

Understanding the Role of Different Actors in Preventing Human Trafficking: The Bangladesh Experience

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Abstract: *Bangladesh serves as a crucial source and transit country for human trafficking in Southern Asia. The main kinds of human trafficking are forced labour and sexual exploitation. The trafficking victims originating from Bangladesh include males, females, and minors. Human trafficking is a pervasive problem in Bangladesh, necessitating the collaborative efforts of several stakeholders, including the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and foreign entities. The government is facing challenges in implementing strategies to reduce the demand for commercial sex activities and child sex industries. The poor and chaotic governmental approaches to addressing human trafficking are greatly exacerbating the problem. There is an urgent need for more employment opportunities for the unemployed, improved productivity in the agricultural sector, and more rigorous enforcement of laws against illegal activities. Human trafficking negatively impacts women and children and damages the nation's image. Subsequent to their freeing, the hostages would experience psychological anguish and societal stigma. They need sufficient guidance and comprehension. The overpopulation problem in Bangladesh might be converted into a substantial labour force. Thus, the proficient implementation of policy and enforcement of legislation is essential. The article is written based on a review of important documents aimed at understanding the role of various players/actors, including the government of Bangladesh, in combating human trafficking after learning about the causes and consequences of human trafficking.*

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Human Rights, Legislative Actions, NGOs, UN, Government of Bangladesh

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Introduction

Human trafficking is a breach of human rights as per international agreements. Regrettably, the prevalence of human trafficking originating from the nation is rising daily, which is concerning. Individuals, including men, women, and children from Bangladesh, are being trafficked to many countries, such as Malaysia, driven by poverty, economic adversity, or the aspiration for a better life. Women, lured by the promise of improved living conditions and employment opportunities, are eventually coerced into prostitution. A multitude of individuals are perishing due to the avarice and deceit of unscrupulous individuals and brokers. Human trafficking is one of the most egregious manifestations of organised crime, beyond national boundaries and legal jurisdictions.

Combating and preventing human trafficking requires a holistic approach that involves all stakeholders and coordinated initiatives in prosecution, prevention, and protection, based on empirical facts. Migration is a priority for the international community in the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Compacts on Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. Human trafficking is a crime against humanity. Human trafficking is a kind of modern slavery. The Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, 2012, in Bangladesh aims to combat human trafficking via inter-agency collaboration and the creation of specialised courts. The recent initiative to safeguard victims within a comprehensive framework underscores the need for social and economic reintegration and empowerment of these unfortunate persons. The objective of this article is to assess the current state of human trafficking in Bangladesh, along with the government's actions and advancements regarding this subject.

Causes and Effects of Human Trafficking in Bangladesh: A Brief Overview

Bangladesh serves as a significant origin and transit nation for human trafficking in Southern Asia. The primary categories of human trafficking include forced labour and sexual exploitation. The trafficking victims from Bangladesh include men, women, and children. A substantial proportion of Bangladesh's trafficking victims, who are later subjected to forced labour or debt bondage, are males lured by deceptive international job promises. Women and children are the primary demographic of sex trafficking. The fundamental dynamics of human trafficking have resulted in the development of several global and regional legal frameworks, as well as extensive state laws (Tuhin, 2024).

The Key Causes of Human Trafficking in Bangladesh

Till now, human trafficking has remained a persistent socio-economic challenge in Bangladesh, with a violation of human rights on a large scale. Bangladesh witnesses the trafficking of thousands of men, women, and even children across borders and within the country. Being a source and, to a smaller extent, a transit country, Bangladesh is at high risk (Tribune Desk, 2024). Numerous national and international initiatives have been undertaken by both the Government and non-government organisations to combat this crime, but trafficking continues due to a complex web of root causes and multidimensional impacts.

There are different causes behind the trafficking in Bangladesh. However, the major causes, mentioned by the national and international agencies and institutions, are related to economic hurdles and socio-economic fragile conditions. The key causes of human trafficking in Bangladesh are poverty, unemployment, lack of proper education, demand for cheap labour and sex work, weak border management, natural disasters, and gender inequality (Alamghir et al., 2025).

