

Gender Inequality, Intersectionality, Human Trafficking and Development: An Explorative-Analytical Perspective on Bangladesh

Abstract

The article delves into the intricate link between gender inequality, human trafficking, and development in Bangladesh. It reveals that women, particularly those in underprivileged areas, are disproportionately affected by patriarchal norms, economic inequalities, and inadequate legal systems. Drawing from the theoretical literature, the study suggests that conventional development strategies often overlook these structural inequalities, disproportionately affecting women. It also highlights how commodification of labor, deregulation, and market-oriented policies can exacerbate gender inequalities, increasing women's vulnerability to exploitation. The article calls for a comprehensive strategy to address these systemic issues, advocating for substantial investments in education, healthcare, social protection, and legislative reform. It also underscores the importance of collaboration between governments, civil society organizations, and local communities in combating trafficking and raising awareness. The article provides policymakers and stakeholders with significant insights and recommendations to accomplish Sustainable Development Goal-5 (SDG-5) of gender equality and empower all women and girls. By highlighting the complicated relationship between gender inequality, trafficking, and development, it emphasizes the necessity for gender-sensitive policies and initiatives to address women's vulnerability and their exploitation. An intersectional approach, integrating multiple sectors, can create comprehensive policies and actions to prevent trafficking, empower women, and promote inclusive, sustainable development to attain the targets of Sustainable Development Goal-5.

Keywords: Women's Trafficking; Gender Inequality; Intersectionality; Development, Women's Empowerment; Bangladesh

Introduction

Human trafficking is a crime against humanity. We must unite our efforts to free victims and stop this crime that's become ever more aggressive, that threatens not just individuals, but the foundational values of society itself.

– Pope Francis

The act of trafficking women has become a major human rights abuse over the last several decades. The intersection of labor exploitation, migration, gender, and development is a well-established feature of this contemporary slavery (Brysk & Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2012; Vijayarasa, 2016). Rising international wealth, worsening gender poverty, and a lack of legal safeguards in victims' home nations are the main forces propelling the human trafficking industry forward. Issues like vulnerability, gender inequality, poverty, marginalization, and being part of a minority worsen female trafficking (Jana et al., 2002; Rao & Presenti, 2012; IOM, 2024).

Human trafficking significantly impacts women in impoverished countries like Bangladesh. This shows the tough challenges faced when trying to achieve sustainable development. Looking into development ideas and policies is key to understanding the unexpected effects they might bring and the inequalities they could keep in place (Cornwall et al., 2007). Scholars highlight the connection between gender and development, emphasizing that numerous development initiatives frequently disregard the distinct experiences and requirements of marginalized women. This disregard for patriarchal power dynamics is evident, leaving women even more vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking.

Critics claim that the neoliberal economic strategies of governments and development organizations make inequalities worse and promote exploitation (Navarro, 1998; Cavalieri, 2010). Economic growth typically benefits men more than women due to the often-overlooked nature of women's work, particularly in informal or unpaid care roles (Sjoberg & Thies, 2023). Deregulation, privatization, and market-focused policies can push some groups to the sidelines, leaving them in unstable jobs and making them more susceptible to trafficking networks (Peksen et al., 2017).

The commodification of labor and global supply chains has expedited the expansion of trafficking networks, specifically focusing on women. Cultural norms and patriarchal power systems exacerbate gender-based violence, discrimination, and commercialization, making women more vulnerable to trafficking (Bertone, 1999). The scarcity of employment prospects in the formal sector results in individuals being compelled to take up precarious and low-wage positions in the informal sector, rendering them more susceptible to exploitation. The lack of economic autonomy among women hampers their capacity to make independent decisions and break free from exploitation (Rouf, 2015).

Theoretical and empirical research supports the argument that development attempts frequently increase gender inequality. Feminist critiques of development paradigms stress how the emphasis on economic growth and poverty alleviation usually ignores social and gender equality, exacerbating existing gaps (Singh, 2007; Zein-Elabdin, 1996; Marchand & Parpart, 1995; Parpart, 1993).

Human trafficking is seen as a major abuse of their rights and a form of modern slavery. Global economic expansion, rising female poverty rates, and inadequate human rights protections fuel trafficking. Gender inequality, vulnerability, poverty, marginalization, and minority status are all major contributors to the female sex trade and human trafficking (Beeks & Amir, 2006). Furthermore, development measures frequently unintentionally exacerbate gender disparities, requiring a comprehensive plan to address the structural causes of these difficulties and promote inclusive development.

