



Research article

UDK 343.988


DOI: 10.47475/2411-0590-2024-11-2-305-315

## Human Trafficking: Risk Profile of Victims and Traffickers and the Scope of Forensic Victimology

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**Abstract.** Human trafficking is a growing problem across the world and the actual estimation of this crime is not yet done due to methodological issues and the underreporting of cases. The victim's uncooperativeness in many cases or trying to conceal the identity of the victim due to many sociocultural factors poses a barrier to understanding the profile of the victims and traffickers. This article attempts to create a risk profile of victims and human traffickers based on available literature and various factors like gender, children, profession, migration, socioeconomic and cultural factors and political conditions were emphasized. In addition to this, the article focused on the importance of Forensic victimology in the area of human trafficking. The author emphasized that this crime is as important and complicated as sexual abuse/assault and stressed the need for more research in the field of forensic victimology especially on victims and traffickers to understand the dynamics of human trafficking which leads to better profiling, deepened knowledge of entrapment strategies and relationships between victims and traffickers that will help the criminal justice system as well as to make strategies for prevention and interventions. This crime is as important and complicated as sexual abuse/assault.


**Keywords:** human trafficking, victims, traffickers, risk profile, forensic victimology, criminal justice system

**For citation:** Gopalan RT. Human Trafficking: Risk Profile of Victims and Traffickers and the Scope of Forensic Victimology. *Viktimologiya* [Victimology]. 2024;11(2):305-315. DOI: 10.47475/2411-0590-2024-11-2-305-315

Научная статья

## Торговля людьми: профиль риска жертв и торговцев людьми и сфера применения судебной виктимологии

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**Аннотация.** Торговля людьми — растущая проблема во всем мире, и реальная оценка этого преступления еще не проведена из-за методологических проблем и занижения числа случаев. Нежелание жертвы сотрудничать во многих случаях или попытка скрыть личность жертвы в силу многих социокультурных факторов создают препятствия для понимания профиля жертв и торговцев людьми. В данной статье предпринята попытка составить профиль риска жертв и торговцев людьми на основе имеющейся литературы, при этом особое внимание уделяется таким факторам, как пол, дети, профессия, миграция, социально-экономические и культурные факторы, а также политические условия. Кроме того, в статье сделан акцент на важности судебной виктимологии в сфере торговли людьми. Автор подчеркнул, что это преступление столь же важно и сложно, как и сексуальное насилие/нападение, и указал на необходимость проведения дополнительных исследований в области судебной виктимологии, особенно в отношении жертв и торговцев людьми, чтобы понять динамику торговли людьми, что приведет к улучшению профилирования, углублению знаний о стратегиях захвата и отношениях между жертвами и торговцами людьми, что поможет системе уголовного правосудия, а также разработке стратегий профилактики и вмешательства. Это преступление столь же важно и сложно, как сексуальное насилие/нападение.

**Ключевые слова:** торговля людьми, жертвы, торговцы людьми, профиль риска, судебная виктимология, система уголовного правосудия

**Для цитирования:** Гопалан Р. Т. Торговля людьми: профиль риска жертв и торговцев людьми и сфера применения судебной виктимологии // Виктимология. 2024. Т. 11, № 2. С. 305–315. DOI: 10.47475/2411-0590-2024-11-2-305-315

### Introduction

Human trafficking is an increasingly well-recognized human rights violation that transcends all races, social classes, demographics, and genders and it is a crime based on the exploitation of the most vulnerable and marginalized people of any community and it is estimated to be around 40.3 million victims worldwide [1; 2; 35; 53; 54]. The definition of human trafficking encompasses three elements such as acts, means and purpose and it can be defined as induction by force, fraud, or coercion of a person to engage in

the sex trade, or the harboring, transportation, or obtaining of a person for labour service or organ removal and in general it can be divided into three categories such as sex trafficking, labour trafficking, and the removal of organs<sup>1</sup>. It is very important to understand that human trafficking is different from human smuggling

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto*. Accessed on URL: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/CTOC/index> (date of address: 20.03.2024).

which happens with the consent of the person whereas trafficking happens against the will of the person [45]. Domestic trafficking means when labour or sex trafficking occurs in a person's home country and transnational trafficking is when international boundaries are crossed [50].