Bangladesh has been facing economic hardship since the very beginning of its independence. About 42% of the population in Bangladesh lived in poverty conditions during 2020, and in 2022, about 20% of the population in Bangladesh lived in poverty (Raihan et al., 2021). This Extensive poverty and lack of sustainable employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas, force individuals to search for job opportunities abroad or in urban areas. However, there also remains a huge competition for this opportunity. Therefore, the village's illiterate people often fall prey to deceitful enrolment agencies and traffickers.

Similarly, although the literacy rate reached 75.6%, the proportion of children not enrolled in primary school fell below 13.15% in 2023. Bangladesh suffers from inadequate educational quality (Islam, 2024). Due to this limited education and awareness about safe migration, legal rights, and the risks of trafficking, many people are easy targets of traffickers. Besides, there remains a high demand for cheap labour in the Middle East and Southeast Asian countries. Even within Bangladesh's informal sectors, the demand for commercial sex work fuels trafficking networks. Moreover, the borders are not fully controlled by the security forces (Alamghir et al., 2025). Inadequate border monitoring and corruption among officials at various levels allow traffickers to operate with impunity. Even, Frequent natural disasters and climate-

induced displacement led to increased migration and increase the risk of trafficking, particularly of women and children.

Moreover, Bangladesh lacks gender equality and legal enforcement regarding trafficking. Discrimination against women and girls, forced and early marriages, and domestic violence push the vulnerable groups into trafficking routes, especially for sexual exploitation. Although laws like the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act 2012 exist with all its strengths as a written document, in reality, enforcement is often very weak, and conviction rates remain low, preventing neither traffickers nor facilitators. That is how the trafficking rate is rising with time.

Effects of Human Trafficking in Bangladesh

Human trafficking poses serious and long-lasting consequences not only for individual victims but also for society, the economy, and governance in Bangladesh. Despite various legal and institutional efforts to prevent it, the impacts continue to undermine national development and human rights (Tribune Desk, 2024). Its impact is beyond imagination as it violates human rights, affects physical and mental health, breakdown down family and social structure, forces to loss of social capital, and poses a great threat to public health and the existing rule of law of the country.

Most of the time, the victims are subjected to a high level of physical and sexual exploitation, and even in some cases, organ trafficking. It often poses a bitter experience of long-term physical health problems, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and injuries from exploitation (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2012). Many of them suffer from trauma, lifetime depression and anxiety, and even lifetime post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This case is very common where the victims are women and children, and they are subjected to sexual exploitation.

Trafficking results in family separation, broken homes, and emotional trauma for loved ones left behind. The families face long-term economic loss, and often are left in deeper debt and poverty. Moreover, survivors of trafficking frequently face intense social stigma upon their return home. They are extensively blamed or rejected, especially women who were trafficked for sexual exploitation (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2012). It also imposes a serious threat to the health of the trafficked person as he is kept in unsanitary places. This unhygienic stay contributes to the widespread of

diseases. Most notably, it poses a serious threat to the rule of law in the country and the national and international image crisis of the state (Alamghir et al., 2025).

Human trafficking happens both domestically and internationally, as evidenced by various International Organisations for Migration and host governments' research and country reports. Countries in South Asia serve as sources, transit points, and destinations for the traffickers. As a result, all successful and long-term measures to combat human trafficking must be integrated, multinational, and collaborative. The current training project primarily involves law enforcement officers from all eight South Asian countries. It exemplifies a separate, concerted effort to combat human trafficking. The SAARC Training of Trainers (TOTs) on Combating Trafficking marks the beginning of the anticipated partnership.

Understanding the Role of Different Actors in Preventing Human Trafficking in Bangladesh

Human trafficking is a serious problem for the nation worldwide. Bangladesh is also at the top of this trafficked list of countries. The government of Bangladesh and many other non-governmental organisations are trying to prevent human trafficking. All the agencies are also trying their best to combat the curse of trafficking.