This article presents an examination of the intricate relationships between gender inequality, intersectionality, and women's trafficking in Bangladesh, set against the backdrop of globalization and human development. By employing an explorative-interpretive analysis, this article delves into the complexities of this pressing issue, shedding light on the multifaceted dynamics at play. This article draws upon a comprehensive review of conceptual literature and empirical findings to provide a comprehensive overview of the issues, highlighting the key factors that contribute to gender inequality and women's trafficking in Bangladesh. Despite limitations, it acts as a catalyst for additional investigation, enabling the development of ideas and insights through comprehensive empirical research. This may contribute to the growing body of knowledge about women's trafficking and gender inequality, ultimately informing strategies and interventions to address these pressing issues.

Following this introduction, the first section of this article examines the worldwide perspective on human trafficking, while the subsequent section explores the connection between trafficking and development. The third section focuses on the theoretical aspects of trafficking. The fourth provides a detailed analysis of women's trafficking in Bangladesh, including its nature, current state, causes, and implications. The fifth section examines methods for addressing the issue, while the concluding section summarizes the discussion.

Trafficking: A Global Perspective

The United Nations adopted the Palermo Protocol in 2000 and ratified it in 2006, providing the internationally accepted definition of human trafficking. It describes trafficking as:

"...the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation" (UN, 2000).

Human trafficking exploits individuals, including children, women, and adults, through methods such as sexual slavery, forced labor, and the recruitment of underage soldiers, with victims facing physical,

psychological, and social challenges (Franjić, 2023). The implementation of more advanced detection techniques in several nations has resulted in a noticeable rise in the reported number of individuals who have fallen victim to human trafficking (WHO, 2012; UNODC, 2008; Pennel, 2023).

Many societies often view women and girls as commodities, diminishing their autonomy and intrinsic value as individuals. Stigma isolates the stigmatized from everyday circumstances, which often follow human trafficking. This detrimental quality isolates victims from their everyday lives, leading to social marginalization, low self-esteem, psychological suffering, and challenges in reintegrating into society after the crime. The stigmatization and marginalization experienced by trafficking survivors deters them from seeking assistance or reporting instances of abuse. As a result, there is a prevailing culture where traffickers can operate without facing any consequences, creating a sense of impunity (Poulin, 2003).

Globalization has worsened women trafficking because of the increased need for inexpensive labor that crosses national borders (Mendez, 2015). This demand leaves prospective immigrants vulnerable to exploitation, generating significant revenues for criminal companies. Law enforcement and social agencies face substantial difficulties in identifying and aiding victims of these companies. Trafficking has significant effects on both the nations that send migrants and the countries that receive them (Jones et al., 2007).

Trafficking primarily originates in sub-Saharan Africa and South and Southeast Asia. While most countries have enacted laws against trafficking, the rates of conviction vary considerably. Certain regions have made significant progress in prosecuting those involved in trafficking, while others, particularly in Africa and Asia, have reported lower rates of successful legal actions against traffickers.

The extensive effects of human trafficking on human rights, social justice, economic stability, and global security are significant. The International Labor Organization (ILO) highlights a serious problem: more than half of the roughly 24.9 million people in forced labor worldwide are women and girls (ILO, 2022). This figure highlights how common trafficking is and how it impacts women and girls differently. They endure forced labor, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, and even organ trafficking.

Research shows the complicated mix of political, social, and economic forces that contribute to human trafficking. Poverty, racism, and limited access to work and education often cause harm to individuals, particularly women and girls. Unfair events like these make it easier for trafficking to happen. More supplier networks and globalization make it easier for people and things to move between countries. For profit, this opens up new ways for smugglers to take advantage of weak groups (Cameron et al., 2023; Perry & McEwing, 2013; Laan et al., 2011).

Data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2022) highlight significant gender disparities in trafficking. Women and girls make up most trafficking victims, showing just how widespread this issue is. It deeply affects their physical, emotional, and mental health.

Traffickers take advantage of people who are struggling financially to get new members. They achieve this by posing as both businesses and crime groups. People who want to improve their lives often have few means and few friends, which makes them simple targets for scams. Traffickers deceive individuals into engaging in prostitution or forced labor. Some families, having endured significant hardships, opt to collaborate with criminals in order to generate income. Women-led families are more vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Violence against women and girls keeps happening, and societal norms that allow it only make things worse. Women are more vulnerable to trafficking as a result (ICAT, 2017).

The Development-Trafficking Nexus

Human enslavement and progress are inseparable and mutually influence each other. Because they are more prone to trusting fraudulent allegations, poor women are in danger of abuse. Poverty, illiteracy, joblessness, and gender abuse provide fertile ground for trafficking. Traffickers take advantage of these flaws to trick women into believing they have better work and living conditions, thereby trapping them in abusive relationships. Human trafficking stems from underdevelopment and restricted alternatives (Danailova-Trainor & Laczko, 2010).

