social and economic situation.

The status of a child, especially girl child has emerged as a fundamental question for the Indian society as they are often being considered to be a burden for their family as well for the society at large. The family which is considered as the primary agent of socialization for a child sometimes become the offender in his/her life.

A girl can be defined as an individual who is supposed to acquire feminine characteristics like submissiveness, self-sacrifice, meekness, dependence, less achievement oriented, and nurturing. She plays different roles in the society but the role of a daughter, sister, wife and mother are the important ones. Growing as a female child in a male-dominated Indian society is full of constraints and complexities. The Indian family structure and social values function in such a way that girls have no choice of their own and are bestowed with less opportunity, less authority, less property, less status, less power. They have everything 'less' in their childhood and thus are viewed as a 'burden' and a 'liability' in their families.

Given below is a child population ratio in India and West Bengal in particular, in the age group of 0-6 years and 7 years and above in the year 2001 and 2011 where it is shown that the child population in the decade between 2001 and 2011 in the age group 0-6 years declined but the population aged 7 years and above increased in the same decade. This is depicted below:

India

| Sex ratio (females per 1000 males) | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|------|---------------------------------------|------|-----------------------------|------|
| Total Population | | Child population in the age group 0-6 | | Population aged 7 and above | |
| 2001 | 2011 | 2001 | 2011 | 2001 | 2011 |
| 933 | 944 | 927 | 914 | 934 | 944 |

West Bengal

| Sex ratio (females per 1000 males) | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|------|---------------------------------------|------|-----------------------------|------|
| Total Population | | Child population in the age group 0-6 | | Population aged 7 and above | |
| 2001 | 2011 | 2001 | 2011 | 2001 | 2011 |
| 934 | 947 | 960 | 950 | 929 | 946 |

Source: Census of India, 2011

1.1 Concept of girl child trafficking

Child trafficking is one of the serious problems that is prevalent in India today. When this problem takes into account young girls as the prime victims, then the problem becomes more serious. Trafficking is a serious violation of human rights. It involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labour or commercial sex act. Every year, several men, women and children fall into the prey of traffickers, in their own countries and abroad. Almost every geography in the world is affected by

trafficking, whether as a country of origin, transit or destination for victims. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as guardian of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and the Protocols thereto, assists States in their efforts to implement the Protocol.

After trafficking, these girls are often forced into prostitution and begging rackets and even for business like removal of organs and are destined for a life of child abuse and exploitation. Horrific stories of girls as young as 9 years old emerge daily who are being forced into the sex trade. It is often found that the children from the poor and marginalized sections of the society are commonly the victims of trafficking. They are even forced into child labour. The vulnerable section of the society belongs to the Dalits, members of tribal communities, religious minorities and women and girls from the excluded groups.

Several girls from various parts of the country are victims of trafficking for flesh trade. Flesh trade refers to the network of procurers, pimps, brothel-keepers and the victims. It is a chain involvement in the business either voluntarily or involuntarily. This trade encourages trafficking which means transportation of girls/women by road/rail or other means of transport for monetary consideration of the persons engaged in. The purpose is two-fold: flesh trade and marriage.

Prostitution has been in existence from time immemorial though its institution has never been recognised by the society. Girl child prostitution can be defined as a prostitution practised by a girl who belongs to the age group of 10-12 years. It is practised in both rural and urban areas including the metropolitan cities of the country. It is not always willingly they are practising the same but many girls who are trafficked fall prey to this business through a network of pimps and procurers. The reason behind being trafficked and falling into this business is poverty, destitution, death of parents, ill treatment or neglect by parents, kidnapping, and bad influence. The tough side of the business is that the girls cannot willingly come out as there is high vigilance and security system provided by the brothel keeper. There is also the practice of Caged Brothel Prostitution where the trafficked young girls are confined to cages or small cubicles and the earnings go to the brothel

keepers till their investment made in procuring them has been recovered.

Parents of these children are either betrayed or lured due to their poor socio-economic conditions and forcing them to 'sell' their children for better livelihood. They are often approached by the traffickers with an offer to buy their children and with no other escape from their pitiful conditions, parents comply. It is seen that the problem of trafficking has increased to such an extent immediately after the global outbreak of COVID 19 and thereafter the commencement of lockdown in India from March 25, 2020.

II. METHODOLOGY

Research is a scientific and systematic search for pertinent information on a specific topic and research methodology is a way to systematically solve the research problem. Here the study of girl child trafficking is based on secondary cases. In addition, various books and news articles related to this topic have also been referred for writing this paper.

