



Combating Child Trafficking for a Sustainable Future: A Case Study of Women-Led Initiatives from Dooars, West Bengal

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Abstract: According to the NCRB report for 2022, there were 29 incidents and 49 victims under 18 years of age trafficked in West Bengal, part of a total of 343 cases of 741 victims across India. Child trafficking remains a significant human rights challenge in the Dooars region of West Bengal. Factors such as proximity to the international border, structural poverty, tea garden closures, seasonal unemployment, and educational exclusion have contributed to the Dooars becoming a major source area for trafficked children and adolescents. In recent years, women-led community initiatives, particularly grassroots volunteers, have played a vital role in the prevention, detection, rescue, and post-rescue rehabilitation of victims. This paper presents a case study and evaluates the effectiveness of women-led anti-trafficking initiatives in providing community-based protection. The paper argues that sustainable anti-trafficking strategies in the Dooars must incorporate women's leadership, livelihood security, education, and institutional coordination. A case study research design was employed for an in-depth analysis. Primary data were collected through interviews with women anti-trafficking activists, community groups, government officials, and from governmental reports. Secondary data sources included books and academic journals, with the collected data analysed using a coding technique. The findings reveal that the root causes of child trafficking in Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts include the smuggling of children across borders for forced labour, prostitution, organ and skin trafficking, domestic servitude, and various forms of sexual exploitation. This study highlights the philanthropic role of women activists in preventing trafficking through awareness generation, rescuing trafficked children, providing post-rescue counselling for the physical and mental well-being of victims, and aiding in their rehabilitation and reintegration.

Keywords: Child trafficking, Women-led initiatives, Dooars, Sustainable anti-trafficking strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Child trafficking in the Dooars region of North Bengal, an area that includes the districts of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar, remains a persistent and multi-faceted problem driven by proximity to the international border, poverty, seasonal migration, failing tea-garden economies, and weak protection systems. This belt has repeatedly been identified in both scholarly and government investigations as a high-risk area where children, especially teenage girls, are vulnerably situated for exploitation in commercial sexual exploitation, forced labour, and unsafe migration to urban centres (EPW, 2013; Mandal, 2024). Recent field studies and district inspections have documented patterns in which economic distress in tea gardens and low awareness of trafficking risks combine with intermediary recruitment practices to place children, especially adolescent girls, at elevated risk of being moved out of the area for exploitative work.

In 2022, the National Crime Records Bureau reported 29 cases involving 49 victims of trafficking below the age of 18 in West Bengal, ranking it as the fourth highest in India, which recorded a total of 343 incidents affecting 741 child trafficking victims that year

(National Crime Records Bureau, 2023). Furthermore, a significant number of trafficking cases go unrecognized because they are mistakenly labeled as missing children or categorized as runaway incidents. This misclassification obscures the true severity of the issue and hinders vital intervention efforts. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has launched the innovative 'Monitoring App for Seamless Inspection' (MASI) to enhance real-time monitoring of Child Care Institutions (CCIs) across the country. This app supports the inspection mechanism outlined in the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, ensuring cohesive monitoring and robust reporting through its integration with a dedicated portal. MASI enables unified inspections by Child Welfare Committees, State and District Inspection Committees, Members of Juvenile Justice Boards, and State Commissions for Protection of Child Rights, ultimately promoting a safer environment for children (NCPCR, 2024). The state's policy responses, such as the establishment of the Directorate of Child Rights & Trafficking and specialized Anti-Human Trafficking Cells, indicate an institutional acknowledgment of the issue. However, field reports reveal significant gaps between these policies and the actual protection realities faced on the ground. In recent years, women-led