Extreme poverty reduction might change human trafficking. By improving the economic circumstances of the most impoverished individuals, these actions have the potential to modify the demography of people susceptible to trafficking or alter the characteristics of trafficking operations. For example, enhancements in the local economic situation may decrease domestic trafficking, but they could also unintentionally compel traffickers to exploit new international pathways (McGrath & Watson, 2018). If their conventional tactics of exploitation become less viable, they may turn to other routes of profit, such as international trafficking. This might include spreading their networks and activities outside boundaries.

Human trafficking flagrantly infringes upon the inherent rights of persons, creating recurring patterns of mistreatment, psychological distress, and economic exploitation that impede both personal and societal advancement. Trafficking exacerbates poverty and economic instability by redirecting human potential away from productive endeavors. Victims frequently lose opportunities for education, employment, and personal growth, which hinders broader development objectives. Furthermore, trafficking serves as a clear and evident display of gender disparities, revealing the susceptibilities that result from imbalanced power dynamics, limited economic prospects, and societal norms that permit mistreatment. Addressing human trafficking is crucial for promoting gender equality and empowering women, which are vital for achieving sustainable development (UN, 2015).

Development activities, such as projects to build infrastructure or policies that encourage movement and ambition, might inadvertently increase the likelihood of dangerous migration, which puts women at risk of trafficking. Human traffickers can exploit women seeking better opportunities due to

inadequate precautions (UNODC, 2008; 2020). Trafficking uses violence, exploitation, and human rights violations based on gender, significantly affecting the overall welfare of survivors (ILO, 2017).

Human traffickers exploit women's vulnerable status in a patriarchal society by deceiving them and keeping them in bondage, resulting in significant personal and societal harm. This criminal act harms the well-being of individuals and hinders authentic progress in development. Trafficking undermines attempts to empower women and achieve social justice by sustaining gender-based exploitation (Hoque, 2020; Kabeer, 2005a).

The development narrative frequently emphasizes the economic advantages of migrant workers who sustain their families through remittances that are essential to both poverty alleviation and economic growth (ADB-World Bank, 2018). Nevertheless, this account sometimes conceals the severe hardships experienced by women who are victims of trafficking. Although these stories highlight the importance of economic progress, they do not acknowledge the fundamental weaknesses that render women prone to trafficking. Trafficking thrives by taking advantage of inequalities in money, social standing, and access to opportunities amidst the presence of development programs.

Exploiters target individuals' hopes for improved circumstances, whether it be in terms of employment, education, or marriage, only to subject them to involuntary work, sexual abuse, and extreme violence. The lack of visibility for trafficking victims hinders efforts to combat this criminal activity. Societal attitudes and cultural norms frequently stigmatize trafficked women, promoting victim-blaming narratives that exacerbate their suffering and hinder efforts to dismantle trafficking networks. The consequences of trafficking extend beyond individual victims, significantly impacting wider human rights. It perpetuates cycles of poverty, undermines societal unity, and jeopardizes governance, the legal system, and global security. Trafficking is profitable for some, which keeps organized crime and corruption going and makes the world less stable.

Gender Inequality, Intersectionality, Development and Trafficking: Theoretical Concerns

The notion of intersectionality shows how different parts of identity interact with each other and affect how people feel oppression and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). Understanding this concept of gender is crucial in preventing women from trafficking. It shows how identities based on gender, money, and other things come together. Women who are poor face unique problems and risks that most people **do not** have to deal with. By considering these shared identities, groups and lawmakers can formulate more effective policies for victim support, action, and protection that cater to the individual needs of each victim. This way of thinking promotes strong and all-encompassing actions against trafficking in people (see Cho et al., 2013).

Trafficking is extremely harmful for women and girls, especially those who come from disadvantaged homes. This occurs due to gender disparities, societal norms, and traditional beliefs that

support male dominance. To solve this problem, states need to deal with the root causes of risk in a broad way (UNODC, 2022; Chuang, 2006).

However, development plans often prioritize economic progress and poverty reduction over the more general goals of social and gender equality (Elson, 2009; Sinha et al., 2007). Putting too much emphasis on market-based solutions and GDP growth could make gender inequality worse because it fails to consider how gender, class, and race affect people's daily lives. Some groups receive more resources and opportunities than others, while the needs and issues of disadvantaged groups, such as women, remain unconsidered (Forsythe et al., 2000). This lack of respect can show up as limited access to schooling, health care, and job opportunities, which reinforces women's lower status in society.