### Risk Profile of Victims

People who are trafficked are considered "victims" or "survivors" and the profile of victims is not yet established in detail due to the shortage of available data and limited studies. Available literature points out a few common factors as vulnerability to human trafficking such as being children, women, poor socioeconomic status etc. The most noticeable factors are listed below.

#### (a). Gender

Women, especially in their young adulthood are more prone to human trafficking and the majority were trafficked for sexual exploitation [2; 38]. It is observed that secondary status in a family and society makes women more vulnerable and traffickers may target those aged between 20 and 29 years, with low education and unemployed, from international land borders, approach divorcees and young married girls as candidates for marriage or offer employment [5; 21; 38].

#### (b). Children

Trafficking of children for labour and sexual exploitation is a serious issue and it was reported that almost 20% of trafficking victims are children. Girls are mainly used for sexual exploitation, while boys are trafficked for forced labour<sup>1</sup> [53]. Children are easier to exploit and manipulate and their inability to protect themselves physically and a lack of awareness of laws make them more vulnerable<sup>2</sup>. Children, especially immigrant and refugee children [35],

those who are unstably housed or homeless [34], orphans and unaccompanied children in disaster areas [47], those experienced community violence victimizations, abuse and violence in childhood [17] and girls with any disability [18] are more prone for trafficking.

#### (c). Professions

It is widely reported that human trafficking mainly happens for labour and sex trafficking. Rafferty [42] found that girls and women constitute 98% of those who are trafficked for commercial sex exploitation. Among labour trafficking victims were placed in domestic work, agriculture, construction, landscaping and travelling sales crews [30; 40]. Greenbaum J. et al. [24] pointed out common risk factors for sex and labour trafficking among minors such as prior child maltreatment and out-of-home placement, labour-trafficked children had less prior child welfare involvement than those involved in sex trafficking, more likely to be younger, male, Black or non-white, and Hispanic.

#### (d). Migration

Repeatedly studies have suggested that migration poses a high risk for human trafficking and the magnitude of human trafficking among returning migrants was estimated at 50.89% and mostly associated with female sex, household wealth quintile, smuggling status, exposure to seductive information about overseas life, risk-opportunity imbalance before departure, and feeling hopelessness for success at home [19].

There are several reasons why people migrate and Gezie L. D. et al [20] noted that corruption leads to the loss of trust and belief in local governance, resources, and opportunities to build one's future at home, thereby creating fertile ground for illegal migration, including smuggling and possibly trafficking. Many victims may have often borrowed money or been lured by attractive employment promises and lack of upward mobility, economic opportunity, and conflict drove many labour trafficking survivors to seek employment overseas [37; 46]. Marginalized groups by ethnicity and religion, low social and minority status pose increased risk for human trafficking and especially poor education attracts domestic servitude, debt bondage, and forced labour [48; 52].

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto*. Accessed on URL: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/CTOC/index> (date of address: 20.03.2024).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Global Programme Against Trafficking in Human Beings. Toolkit to combat trafficking in persons*. United Nations Publications. 2008. URL: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/HT\\_Toolkit08\\_English.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/HT_Toolkit08_English.pdf) (date of address: 20.03.2024).

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime mentioned about the push (factors exert pressure on victims and “push” them towards migration) and pull factors (factors that tend to “pull” potential victims) for migration<sup>1</sup>. The causes of human trafficking may also be characterized as push and pull factors. Some factors exert pressure on victims and “push” them towards migration and eventually under the control of traffickers. In contrast, other factors tend to “pull” potential victims. War, genocide, violence, persecution, natural and artificial disasters, limited employment, and educational opportunities may act as push factors [10] while the availability of employment and labour market opportunities, improved quality of life, a promise of a more affluent lifestyle in abroad act as pull factors [28].