Role of Government in Preventing Trafficking

The government plays a critical role in combating human trafficking; thus, the government's measure includes the passage and effective implementation of the Law on Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking 2012, which provides frameworks for identifying and rescuing victims, ensuring safe migration, and reintegrating them. The government is also concerned with repatriation and return, medical care, rehabilitation, social reintegration, and the safety of children who are victims or witnesses (Hossain, 2022). To reduce vulnerability to trafficking, the government has invested in social safety nets and microcredit initiatives that give economic stability to at-risk groups.

Bangladesh must ultimately ratify the UNTOC and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Particularly Women and Children, to engage in this international legal framework and contribute to the worldwide fight against Trafficking in Persons. The Government of Bangladesh has thus far endeavoured to enhance its response to TIP as a participant in the SAARC Convention on Preventing

and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution, the SAARC Convention on Regional Agreements for the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia, the Slavery Convention, the Supplementary Convention on the Slavery and Slave Trade, among others, including the International Bill of Rights.

The government persisted in executing national awareness programmes using print media, television, radio, text messaging, CTCs, and community forums, sometimes in collaboration with civil society. The government implemented trafficking awareness initiatives in border regions and convened discussions on safe migration; Bangladeshi embassies abroad also facilitated awareness events for expatriate populations. The majority of marketing materials were only accessible in Bangla. The government had many general helplines for reporting crimes, including human trafficking. The authorities reported that these hotlines received a minimum of 48 calls relating to trafficking in 2022.

The government mandated extensive pre-departure training for Bangladeshi migrants, including safe travel and anti-trafficking components, in addition to a 30-day training programme tailored for female domestic workers. The government collaborated with the Inter-Sector Coordination Group, which supervises humanitarian organisations involved in the Rohingya refugee response, to disseminate anti-trafficking awareness messaging to Rohingya populations and host communities. The government let international groups and civil society conduct anti-trafficking awareness programmes in Rohingya camps.

Challenges Faced by the Government: The Government of Bangladesh does not entirely satisfy the minimal criteria for the eradication of trafficking, although it is undertaking substantial efforts to achieve this goal. The government exhibited a general enhancement in efforts relative to the last reporting period, taking into account the COVID-19 pandemic's influence on its anti-trafficking capabilities; hence, Bangladesh retained its Tier 2 status. These initiatives included augmenting prosecutions and convictions of traffickers, initiating investigations into incidents involving Rohingya victims for the first time in recent years, and implementing measures to reduce some recruiting costs linked to the government-operated recruitment agency. The government has prolonged its National Action Plan till 2025 and released its first national report on human trafficking in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the government failed to satisfy the minimal criteria in other critical domains.

The government failed to consistently implement standard operating procedures to identify trafficking victims, particularly among vulnerable communities, and police often conflated human trafficking with migrant smuggling in several instances. Moreover, courts predominantly imposed fines on traffickers instead of incarceration, so diminishing deterrence, undermining the government's comprehensive anti-trafficking initiatives, and perhaps exacerbating security and safety issues for victims. The incidence of human trafficking is rising alarmingly on a global scale (Financial Express, 2023).

The government often overlooks acknowledging its official complicity in human trafficking and does not reveal any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government officials implicated in trafficking offences; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remain significant issues, hindering law enforcement and judicial actions. A multitude of instances to examine and litigate, contingent upon the political and financial connections of the accused.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) is working hard to combat trafficking and has established Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the proactive identification of trafficking victims; however, these SOPs have not been widely distributed or implemented by officials in other government agencies who give top priority to everyone. The lack of a common victim identification approach resulted in various law enforcement agencies following diverse rules of business; a thorough step-by-step guide for victim identification was awaiting approval. The government, in partnership with NGOs and trafficking victims, continued to develop a nationwide referral system, which remained unresolved at various points in time.

Members of the Counter-Trafficking Committee (CTC) and law enforcement have used various methods to create referral directories that connect victims and at-risk individuals to services; however, the lack of established procedures has hampered the referral of identified victims to appropriate resources. The police are frequently involved in developing plans to manage multiple shelters for female and child abuse victims in all eight divisions of Bangladesh, providing temporary shelter, medical care, and psychological support. The government's NGO Affairs Bureau has delayed the clearance of foreign financing for some human rights-focused NGOs, impacting the provision of help to vulnerable groups, including trafficking victims.