Focusing mainly on economic development might obscure the true causes of gender inequality, such as discriminatory laws and societal norms. If governments do not address structural issues, initiatives may worsen power disparities and harm women (Cornwall et al., 2007). While gender norms make women more vulnerable to exploitation, pay inequalities, employment insecurity, and economic reliance make women more vulnerable to trafficking (Kabeer, 2005b).

There are several theories that help us grasp the tricky dynamics of trafficking. They shed light on its causes, effects on people, and the societal systems that keep these human rights violations going (Meshelemiah & Lynch, 2019). Ludwig von Bertalanffy developed general systems theory in the 1950s and 1960s, and Bronfenbrenner introduced ecological systems theory in 1994, which are crucial concepts for understanding human trafficking as a complex network of interconnected elements.

General systems theory sees human trafficking as a web of connections involving traffickers, victims, and law enforcers, all having a role. This connected world opens up weaknesses for traffickers and exploitation, making it essential for law enforcement to step in. Things outside, like the economy and cultural norms, also affect trafficking (Bertalanffy, 1968).

Ecological systems theory examines the different reasons why people are trafficked. It shows how poverty, crime, and social support can help. The microsystem includes everything around the target. The mesosystem looks at how these different environments affect each other. The exosystem looks at things like economic problems that come from outside the system, while the macrosystem looks at bigger things like culture norms, laws, and rules. To deal with the many external factors that lead to human trafficking, it is important to understand these levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Conflict theory, rooted in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels' ideas, examines human trafficking by examining social class and power disparities. The theory proposes a division of society into the bourgeoisie and proletariat, where the former controls production. Traffickers exploit the working class's vulnerabilities, treating victims as commodities and exploiting their bodies and labor for profit (see Rössel, 2013).

Structural functionalism, developed by Talcott Parsons (1951) and Robert Merton (1968), views society as a complex system with interrelated components. It emphasizes socialization, economic production, and social control. Families with issues, a lack of education, and a strong economy are more

susceptible to trafficking. Effective laws and enforcement are crucial for maintaining social order, while inadequate enforcement can facilitate trafficking (Parillo, 2012).

Howard Becker and Edwin Lemert's *labeling theory* examines how society labels individuals as criminals, influencing their self-perception and involvement in trafficking activities (see Crewe & Guyot-Diangone, 2016; Meshelemiah & Lynch, 2019). They focus on the social construction of deviance, highlighting that primary deviance, like poverty, is not intrinsically criminal. Secondary deviance is a societal response to an individual's susceptibility, highlighting power dynamics and exploitation.

According to Abraham Maslow's *hierarchy of needs theory*, traffickers who satisfy victims' basic desires draw them in and influence their actions and decisions. As people move up the hierarchy, their focus shifts to social needs like love, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Trafficking victims face restrictions on fulfilling higher-level needs, such as isolation, humiliation, and shame (Maslow, 1943).

These theories offer frameworks for comprehending the intricate dynamics of trafficking, including its underlying causes, effects on individuals, and the societal systems that sustain human rights abuses. Using these theories, researchers and practitioners can develop effective treatments and policies to fight human trafficking and support victims.

On the other hand, several development theories can be related to women's trafficking (Peet & Hartwick, 2015; Kothari & Minogue, 2001; Willis, 2021; Meija, nd; Coetzee, 2001). Among these are *modernization theory*, *dependency theory*, *feminist theory*, *neo-liberalism*, *sustainable development theory* and the *human rights approach* to development. Modernization theory claims that economic prosperity empowers women and reduces trafficking, while detractors believe it may increase vulnerability, economic inequality, and social instability. Girl education and employment may help minimize vulnerability (UNODC, 2008).

Dependency theory highlights the interconnectedness of trade and investment with industrialized nations, highlighting the vulnerability of developing countries to economic growth and increased risk of women trafficking. Economic scarcity, debt, and gender inequality in poor countries make women vulnerable targets, while foreign capital dependence can lead to informal work.

Feminist theory critiques women's trafficking, highlighting its vulnerability due to patriarchy, limited education, and economic prospects. It acknowledges domestic servitude, forced labor, and forced marriage as forms of trafficking. The feminist perspective advocates for gender equality, dismantling patriarchal structures, and women's empowerment.

Neoliberalism's market deregulation, privatization, and limited government intervention contribute to women's trafficking, exacerbate gender inequality, and lead to low-paying, labor-intensive jobs in developing countries. Desperate women seek work abroad or in cities.