community initiatives, particularly those driven by grassroots volunteers in Dooars, have made significant strides in enhancing the prevention, detection, rescue, and rehabilitation of victims. Their efforts have been instrumental in building a supportive network that empowers communities and fosters resilience.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The researchers conducted a thorough review of relevant literature to effectively identify and define the research problem for this study. **Das and Azad (2024)** have conducted a study on child trafficking in India and suggested some strategies for prevention and rehabilitation. This study examines factors contributing to child trafficking, including poverty, lack of education, socio-economic disparities, and inadequate law enforcement. It identifies patterns and trends, maps high-risk regions, and evaluates existing legal frameworks. The research emphasises innovative prevention strategies like community-based monitoring, education programs, and technology. It also explores holistic rehabilitation models for victims' reintegration into society. **Krishnan (2023)** shows that child trafficking is a global crime and violation of human rights, with a high prevalence in India in his paper. The article highlights the importance of human rights education and social work practice in addressing this issue. Education can educate the public about their rights and empower vulnerable communities to protect their children. Three major models of human rights education are discussed, and social workers play a crucial role in addressing this issue. **Neha and Kumar (2022)** investigated child trafficking in India and focused on its extent, historical background, legal framework, and existing laws. It revealed a lack of effective implementation and awareness among the public about their rights, leading to societal indifference towards the issue. The study highlighted the need for better awareness and enforcement of existing laws to combat child trafficking, including begging, prostitution, child labour, organ trade, drug trafficking, and smuggling. **Das (2022)**, in a report entitled 'How girls are saving girls from traffickers in the Sundarbans', published by the Times of India, highlighted the fight of girls working against human trafficking, including the lived stories of girls like Rani and Aditi. The girls in the village, known as "Joddha," which means "warrior" in Bengali, have filed 102 reports of sexual assault, prevented 29 children from being trafficked, and halted 334 child weddings in the past five years. **Seefar and My Choices Foundation (2021)** conducted a study in Bankura, Bardhaman, and Birbhum districts in West Bengal and found that locally rooted campaigns addressing knowledge gaps are effective in preventing child trafficking. Female community leaders played a

pivotal role in these efforts. Female politicians and leaders might be more committed to addressing trafficking threats and driving change in their areas. These areas are critical for preventing child trafficking (CT) and commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC). **Burns et al. (2021)** conducted a qualitative study on exploring the anti-trafficking response in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The study aimed to identify factors hindering and enhancing the efficiency of anti-trafficking programmes. Key stakeholders in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Nepal participated in the qualitative study that employed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The interviewees underlined the part women play in community vigilance committees and the general significance of women's empowerment in the anti-trafficking campaign.

Objectives

- To investigate the socio-economic factors contributing to child trafficking in the Dooars region.
- To assess the role and impact of women-led anti-trafficking initiatives in Dooars.
- To suggest measures for strengthening child protection in the Dooars region.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilizing a collective case study approach to investigate the urgent contemporary issue of child trafficking. In collective case study, **multiple cases** are studied and compared to provide focus into a specific issue (Stake, 2002). This is also called explanatory case study.

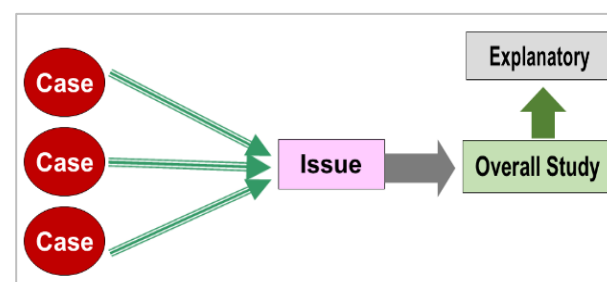


Figure 1: Collective Case Study Design

It particularly focuses on the real-life experiences of women actively engaged in addressing this social challenge in the Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal. This paper is designed to intricately examine the nuanced lived experiences, strategic approaches, and significant obstacles that women activists encounter in their bold advocacy against child trafficking.