The government failed to routinely commence criminal investigations into the exploitation of migrant labour overseas, and civil remedies remained insufficient. Victims of trafficking were entitled to court-ordered restitution from traffickers or compensation from a government-established fund, which was, however, insufficiently funded. Victims of trafficking may also initiate civil lawsuits to obtain restitution. Out-of-court settlements between victims and traffickers persisted, with the majority of agreements requiring victims to retract their evidence, thus precluding the trafficker from facing criminal prosecution.

The government endorses several task forces and committees to oversee advancements in anti-trafficking initiatives and to synchronize efforts across government departments, NGOs, and foreign organisations. The government persisted in endorsing CTCs at the district, sub-district, and union levels to enhance collaboration between local authorities and civil society in the fight against human trafficking. Despite the MOHA's failure to publicly disclose its yearly statistics on human trafficking, the government released the first national research on the subject, which analysed trafficking risk factors, routes, and proposed suggestions for national solutions.

Traditional tactics like as awareness campaigns are being supplemented with novel community-based strategies (Palma, 2020). Partnerships between governmental and non-governmental groups allow for larger outreach and stronger implementation of anti-trafficking measures, in addition to maintaining traditional approaches to combating Bangladesh's worst trend of human trafficking. Human trafficking is a continuing problem in Bangladesh, and tackling it needs the collaboration of multiple parties, including the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and foreign organisations. This is the foundation of the National Plan of Action (NPA) for the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking (2018-2025), which is also part of the fifth-year planning of the government.

Addressing TIP in National Legislation and Key Challenges: Human trafficking in Bangladesh is a significant contemporary issue. The primary causal elements of TIP are several. Poverty, social isolation, gender discrimination, pervasive illiteracy, lack of knowledge, and inadequate governance are the main factors leading to human trafficking in Bangladesh (UNODC, 2025). The question arises of how Bangladesh might tackle Trafficking in Persons (TIP) within its national law and what the main hurdles would be in this endeavour. Bangladesh lacks a single, comprehensive statute addressing human

trafficking. The legal framework addressing anti-human trafficking in Bangladesh comprises a collection of criminal statutes directly related to human trafficking, together with supplementary legislation that indirectly contributes to the fight against trafficking. The principal anti-trafficking laws that impose penalties for the acts, processes, and outcomes of human trafficking include the Penal Code of 1860, the Suppression of Immoral Trafficking Act of 1933, the Children Act of 1974, and the Prevention of Repression against Women and Children Act of 2000 (amended in 2003) (UNODC, 2025). Conversely, additional legislation aimed at establishing a preventative framework and mechanisms against human trafficking includes the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980, the Primary Education Act of 1990, and the Labour Act of 2006 (UNODC, 2025). Nonetheless, the legal framework addressing trafficking in Bangladesh should prioritise the victim's physical, emotional, and psychological harm, in addition to the financial and property losses incurred by the victim.

Role of NGOs in Preventing Trafficking

Besides the government agencies, numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations play an important complementary role in correcting gaps in government efforts and offering grassroots support through various types of programmes that benefit victims. Many NGOs play an important role in preventing human trafficking in Bangladesh. For example, Caritas Bangladesh was first involved with the anti-trafficking initiative to protect women and children from the exploitative conditions of trafficking by building capacity and strengthening local networks.

To prevent the trafficking of women and children, Caritas Bangladesh has worked with advocacy groups like the Bangladesh Mohila Sangstha and Mohila Ainjibi Samity to strengthen local networks and prevent the trafficking of women and children. Also, Young Power in Social Action (YPSA) is an NGO focused on sustainable development, holding Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UN ECOSOC), and is involved in the Bangladesh Counter Trafficking-in-Persons Programme (YPSA, 2010).