Sustainable development aims to combat women's trafficking through social justice, economic opportunities, and environmental sustainability. However, it requires significant investment, corruption,

and inadequate governance. Effective collaboration between governments, NGOs, and local communities is crucial for successful implementation.

Human rights theory asserts that individuals possess inherent rights, including those of trafficking victims. It advocates for a victim-centric approach, prioritizing their safety, well-being, and empowerment through access to medical care, psychiatric support, legal services, and secure reintegration into society.

In the following section, this article attempts to understand the dynamics of women's trafficking in Bangladesh through the prism of these diverse theories.

The Nature and State of Women Trafficking in Bangladesh

Variables such as a dense population, elevated poverty levels, frequent migration, and natural calamities exacerbate the pervasive problem of human trafficking in Bangladesh. Women and children are more susceptible, with thousands affected each year (Vink et al., 2024). The World Economic Forum's ranking of Bangladesh at 71 out of 146 countries in terms of gender equality highlights the severity of the country's gender inequities, even though the country, together with Nepal, tops the regional performance with more than 69% of gender gaps filled (WEF, 2022). Bangladesh, like other patriarchal societies, faces significant challenges due to long-standing social norms and institutional barriers that contribute to gender inequality in different aspects of life. The marginalization of women leads to limited opportunities for economic empowerment and social mobility, as revealed by an analysis of economic, social, and cultural factors (Haque & Druce, 2019; Jahan et al., 2016).

In Bangladesh, the combination of economic class and patriarchy results in a gender-based division of labor, which places women in situations of vulnerability. Kabir et al. (2018) claim that factories intentionally selected women for low pay to exploit them. Women are viewed as a docile, obedient workforce that will take low earnings without demanding labor and human rights. Rural Bangladeshi women hired by RMG factories find it challenging to engage in collective bargaining due to patriarchal societal norms (Dhar, 2024). Women experience unique economic mobility patterns, which are mostly unrelated to social status, while men participate in income-generating endeavors beyond their household. According to the ILO (2019) data, the gender disparity in employment opportunities, which shows a higher unemployment rate among women in Bangladesh compared to men, is a major factor contributing to women's vulnerability to trafficking. There exist systemic obstacles that impede women's ability to obtain formal employment and achieve economic autonomy. Low-skilled and informal work, such as domestic work, self-employed agriculture, and casual work, overrepresents women and exposes them to unstable working conditions, meager salaries, and no legal safeguards. Due to their marginalization, these women become vulnerable to trafficking schemes that offer deceptive employment and economic prospects. Informal employment has a significant impact on gender wage gaps as well as the working conditions and social protections available to women. According to Kabeer

(1988), the country's socioeconomic structures resemble 'typical patriarchy' with restrictive gender norms, posing significant problems for women. Cultural traditions and religion shape these norms.

Dhar (2021) noted globalization's effect on women's empowerment in Bangladesh. From an economic perspective, globalization has increased employment opportunities for women, but it has also led to discrimination in favor of male workers, the persecution of women in unpaid or informal labor, the ill-treatment of women in low-wage piece-rate work, and poverty through traditional sources of income. Socio-culturally, globalization influences various groups of women in distinct ways, creating new opportunities for the exploitation of women and providing support to women's organizations. International marketing of sex trafficking, tourist enjoyment, and other unethical exercises mistreats women. From a political point of view, women are concerned about expulsion from the domestic political process and loss of control due to global constraints.

While Bangladesh may have made significant progress toward women's empowerment and gender equality, there are still myths and challenges as women continue to experience gender discrimination, low education, and socioeconomic inequities (Diwakar, 2022). While some have hailed financial inclusion (making financial products accessible and affordable to everyone) as a critical driver of women's economic emancipation, the reality is more complex. Gender biases and discrimination against women in Bangladesh's garment industry contradict the notion of a 'genderless' worker (Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020). Microfinance initiatives aimed at entrepreneurship demonstrate neoliberalism's impact on Bangladeshi women. However, women's empowerment efforts encounter obstacles such as men's control over loans, rising debt burdens, and negative consequences for borrowers. Focusing on women's freedom and business in microfinance can hide the complicated social rules and gender issues (Karim, 2011).

The gap in job opportunities between genders shows larger issues in the job market, like biased hiring practices, fewer training programs, and unequal access to resources for career growth. These barriers keep women dependent on men for money and reinforce traditional gender roles, making them more vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking. To address the root causes of women's economic marginalization and vulnerability to trafficking, we need a clear strategy that focuses on both structural barriers and discriminatory attitudes (Kabeer, 2005a).