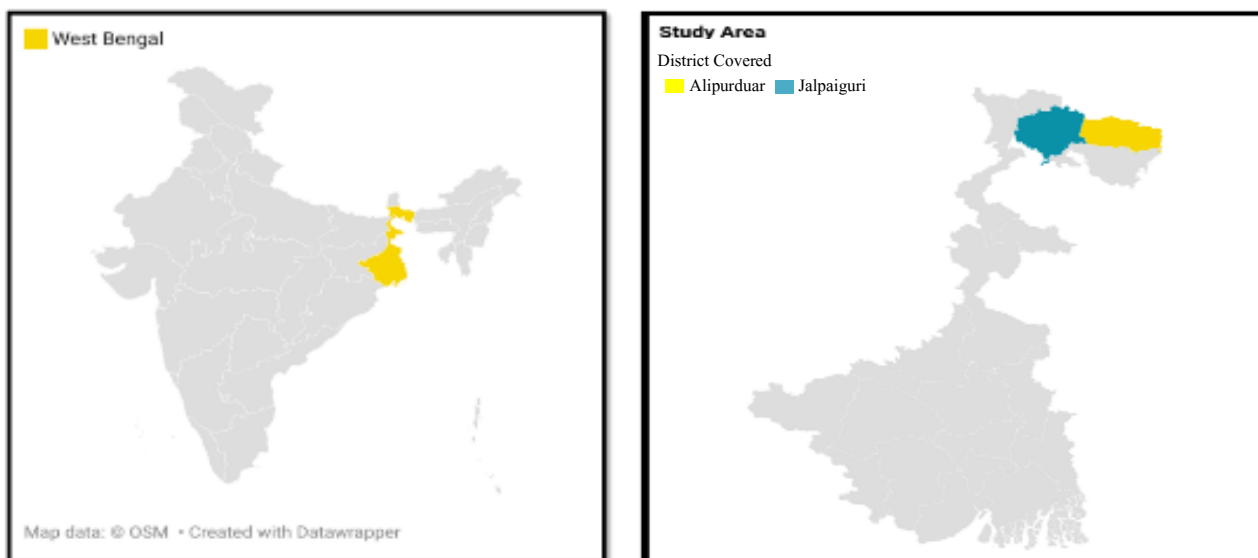


Figure 2: Selected states and districts of the study

The sampling technique incorporated non-probability methods, with a specific emphasis on purposive and snowball sampling. Women activists from Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar (both adjacent to the border of Bhutan) have been identified as operating in regions with the highest incidences of child trafficking.

In this comprehensive study, researchers utilized both primary and secondary qualitative data to foster a nuanced understanding of this complex issue. Primary data were collected through interviews with women anti-trafficking activists, community groups, and from government reports, whereas secondary data sources included books and academic journals. The collected information was analyzed using a coding technique, categorization into themes and then thematic analysis. Triangulation was done for cross-verification of authenticity of data. To capture rich and compelling personal narratives, motivations, and insights, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with women activists engaged directly in anti-trafficking efforts, as well as with members of local communities.

Research Ethics

Due to the sensitive nature of this study, data confidentiality is strictly maintained. The names of the victims have been changed, and other details about them are used solely for research purposes.

Case 1:

A teen-age girl named Laxmi Oraon (17) from a tea plantation area in Jalpaiguri was lured by fake promises of providing costly mobile phones and the provision of getting work in Delhi, along with a marriage settlement. The abductor involved in this incident was a renowned face who had been involved earlier in similar incidents. The girl was brutally raped by several men who had accompanied the abductor and formed a group. The girl was rescued by an NGO that has been working against the women trafficking system in the tea garden

areas. The information regarding this impending criminal operation was brought to the volunteer group's notice by a local tea vendor who had overheard the entire conversation taking place between the abductor's group and noticed the girls who were brainwashed to accompany the abductor by providing false hopes regarding a bright future. The entire gang was arrested from the New Jalpaiguri Railway station with the help of the leading volunteer group, who tried to anticipate the situation by interrogating the girl who was a victim of gang rape and the abducting group, who denied every charge against them. The man in charge of these criminal operations collected money from various people, who were provided with the opportunity to rape the victim. Having been involved in these illegal activities for a long period, he had political backers who helped him defend his case. Abducting poor teenage girls from the tea garden areas ensured less commotion from the people, as many believed that young girls often ran away with their lovers. Hence, raping them and later trafficking them in various red-light areas had become a lucrative profession for him. After the victim was rescued from the abductor, she was handed over to her family members.

Case 2:

Another victim, Miss Nayana Kisku, aged 5 years, was sold by her father, Raman Kisku, an employee of a tea estate of Jalpaiguri district, which was closed down recently due to the conflict between the employers and the managers in general. When confronted, the father, regardless of his guilt, seemed nonchalant about his crime and confessed that, due to extreme poverty, he had sold his daughter and his alcohol addiction had compelled him to do so as he needed money to buy liquor regularly. The socio-economic complications existing in the tribal belt had lured him to sell his daughter off, which had fetched him a huge amount of money. One of the chief reasons behind this might be a lack of educational facilities, low or no wages in the tea gardens,

lack of sexual education and birth control measures, which leads to the birth of many children.