Several cases were taken up to show the impact of lockdown on the trafficking sector, to find out the reasons behind the increase in the number of trafficked girl children and to find out the possible solutions to stop the atrocity of the situation.

III. CHILD TRAFFICKING SCENARIO IN WEST BENGAL

According to Bachpan Bachao Andolan between April and September, 2020, about 1,127 children were suspected of being trafficked and were rescued across India. About 86 alleged traffickers were arrested. In India, more than 80 per cent of trafficked children are girls. In West Bengal also the number increased so much that the State Government had to set up a task force to save young girls from being trafficked. Girls always constitute a majority of the victims as it was seen in 2017 and 2018 and even in 2020 amidst the pandemic. They are trafficked with promises of jobs and marriages outside the state. From March 20 to April 14, the cases of child marriage, sexual abuse, child trafficking and violation of child rights are measured on an increasing scale. Most of the child

marriages that have taken place during lockdown are result of forced marriages that leads to child trafficking.

In this situation child protection is one of the priorities for Child Rights and You (CRY), with the aspects of 'rescue', 'restoration' and 'rehabilitation' of the trafficked victims. Childline rescued more than 1,000 survivors in the state during lockdown, many of who had been forced to work in brothels in other states.

Over the past several years Durbar Mahila Samanyaya Committee, an Organisation working for the rehabilitation of sex workers claims to have rescued huge number of minor girls trafficked into the red-light areas of Kolkata. It examined that girl child trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation is highest in three districts of West Bengal – Kolkata, Darjeeling and South 24 Parganas. Three districts of West Bengal, namely, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and Murshidabad, is connected with the international border of Bangladesh and are prone to trafficking. West Bengal also shares borders with Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand, Sikkim and Assam, along with Nepal and Bhutan, which makes trafficking easy.

3.1. Interpretation of several cases from West Bengal
Some cases are highlighted below who were being trafficked during the lockdown –

A 16-year-old Dalit girl from Baruipur had been trafficked to Delhi when riots broke out on the north-eastern fringes of the city. She was lured by the traffickers on the pretext of marriage and the girl accepted their offer because she was had a soft corner for one of the traffickers. They took her to Delhi by train with the intention to sell her off. There she was confined in a dingy room in an area located in Khajuri Khas area of Delhi. Later she was sold to a man in Rajasthan but due to lockdown the man could not come to Delhi to take possession of her. The trafficker also could not take her away from the location due to travel restriction for COVID 19. This situation turned out to be a blessing for the girl child. By that time a joint team of Baruipur Police and Delhi Police with the help of a local NGO and National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) rescued the girl and detained the trafficker. Due to lockdown she was kept in a home in Delhi and was medically examined

also. The NGO personnel applied some tricks to save the minor and the trafficker fall prey to their net. It was the girl's good luck that she was being rescued by the police and the traffickers did not get the chance to flee from the area with her.

Another case of a *14-year-old girl, Krishna from Hasnabad*, North 24 Parganas figures out that she had an admirer who regularly communicated with her over WhatsApp as during lockdown mobile phones were the only means of communication for everybody. The boy manipulated her to make lewd videos and send to him. Later he photoshopped one of her videos and circulated it across the entire village. That left Krishna nowhere and she was taken out of school and eventually became a child bride in a distant village. This is a typical case of child abuse. Fortunately, she was not trafficked due to restriction in the movement of vehicles.

In another case it was found that a *15-year-old girl from a village in Basanti*, Canning, South 24 Parganas was rescued from being married off to a man from East Midnapore, who had apparently offered Rs 50,000 to her father. The family out of greed married off their daughter to the unknown man who seems to be a trafficker. Such cases are common in the rural areas of West Bengal.

The case of a *15-year-old girl from West Bengal* has been missing since an unknown person befriended her on Facebook. The investigating team and the anti-trafficking unit working in the area believe that she has been lured by a trafficker to send her to Delhi, which is the ultimate destination for trafficked children. But no further information was available on this case. This type of cases is rampant in the rural areas of West Bengal.

The cases of *Amita Joardar and Ruksana* is of no exception. These two 15-year-old girls from West Bengal were abducted in early March 2020 and were finally rescued on June 25, 2020 from Gujarat after they managed to call home. But due to lockdown the rescue initiatives were slowed down and it took time to bring them back home by the West Bengal Police.