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has always stood steadfast in supporting the government's commitment to combat human trafficking. IOM arranged a three-day working event in Bangladesh in February 2024 to learn about the difficulties and get some recommendations regarding human trafficking (IOM

Bangladesh, 2024). They gave decisive importance to a strong judiciary to ensure victim-friendly trial procedures and speedy disposal of human trafficking cases. Also, the primary organisation in charge of organising the campaign against human trafficking in Cox's Bazar is IOM (TBS, 2021). The government, military, law enforcement, and other relevant agencies came together with IOM in Cox's Bazar to protect people from falling victim to this terrible crime.

Nevertheless, the government's efforts to combat refugee trafficking were inadequate. Rohingya refugees faced limitations on their freedom of movement in Bangladesh, and access to education was irregular for several Rohingya teenagers. The vulnerability of the Rohingya to trafficking has intensified owing to a governmental ban on their admission to Bangla language schools, the closure of informal educational establishments established by the Rohingya community, and their lack of legal work prospects.

The government delivered fundamental anti-trafficking training to Bangladeshi military and police officers before their deployment as peacekeepers and said that it also offered anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic staff. The government failed to take measures to diminish the demand for commercial sex acts and child sex tourism. The ineffective and disorganised governmental policies in combating human trafficking are significantly contributing to the issue. There is a pressing need for more employment options for jobless people, enhanced production in the agriculture sector, and stricter enforcement of laws against criminal activities.

It is concerning that, despite possessing a specialised legal framework for prosecuting human trafficking charges, Bangladesh has been experiencing alarmingly low conviction rates. According to statistics from the Anti-Human Trafficking Offence Tribunal in Dhaka, about 1.5 per cent of the cases it handled have led to convictions, indicating that a significant majority of the alleged perpetrators have evaded accountability. The Dhaka tribunal reportedly resolved around 858 instances between March 2020 and August 2022. Among these, only 13 led to convictions, while 20 defendants received varying prison sentences (The Daily Star Editorial, 2022).

Conclusion and Way Forward

Despite being a worldwide issue, effective initiatives to prevent human trafficking must originate at the local level. The fundamental strategy used by most traffickers in the "migration/trafficking dynamic" is straightforward: they establish confidence with an individual and thereafter deceive them about a potential opportunity. They may target a young, vulnerable individual enduring misery and poverty, presenting the one opportunity that seems unattainable to them - an improved existence, a more manageable life, one that would not only enhance the individual's circumstances but also assist their immediate family.

The Government of Bangladesh (GoB), foreign partners, the commercial sector, and civil society must concentrate their efforts on promoting a strong, rights-based strategy to prevent individual exploitation by trafficking networks and to diminish their operational area. It is essential to recognise that human trafficking is a transnational crime, and traffickers may have access to superior technology than what is accessible inside a specific nation. We reaffirm our robust adherence to commitments under various international and regional agreements related to human trafficking. Human traffickers armed with technology may inflict more damage. Government authorities and other stakeholders may successfully counteract the trafficker's activities via the use of technology.

The government, together with pertinent stakeholders, must enhance training for authorities, including law enforcement, labour inspectors, immigration officers, and healthcare practitioners, on the detection of trafficking cases and the referral of victims to assistance. We must enhance assistance for trafficking victims, mainly adult male victims, overseas victims, and those abused internationally, while facilitating NGOs' access to trafficking victims in government shelters. The government must establish and rigorously enforce regulations and oversight of labour recruitment companies, sub-agents, and brokers supplying labour to recruiting agencies, including the abolition of recruitment fees imposed on workers and the criminal accountability of fraudulent recruiters.

Greater emphasis must be placed on preventive strategies to address this condition. Furthermore, awareness must be cultivated throughout all societal strata on this matter. During the investigation of complaints filed by victims, law enforcement authorities must examine many factors, including the true identity of the trafficker and the trafficking route, while avoiding prolonged processes. Embassies should

proactively help in substantiating crimes committed abroad in judicial proceedings. Digitizing the information necessary for expatriates to provide proof is also essential. Women, children, and adolescents are the primary victims of human trafficking situations. Upon becoming victims of such crimes, people often become susceptible. The cases include a substantial amount of sensitive evidence. Given the societal background, they often choose not to bring it to court. Consequently, the case weakens. Consequently, it is essential to establish an atmosphere that safeguards the secrecy of witnesses and evidence.

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