Case 3:

A mother of two daughters in the Alipurduar belt had forced her daughters to join the riveting business of prostitution, which would help them to lead a luxurious life. The rising demand for young girls as escorts to businessmen, industrialists, and other influential people has increased the trend of young girls joining prostitution, which has procured a huge amount of money. The belt of Alipurduar is surrounded by the borders of many countries like Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, which leads to cross-border prostitution, and young girls are trapped and lured for money, settlement, and modern electronic gadgets. Recent studies have shown that young girls who come from extremely downtrodden families are brainwashed easily, and they easily fall prey to the alluring business of prostitution. While interviewing the mother, Shipra Oraon (46), it was found out that she was, in fact, glad that her daughters are earning more money than their father ever could by working as a tea plantation worker. According to the recent reports submitted by certain NGO groups, young girls are more tempted to join the sex industry since sex becomes a medium of transaction in the areas demarcated by the borders of the neighbouring countries.

Case 4:

A group of school dropouts named Kishan (11), Prity (15), Rakhi (14), Raju (16) and Mira (14) were rescued by the local police as they were seen accompanying a gang of abductors who were identified as a notorious group involved in child trafficking. According to the locals, this gang usually targets young children and adults aged 11-17 years who are profitable assets for the booming sex industry. Due to the lack of educational facilities, young dropouts lose focus in their studies and start looking for various means to earn a livelihood. The children were assured to provide jobs as factory workers in different states. While conducting an interrogation, it has been found out that there is a huge demand for children aged 6-11 years for skin grafting and organ smuggling. Young boys are sent for sex in Goa, Mumbai, and Delhi who work in hotels and restaurants to procure an alternative side income. The gang involved in these illegal activities was arrested, and the young group of children was handed over to their families.

FINDINGS

The Socio-Economic Factors Contributing to Child Trafficking in Dooars

Poverty and Economic Insecurity

Poverty is the most significant driver of child trafficking in the Dooars. Families struggling to meet basic needs often accept offers of employment or education for their children without verifying their authenticity.

Tea Garden Closures and Labour Crisis

The sickness or closure of tea gardens leads to irregular wages and sudden unemployment. During such crises, traffickers pose as job agents offering lucrative employment opportunities for children in cities.

Lack of Education and School Dropout

Poor quality education, distance to schools, and child labour contribute to high dropout rates. Out-of-school children are more vulnerable to trafficking.

False Promises and Migrations

The Dooars region is situated along migration corridors that connect urban centres, other Indian states, and even neighbouring countries. Traffickers take advantage of individuals' aspirations for a better life by promising them opportunities such as domestic work, hotel jobs, factory employment, marriage, or vocational training, ultimately sending the victims to different states or countries.

Gender and Social Marginalization

Girls are particularly vulnerable due to gender discrimination, early marriage practices, and a lack of control over decision-making.

Roles and Impacts of Women-led Anti-trafficking Initiatives

Awareness Drives

The women conduct door-to-door sessions, explaining common trafficking tactics and encouraging families to contact the Village Level Child Protection Committee (VLCPCs) before accepting any job offers.

Documentation & Registration

Families are encouraged to register any job recruitment offers with the committee. The committee keeps a log and performs identification checks for agents. They also urge families to promptly report any suspected abduction to the police.

Transit Monitoring

Volunteers, especially women, monitor bus stops and the local feeder routes to the nearest railhead for suspicious group departures and alert police.

Rescue and Rehabilitation Linkages

When suspicious movement is detected, committee members contact both the police and Child Line. After a rescue, female volunteers offer trauma-sensitive listening and initial counselling to the victims to assess their physical and mental health. They also work to trace the victims' families, rebuild acceptance for returning children, assist them in getting legal support, coordinate with a local shelter, and assist in their rehabilitation and social reintegration.

Role in Sustainability

The anti-trafficking initiatives spearheaded by these remarkable women play a crucial role in advancing

several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 1: No Poverty, SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, SDG 4: Quality Education, SDG 5: Gender Equality, SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG 10: Reduced Inequality, SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, and SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals (UN SDGs, 2025).