#### **(e). Socioeconomic,**

##### **Family and cultural factors**

##### **Socioeconomic Factors**

Unstable economic conditions and poverty increase the chance of human trafficking [29; 57]. Factors such as poor education, and fewer opportunities for employment together with poverty increase the chances for immigration which enhances the chance of human trafficking. Wheaton E. M., Schauer E. J. & Galli T. V. [59] pointed out that human trafficking is a monopolistically competitive industry in which traffickers act as intermediaries between vulnerable individuals and employers by supplying differentiated products to employers. In the human trafficking market, the consumers are employers of trafficked labour and the products are human beings. Barner J. R., Okech D. & Camp M. A. [4] mentioned that the presence of socioeconomic inequality in the world creates a system where those in power very easily dominate and take advantage of those people without power which has been reflected in human trafficking, especially in global sex trade.

##### **Family factors**

It is repeatedly reported in research that family factors in addition to poverty contribute significantly to human trafficking. Fedina L.,

Williamson C. & Perdue T. [16] reported that childhood emotional and sexual abuse, rape, ever running away from home, having family members in sex work, and having friends who purchased sex were significantly associated with domestic child sex trafficking. Moore J. L. et al. [33] identified high rates of alcohol or substance use/abuse, being placed in a group home or child protective services (CPS) custody, a history of runaway behaviour, and/or exposure to other child maltreatment among minor sex trafficking victims.

##### **Cultural factors**

Cultural factors play significant role in human trafficking especially in sexual exploitation and trafficking. The racial/ethnicity minority can be a reason for domestic child sex trafficking and same is reported in U.S.A. [16] Religion, caste, spiritual practices and family structures contribute a lot in human trafficking. The commercial sexual exploitation of children is considered normative and expected among some Indian castes like Bedia and Nat and women in these communities are traditionally sex workers whose earnings support the whole community [12; 13]. Badi community in Nepal engage in prostitution and the girls after being trained by their mothers, begin work as prostitutes at menarche with great ceremony many may sold for prostitution in neighbouring countries. They suffer no social isolation, and retire back into the community in old age [44]. Magesa R. J. [32] explored the cultural factors attributing to the trafficking of girls and women in Northern Tanzania and reported female genital mutilation, son preference, daughters not inheriting land and animals, women not participating in decision-making, the workload for women and girls, wife battering, early marriage as risk factors for trafficking. In many societies human trafficking and exploitation is considered normal and Okonofua F. E. et al. [36] reported in their study that 18.5 % of the women in Benin City, Nigeria felt sex trafficking should be allowed to continue as it leads to wealth creation and economic gains for women.

##### **(f). Social and political situations**

Political instability, militarism, civil unrest, internal armed conflict and natural disasters may result in an increase in trafficking.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Global report on trafficking in persons. 2009. URL: [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/glotip\\_2009.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/glotip_2009.html) (date of address: 20.03.2024).

The destabilization and displacement of populations increase their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse through trafficking and forced labour. War and civil strife may lead to massive displacements of populations, leaving women, children, orphans and street children extremely vulnerable to trafficking and the absence of law enforcement agencies or border patrols may facilitate easy transport of human beings for traffickers through war zones, depending on the region's geography<sup>1</sup> [51]. The 2016 US TIP Report addressed human trafficking in conflict zones and listed down the reasons like desperate economic circumstances, the weakening or even breakdown of the rule of law, fewer availability of social services, leaving home in search of safety, lack of opportunity to maintain their livelihood push them to look up opportunities that entail risky situations or illicit economies, which are often home to traffickers.

#### Trafficker's profile

Most of the studies in the field of human trafficking focused on the victims and victim characteristics but not much known about the traffickers. The profile of the traffickers varied in many researches and mainly focused on gender, age, education, citizenship and Clawson H. et al. [11] have the opinion that identifying the citizenship, gender, age, and education of traffickers can help to generate a broader understanding of traffickers.

Contradictory to the general notion that only males involved in human trafficking, many studies have been reported that both males and females carried out the role of traffickers. In the first known study on typologies of traffickers, Busch-Armendariz N. et al. [7] reported the same and others as well [26] and UNODC (2014, 2016)<sup>2</sup> found that 30 %

of the convicted/prosecuted traffickers were female. The role also varied according to the gender of the traffickers and usually female traffickers performed lower-level duties such as the guarding of younger women and girls and recruitment, but male traffickers were more into organizational and exploitation roles which are considered higher level duties. But many other studies pointed out that females performed core/higher-level duties [15; 31].