The effects of limited economic independence for women go beyond just jobs and affect many parts of their lives. Reliance on male relatives or partners reinforces traditional gender roles and power dynamics, further entrenching women's subordinate position in both the family and society. This heavy dependence not only hampers women's autonomy and decision-making power but also exposes them to increased vulnerability and exploitation, such as human trafficking (Khan, 2005; Kabeer, 1988, 2005a, 2005b).

In Bangladesh, there is a clear difference between how well boys and girls do in school. Secondary school completion rates show that 63% of women and 75% of men finish. Long-lasting problems in the school system, such as inadequate facilities, cultural barriers, and money problems, contribute to the

difference in students' academic performance. These issues significantly impact women, especially those residing in rural areas (UNDP, 2019; Shafiq, 2009). Structural barriers and gender inequality render women socially and financially vulnerable. This makes it simple for traffickers to take advantage of their desperate need for better jobs and living conditions (Andaleeb & Wolford, 2004). In Bangladesh, women are more vulnerable to trafficking due to their limited access to schools and social services, particularly in rural areas.

Because they lack access to quality social services like healthcare and social safety, women in Bangladesh are more vulnerable to trafficking. Remotely located women, lacking access to basic services, may be more vulnerable to exploitation due to their limited tools and support networks. Because there aren't many social safety nets, women **do not** have many options for getting help or justice when they need it. This increases their vulnerability to manipulation and pressure from traffickers.

People who are weak, especially women and girls, are convenient targets for human traffickers in Bangladesh, where poverty and systemic gender injustice are common. According to the World Bank, about 18.2% of Bangladesh's people were living below the national poverty line in 2022. This shows how bad the country's economy is for most people (World Bank, online). The high rate of poverty makes it harder for people to get simple things like food, shelter, and medical care. Additionally, it increases their vulnerability to exploitation or trafficking (Khan, 2005).

Discriminatory practices like early marriage, dowry, and gender-based violence further intensify the vulnerability of individuals. Abuses of human rights and acts of violence often result in significant physical and psychological harm. Sex trafficking involves women's sexual exploitation, forcing them to work in brothels or engage in forced prostitution. Deceptive promises of jobs or marriage delude women and girls, leading them to participate in sexual exploitation or forced labor (IOM, 2023).

Women's trafficking is more common in the outlying border regions. A considerable proportion of individuals involved in the commercial sex industry who encountered trafficking in the past are presently working as brothel managers, therefore perpetuating the continuous cycle of exploitation (Khan & Raman, 2024, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). UNICEF reports that around 400 women and children in Bangladesh fall victim to various forms of abuse annually (Sattar, 2023). Redfern (2019) links the issue to the phenomenon of child marriage in Bangladesh.

Due to the lack of trauma-informed support services, assistance, and resources, trafficked women face formidable obstacles in reconstructing their lives. They face stigma, discrimination, and social ostracism, and they cannot reintegrate into society. The successful retrieval of women and underage girls from the clutches of traffickers highlights the need for strong law enforcement endeavors, collaboration between different countries, and victim-focused strategies to combat trafficking and guarantee justice for those who have survived such crimes (Khan & Raman, 2023a, b & c; 2024; IOM, 2023). Their narratives underscore the shortcomings of the existing legal and social protection systems, often failing to adequately safeguard victims or hold traffickers accountable. This fosters a culture of

impunity, allowing traffickers to operate without fear of punishment. Trafficked victims have a harder time because of poor or uncaring management, dishonesty, and limited legal options.

Application of the Theories

Using the various theories from Section 3, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the trafficking issue in Bangladesh. Each theory highlights different parts—like connections, environmental impacts, class struggles, roles, identities, and unmet needs—offering a broad view of how these elements mix to create a setting that supports trafficking.

General systems theory sheds light on human trafficking in Bangladesh, showing how it connects to various social, economic, and political systems. There is a high concentration of poverty and a close-knit community in Bangladesh. On top of that, natural disasters happen often. These issues make it easier for traffickers to take advantage of the situation. These elements work together in a way that makes women's socioeconomic conditions worse, which in turn makes them more vulnerable to trafficking.

Through the application of *ecological systems theory*, we may emphasize the various environmental layers that contribute to women's susceptibility to trafficking. The macrosystem in Bangladesh, which encompasses cultural norms and policies, has an indirect impact on women's positions through the *exosystem* (economic conditions) and *mesosystem* (community networks). Patriarchal values and gender inequality shape this impact. *Microsystem* elements, like the dynamics within a family and the level of support from the local community, significantly influence whether trafficking shields women from or exposes them to its hazards.