Through their dedicated efforts, these front-liner women have created sustainable livelihoods for rescued persons and developed alternative income streams that significantly alleviate poverty. By raising awareness about menstrual health and hygiene among adolescent girls, they tackle one of the many barriers that contribute to trafficking. Their initiatives also champion access to quality education for all, transcending gender, class, creed, and sect. This commitment not only reduces gender disparity but also fosters the development of new economic opportunities, leading to transformative livelihood structures. These initiatives embody the essence of gender equality through inclusive growth, empowerment, and meaningful employment opportunities for survivors of trafficking. By ensuring productive employment and decent work for all, they actively combat inequality and empower women to take charge of their lives. With the ability to make informed decisions about their livelihoods, these women become the architects of their futures. Moreover, their endeavors illustrate the power of collaborative partnerships among diverse stakeholders at regional, national, and global levels. This synergy is vital for shaping robust anti-child trafficking policies that are grounded in collective action and shared responsibility.

Measures for Strengthening Child Protection in the Dooars

Awareness Generation

Organizing awareness programs is crucial for addressing trafficking risks, promoting safe migration practices, safeguarding children's rights, highlighting the harms of child marriage, and encouraging responsible use of digital media. Utilizing local languages and relatable examples enhances the effectiveness of these messages.

Institutionalizing Community Vigilance

It is important to provide small grants and formal recognition, such as stipends and training certificates, to Village Level Child Protection Committees (VLCPCs) and vigilance committees. This support allows them to operate safely and effectively over time.

Training and Equipping Women Volunteers

Women volunteers should receive modular training on identification, safe reporting, basic legal literacy, and trauma-informed counseling. They also need simple tools, including digital support, legal referral lists, and protected communication channels. WhatsApp

groups can be used to quickly share alerts, disseminate photos, and coordinate rescues or reunions.

Strengthening Rail/Bus Station Partnerships

Protocols should be established to connect community volunteers with Government Railway Police (GRP) and Railway Protection Force (RPF) teams at New Jalpaiguri and other transit hubs. Appointing community liaison officers is also necessary to expedite rescue referrals, as recent rescues indicate that transit hubs are critical intervention points.

Scaling Livelihood Alternatives for Women

It is essential to expand self-help group (SHG)-based income programs to alleviate the economic pressure on households that may lead them to send their children away. Skill training and the establishment of micro-enterprises, supported by the Dooars industry, including initiatives from the Dooars Branch of the Indian Tea Association (DBITA) and collaborations with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), should be introduced.

Data Systems and Registration of Job Agents

Encouraging local community registrations for recruitment agents could be beneficial. Implementing cross-check mechanisms with district labor offices to create a watch list of suspicious recruiters is essential.

Providing Psychosocial and Reintegration Support Led by Women Counsellors

Empowering female counselors from tea garden communities to provide culturally sensitive follow-up care for rescued children and women is crucial. By investing in their training, we can ensure that these vulnerable individuals receive the compassionate and understanding support they deserve, fostering healing and resilience in their lives.

CONCLUSION

Women-led anti-trafficking initiatives in the Dooars region have emerged as a powerful and context-sensitive response to the ongoing challenge of human trafficking, particularly involving children and young women. Rooted in lived experiences, local knowledge, and community trust, women leaders have been instrumental in prevention, rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration efforts. Their interventions have addressed deeply entrenched socio-economic vulnerabilities, bolstered community vigilance, improved early identification of trafficking risks, and ensured the effective rehabilitation of victims. These initiatives illustrate that women's leadership significantly enhances the sustainability and efficacy of anti-trafficking strategies. By integrating livelihood generation, education, legal awareness, and psychosocial support, women-led efforts have approached trafficking not merely as a law-and-order issue but as a multifaceted development and human rights concern. Collaboration with local administration, law enforcement, child

protection committees, and NGOs has further amplified their impact, fostering decentralized yet resilient protection networks within vulnerable tea garden and forest fringe communities of the Dooars.

Nevertheless, despite their considerable achievements, these initiatives face ongoing challenges, including resource constraints, limited institutional recognition, security risks, and gaps in long-term rehabilitation support. Strengthening policy support, ensuring adequate funding, enhancing capacity-building, and formally incorporating women-led collectives into district and state-level anti-trafficking frameworks are crucial for expanding their impact. Ultimately, empowering women as agents of change is not only vital for combating trafficking in the Dooars but also essential for advancing social justice, gender equity, and sustainable community development in the region.

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