Studies focused on nationality and ethnicity of the trafficker pointed that out mostly both traffickers and victims share same nationality, ethnicity and racial background [15; 7]. Recruiters of trafficking are selected for their ability to establish quick trust with victims and having same background as victims enable them to earn trust which eventually leads to trafficking and in some cases, victims act as traffickers after sometime due to the absence of other livelihood options [15; 27].

Many researchers pointed out that traffickers are usually litter older people or adults [54; 7] and the onset of criminality in trafficking compared with the onset of other types of criminality is around 38 years [15]. Weitzer R. [58] pointed out that traffickers differ in economic, social, cultural and educational backgrounds. They may be less educated or highly qualified, single, married or in partnership, may or may not have children, in some cases families may be unaware about their criminality and some cases families collaboratively engage in such operations. Traffickers are usually having varied age, marital status, relationships with victims, socio-economic status, experience and occupations. Different individuals or groups, knowingly or ignorantly, contribute to trafficking in persons and their roles differ at the places of origin, transit and destinations. Active traffickers at many stages of this crime rarely come into contact with the law enforcement system and fled or rescued victims may not be willing or unable to testify against their traffickers and coercing victims

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Global Programme Against Trafficking in Human Beings. Toolkit to combat trafficking in persons*. United Nations Publications. 2008. URL: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/HT\\_Toolkit08\\_English.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/HT_Toolkit08_English.pdf) (date of address: 20.03.2024).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons*. 2014. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/unodc/2014/en/102771> ; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons*. 2016 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.16.IV.6). URL:

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-andanalysis/glottip/2016\\_Global\\_Report\\_on\\_Trafficking\\_in\\_Persons.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-andanalysis/glottip/2016_Global_Report_on_Trafficking_in_Persons.pdf) (date of address: 20.03.2024).



to do so could further traumatize them which limit our understanding about traffickers<sup>1</sup> [26].

### Scope of Forensic victimology in Human Trafficking

Forensic victimology is a subdivision of interactionist victimology, in which victims are defined by having suffered harm or loss due to a breach of law. It involves the accurate, critical, and objective outlining of victim lifestyles and circumstances, the events leading up to their injury, and the precise nature of any harm or loss suffered [55]. It is a branch of applied victimology, a scientific examination of victimhood and victimization in order to discover the truth in the process of preliminary investigation and criminal proceedings which emphasizes the identification of the causes of victimization and victim's fault [49]. The attempts to deeply understand the victims and the relationship between victim and offender in the crime and the field is growing fast [22].

The kind of interaction between victims and traffickers, risk factors, entrapment methods, perception on social power among many factors leads to the underreporting of this crime. Quas J. A. et al. [41] noticed that despite increased awareness of sex trafficking of minors in the U.S., prosecution of traffickers remains difficult, in part because of victim uncooperativeness in which victims were rarely described as disclosing on their own or as knowing their trafficker before the victimization. The victim and offender in human trafficking may not be strangers to each other in many cases and the kind of relation they share may be a reason for continuation of the abuse. In a study on the recruitment or pathways into sex trafficking for minors trafficked within the US and Canada, Baird K. and Connolly J. [3] suggested that sexual exploitation occurring on a continuum comprising of three components; the recruitment context, entrapment strategies utilized by traffickers, and enmeshment tactics used to prolong exploitation. The kind

of entrapment methods used by the traffickers influence the victims and makes them vulnerable. Preble K. M. and Black B. M. [39] noticed that entrapment factors and shared common characteristics between victim and trafficker prior to trafficking influenced perceptions of interpersonal social power which influence the trafficking.