Conflict theory reveals that underlying class and gender conflicts within the system cause the occurrence of human trafficking in Bangladesh. Economic inequality and patriarchal oppression lead to the exploitation of women as labor, ultimately turning them into commodities. Traffickers exploit the systemic disparities and limit economic prospects, which mirror the wider power dynamics between the privileged (rich, male) and marginalized (poor, female) groups (Vink et al., 2024).

Adopting a *structural-functionalist* viewpoint, trafficking in Bangladesh might be regarded as a malfunction within the social system. Trafficking occurs when social institutions such as family, education, and economics are unable to ensure equal opportunities and protection for women. The absence of viable job opportunities for women in the formal economy compels them to assume precarious positions, hence sustaining systemic instability.

Applying *labeling theory* can help us understand how social labels and shame play a part in making women trafficking easier in Bangladesh. Society often excludes women perceived as economically useless or immoral, thereby increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. Society often shuns trafficked women, which not only facilitates their initial abuse but also hinders their return to normal life, leaving them alone and without the necessary help (Huda, 2019; Paul & Hasnath, 2000; Alam & Das, 2014).

Finally, Maslow's *hierarchy of needs theory* sheds light on how women, unable to meet their basic needs such as health and safety, become victims of trafficking. Due to their poverty and lack of safety, women seek happiness in ways that traffickers exploit (Huda, 2019). Higher goals like belongingness, respect, and self-actualization are hard to reach in these settings. This keeps the cycle of weakness and abuse going.

Applying *modernization theory* to the context of Bangladesh provides insights into how uneven development has played a role in contributing to trafficking. Industrialization has led to significant economic inequalities between rural and urban areas, prompting women to move in search of improved prospects. Unfortunately, this migration exposes them to trafficking risks. Unscrupulous entities have exploited women drawn into the workforce in unprotected informal sectors due to insufficient safeguards (Paul & Hasnath, 2000).

Drawing from the *dependency hypothesis*, we can argue that the worldwide demand for inexpensive labor in the garment industry leads to the exploitation of Bangladeshi women in severe working conditions, ultimately resulting in their trafficking. The combination of labor exploitation and inadequate wages has compelled certain women to go on perilous migratory paths, hence heightening the likelihood of falling victim to human trafficking (Khan, 2005). Like other developing nations, the neocolonial dependent status has significantly restricted the capacity of local economies to offer sustainable means of living for women, hence augmenting their vulnerability to trafficking.

The application of feminist theory allows for a comprehensive understanding of gender inequality and the impact of patriarchal structures on women's trafficking. The patriarchal society in Bangladesh restricts women's opportunities to obtain education, own land, and participate in decision-making processes. Long-standing patriarchal traditions limit women's prospects and freedoms. Gendered discrimination in education, work, and social services worsens women's economic fragility and makes them more prone to exploitation (Kabeer, 2005a).

Due to the impact of neoliberalism, there is a greater emphasis on economic growth than social welfare. As a result, economic inequalities are growing, and marginalized women are becoming more vulnerable to trafficking. While microfinance has indeed liberated certain women, it has also resulted in increased debt and continued exploitation, primarily due to the lack of protections that address gender-specific concerns.

By employing both the sustainable development framework and a human rights approach to development, especially SDG 5, inclusive growth, education and health standards, gender equality, and comprehensive legal and social protections can be promoted. Indeed, gender equality and women's dignity and empowerment are integral to each of the 17 SDGs, as ensuring the rights of women and girls across all the goals is essential for realizing sustainable development (UN, 2015).

Mitigating the Problem

To effectively combat human trafficking, it is imperative to develop a comprehensive plan that specifically targets the underlying factors contributing to this issue, such as poverty, the absence of social safety nets, and gender inequality. Development strategies should focus on addressing economic inequalities, improving education, and guaranteeing fair and equal access to resources. Traffickers exploit the desperate circumstances of impoverished women, promising them jobs and improved living conditions. Education is one of the most important ways to break the cycle of poverty and abuse by giving women the information and skills to fight human trafficking.

Inequality between men and women worsens human trafficking. It keeps women from getting an education, a job, and other important tools. Helping women start their own businesses, learn new skills, and find fair jobs may reduce their risk of trafficking. Governments must combat bias and promote equality between men and women to reduce the risk of women trafficking.

We need to look at how poverty, gender injustice, and economic inequalities connect. This understanding is key to creating better prevention and intervention strategies. To tackle human trafficking, we need to put enough resources into specialized training, set up dedicated teams for anti-trafficking work, enhance cooperation between agencies, strengthen legal frameworks, and promote international teamwork.