The West Bengal Police rescued 17 women, comprising both girl child and adult women from

Bihar and brought back to North and South 24 Parganas. Some of them were sold off to dance groups that were actually prostitution rackets while others were engaged as bonded labourers in factories.

In Hingalgunj (North 24 Parganas) block alone, as many as 12 child marriages have taken place within a month of 'unlocking'. It is heard that these marriages were an offer to the vulnerable families and these are clear cases of trafficking. With schools closed and all sources of income dried up, families are left with no other choice than to choose the dark side of society. They have also admitted to marry off their children despite knowing the risk factor.

This scenario is viewed in every part of the state but the risk of North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas are the most. The sense of hopelessness is so high among the vulnerable families that a resident of Sandeshkhali expressed her eagerness of giving a hopeful life to her daughter through marriage than to make her die out of starvation.

IV. DISCUSSION

Now several *factors* are responsible behind the increase in the number of girl children trafficked during lockdown –

- *Poor socio-economic condition of the family* – Due to lockdown there is a rise in poverty within the family. Lockdown led to job losses for many daily wagers, forcing them to sell or give away their daughters to the traffickers in exchange of lumpsum money to feed the family members. Poverty and desperation led people to unsafe migration, making them vulnerable to trafficking.
- *Lack of awareness within the family* - As the family members are uneducated and belong to the poor section of the society they only know about money and nothing else to make their livelihood. The greed for money urges them to move in the wrong direction at the cost of their child. This points out an important aspect that the family lacks the sense of awareness to protect their child.
- *Family mentality through generation* – As the children are allowed to work from the age of 14, so in financially backward families they are the bread earners. As the economy was badly hit by the

pandemic during the lockdown, many family members lost their jobs, so some families allowed their children to work outside and to bring home whatever amount they can to run the family.

- *Closure of educational institutions* - As schools were the protectors of the children, especially the girls, but due to lockdown for few months the protective shield was gone. Hence, they are at high risk of getting married off early or being sold to outsiders as being approached by them.
- *Restricted communication system*: Due to lockdown as there is restriction in the communication system and in the mobility of the children, they cannot voice out their problems to the respective administration. Earlier, for any problem the victims shared their plight with the teachers, friends, and with the administration, which is not happening now.

Some *solutions* are provided to end this grave problem and to free the girls from the negative clutches of society.

- It is the need of the hour to implement a comprehensive child protection mechanism that can end the problem from the root. For this the state government need to aware the public in every possible way. The citizens can also play an active role in this case and support the causes of the government to end the problem.
- Guardians, community people and educational institutions need to play an important role by spreading awareness and providing a safety net for vulnerable children.
- Government officials need to engage themselves with the District Child Protection Officer and the Juvenile Justice System for effective treatment of the cases of trafficking.
- Several NGOs like CRY, Child Line, Save the children, Bachpan Bachao Andolan need to come forward to tackle the problem and to facilitate the process of establishing inter-linkages between them and the government in all states by utilizing their expertise. The government should support them through various schemes of rehabilitation for the rescued victims.
- It is important to rescue minor girls with the help of local police stations, local administration, social

welfare departments of the state government and also the local governance system.

- To set up a greater number of anti-human trafficking units and to receive funding from the state machineries.

V. CONCLUSION

The formulation of National Plan of Action for Children and Action Plan for the SAARC decade of the girl child aims to improve the status of girl child by providing her with equal opportunities for survival and development. The programme of action includes nutrition, education, health, recreation, upgradation of home-based skills, promoting the decision-making capability of adolescent girls, particularly at the village level. The key principle is to strengthen the awareness and capacity of the family and community with support from government. Here the role of the Panchayats is also crucial.

The upliftment of the girl child involves social mobilisation and transformation of outdated patriarchal values. A two-pronged approach namely, creating awareness among the female members and a concerted effort for re-socialisation of male members of society and changing attitude towards sex bias and gender stereotyping is necessary.

The most important issue is to re-define the sex role in the Indian society and the expectations of a female child and values attached to her. Special efforts should be made for more enrolment of girls to school and to find out ways to contain drop-outs and to retain them at school. For bringing the two sexes at par, both the family and the government should take active role to ameliorate the conditions of the girl child by giving them the basic rights to equality and justice as well as education and health.

For the prevention of girl child trafficking not only legislative measures but effective mechanism is required to end the practice. To eradicate the problem, the role of the government administration, several NGOs, and mass media is very important. It is also necessary to create awareness among girl child and their families. Hence, requisite legal action along with preventive measures should be taken to address the issue and to make the girl child self-reliant.

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