Researchers reported many entrapment methods in human trafficking especially in sexual exploitation such as grooming, pretending as boyfriend or romantic partner, friendship, debt bondage, and threats. In general, traffickers may exploit different victim vulnerabilities depending upon their established relationships with those who are at-risk for trafficking and they may exercise methods such as caregiving, sexual violence, and psychological violence to maintain control over their victims while posing as romantic partners [56]. Reid J. A. [43] also reported about various entrapment methods and observed that sex traffickers use numerous scripts and schemes to entrap and entangle victims including boyfriend/lover scripts, ruses involving debt bondage, friendship or faux-family scripts, threats of forced abortion or to take away children, and coerced co-offending and according to him, youthfulness of these victims and their lack of psychosocial maturity severely diminish their ability to detect exploitative motives or withstand manipulation of traffickers. de Chesnay M. [14] mentioned that Street pimps might use the "Romeo" approach in which they seduce the girl into loving them, creating a powerful loyalty. The phenomenon of the boyfriend tactic includes extreme flattery, promises of salvation from the abuse, and ongoing reassurance that they alone are the only ones who can care for the victim and this methodical emotional manipulation is often confused as kindness, which can cloud the judgment of the victim, friends, and family, impeding the ability to recognize a harmful situation [6]. Some exert control by threatening to harm the girls' families which is more effective technique if young victims from cultures that value the family above the individual and would do anything to protect their families [14]. Grooming is another technique by traffickers to recruit and exploit victims and convince

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Global Programme Against Trafficking in Human Beings. *Toolkit to combat trafficking in persons*. United Nations Publications. 2008. URL: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/HT\\_Toolkit08\\_English.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/HT_Toolkit08_English.pdf) (date of address: 20.05.2024).

them that they have the power to choose to be participants in their exploitation and subtly promote the idea that selling sexual services is normal, acceptable, and necessary [6].

Recently social networks have been used as a way to target the victims of human trafficking and the social media like Facebook and Instagram are widely used for this purpose. The victims include women, men, and children, and they are usually trapped in situations like getting offers of fake jobs through social media [23]. Through these emotional exploitations the possibility of establishing an emotional attachment develop between victim and trafficker which leads to the continuation of exploitation and victim may not reveal any clue regarding trafficker to the police or court. Casassa K, Ploss A, & Karandikar S. [9] identified features of trauma bonding such as imbalance of power that favours trafficker, traffickers' deliberate use of positive and negative interactions, victim's gratitude for positive interactions and self-blame for the negative, and victim's internalization of perpetrator's view [8]. They also identified four aspects related to trauma bonding such as prior trauma made victims vulnerable, victim's feelings of love remained even after exiting trafficking, love is why victims do not prosecute traffickers, and traffickers' intentional cultivation of the trauma bond.

Social isolation and restricting the freedom are the methods employed by human traffickers to maintain the controller over the victims. Hagan E, Raghavan C, & Doychak K. [25] reported in their study on survivors of sex trafficking that traffickers used a combination of structural and functional isolation tactics. In structural isolations, victims were restricted physically and socially where as in functional isolation, shrinking of safe social space and an elimination of privacy and social support (specifically when survivors are surrounded by

peers who are either unreliable or aligned with the trafficker and thus are unable to give true social support) were the dominated features.

### **Conclusion**

All these studies pointing out many important facts that the vulnerabilities of victim such as demographic, socio-cultural and personal vulnerabilities and the offender personality, entrapping methods and strategies involved in human trafficking to be taken in a serious manner to understand the problem deeply. The interaction of these factors facilitates and maintain the trafficking and exploitation and the relationship between the offender and victim either positive way or negative way complicates the scenario. If the victim has love or any soft corner, and commitment for trafficker which may reduce the chance of the escaping from the situation and may reluctant to report or give information regarding the traffickers even after escaping from the exploitation. Same challenges may be there for the victim when force, isolation or threatening methods are used by the trafficker. This crime is as important and complicated as sexual abuse/assault and still lacks a comprehensive understanding of its prevalence, causes and risk factors, prevention and intervention strategies. It is also noticed that many of the traffickers escaped from the law because of a lack of evidence or silence of the victims further fuelling the increment of human trafficking across the world over the years. More research needs to be done in the field of forensic victimology especially on victims and traffickers to understand the dynamics of human trafficking which leads to better profiling, deepened knowledge of entrapment strategies and relationships between victims and traffickers that will help the criminal justice system as well as to make strategies for prevention and interventions.

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#### КОНФЛИКТ ИНТЕРЕСОВ

Конфликт интересов отсутствует.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

Дата поступления статьи / Received: 24.03.2024.

Дата рецензирования статьи / Revised: 27.05.2024.

Дата принятия статьи к публикации / Accepted: 25.06.2024.

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