Fighting human trafficking requires everyone to get involved—government bodies, civil groups, NGOs, and local communities all play a crucial role. Governments need to include gender views in their development plans and put money into programs that fight gender-based violence and discrimination. Global organizations can spark and carry out essential changes that benefit women and girls everywhere, helping to reduce the chances of human trafficking.

Bangladesh has laws and programs in place to stop slavery. To support the Constitution's rules on trafficking, the government needs to improve equality between men and women, protect people from being exploited, and make laws that specifically protect women, children, and groups that have been left out. The Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act 2012 and the Prevention and Protection of Women and Children Repression Act 2000 are laws that make trafficking illegal. The Anti-Trafficking in Persons Rules 2018 simplify the application of these rules. These rules explain how to find trafficking victims, save them, and help them. They also explain how to catch the traffickers. The National Plan of Action for 2023–2025 in Bangladesh calls for a strict "zero tolerance" strategy against trafficking in people. To solve this problem, the plan stresses how important it is to focus on prevention, security, punishment, teamwork, and tracking. The 8th Five-Year Plan and the Sustainable Development Goals are in line with this. Many players, including government offices, NGOs, foreign organizations, and UN bodies (GoB, 2023), contribute to the smooth operation of this process. Talks and lessons about fighting trafficking show how important it is for everyone to be involved. The risk of trafficking is increasing due to the shrinking global economy. Criminals can do their jobs more easily thanks to technology. We need strong laws, clear rules, global teamwork, and tech partnerships to stop human trafficking and protect refugees who are weak (IOM, 2022).

Bangladesh is in the process of creating a 'Bench Book,' with the assistance of the IOM and UNODC, to address and combat the issue of human trafficking. The book facilitates the interpretation and implementation of legislation against trafficking and is in line with Sustainable Development Goals 5, 8, 16, and 17. The program is a component of wider projects financed by the European Union and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (UNDOC, 2024).

The Action against Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Children (ATSEC) Bangladesh Chapter seeks to combat trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children through the promotion of advocacy, awareness, research, and program support. The group builds networks, provides training, and collaborates with international organizations to tackle the issues of repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration (ATSEC, nd). The Global Action against Trafficking in Persons and Migrant Smuggling-Bangladesh 2018–2022 project aimed to address human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Bangladesh by developing policies, providing legal support, and assisting victims. IOM also plays a key role in providing direct assistance to victims and vulnerable migrants (GLO.Act Bangladesh, nd). The Bangladesh Counter Trafficking-in-Persons Project, a multifaceted program, aims to combat human trafficking and child marriage in Bangladesh by mobilizing communities, empowering survivors, improving prosecution efficacy, and coordinating stakeholders (Winrock, nd).

Conclusion

The cultural environment in Bangladesh plays a significant role in facilitating human trafficking, especially by taking advantage of the vulnerabilities of women. In these situations, traffickers exploit financial challenges and social marginalization, intensified by societal expectations that reinforce male authority. The social stigma and disgrace surrounding trafficking create a significant barrier for victims, who may be hesitant to seek help or report abuse. This perpetuates a culture of silence and impunity. To stop trafficking and gender inequality in Bangladesh, there is the need to question and change traditional norms and push for laws that put gender awareness first.

This article has delved into the complex interplay between gender inequality, intersectionality, human trafficking, and development in Bangladesh. The analysis reveals that patriarchal norms, economic inequalities, and inadequate legal safeguards disproportionately affect women, particularly those from underprivileged areas.

The findings of this study underscore how conventional development strategies often overlook these structural inequalities, further exacerbating women's vulnerabilities. Research has shown that the commodification of labor, deregulation, and market-oriented policies intensify gender disparities, thereby increasing women's susceptibility to exploitation.

To solve this important problem, we need a well-thought-out plan that looks at the root reasons for women's trafficking and takes gender into account. This means putting substantial resources into education, health care, social support, and changing the law to give women more power and promote

growth that benefits everyone. The study shows how important it is for local governments, community groups, and people to work together to fight trafficking, raise awareness, and help survivors get justice and support.

The article underscores the significance of lawmakers and other stakeholders adopting an inclusive perspective, demonstrating the intricate connections between gender inequality, crime, and development. Focusing on the experiences of women who are pushed to the edges can help create complete policies and actions that stop trafficking, give women more power, and help reach Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality.

While this study adds to what we know about women's trafficking and unfair treatment of women in Bangladesh, it calls for more research and discussion. The government can make better plans and answers to these tough but doable problems with the fresh insight we take in. This will lead to a more fair, equal, and empowered future for women.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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