

COVID19 and Human Trafficking

Desk Review of News Reports

on Human Trafficking

May - October 2020



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis has brought in unprecedented challenges for the anti-human trafficking initiatives across the country. Prerana, in collaboration with The Movement India, has been organizing Digital Tables since May 2020 to bring various partners in the field of anti-human trafficking together to deliberate on the issues relevant to the domain. Previously, two Tables were held in May and July respectively, to understand the impact of the health and economic crisis on the victims and those vulnerable to human trafficking, and the efforts taken by anti-human trafficking organizations at source and destination areas in light of COVID-19 respectively.

The third edition of the Digital Table was held on 6th November 2020, with nearly 30 organizations participating in the discussion. The objective was to understand and discuss the on-ground experience with regards to the implementation of recent state initiatives (advisories, directives, and orders) in the anti-human trafficking domain. The participants for this digital table included those who provide direct services to the victims of sex trafficking, those who work on prevention, and also those who work with the state to address the needs of the victims and strengthen the state's response to anti-human trafficking. Irrespective of their intervention expertise, there were some common challenges that all participants shared. The lockdown caused a break in providing services to victims including women and children such as psycho-social support. Access to provisions for victims of sex trafficking in shelter homes both run by the govt. as well as those run by civil society organizations were also adversely affected. Many victims who were on their path of rehabilitation lost their jobs, shut down their enterprises, and were at the risk of being exploited again. In addition to this, most of the rescue-activities had been stalled at this time as the priorities for the police personnel had changed.

In its [Brief](#) on the impact of COVID-19 on human trafficking, UNODC also noted that *"There are fears that COVID-19 is making the task of identifying victims of human trafficking even more difficult. They are also more exposed to contracting the virus, less equipped to prevent it, and have less access to healthcare to ensure their recovery. Essential and practical operations to support them have become a challenge, due to countries adjusting their priorities during the pandemic."* There are fears that COVID-19 is also making it easier for traffickers to hide their operations, making victims increasingly invisible. Lockdowns and confinement could reinforce the isolation of victims and reduce drastically any chance of them being identified and removed from such exploitative situations.

In the course of our work with child protection systems in Mumbai, Raigad, Thane, and Palghar, we did not hear about the rescue of trafficked children till almost the month of October 2020. It appeared at the time that the rescue operations had significantly been affected by the lockdown measures. To understand this situation of rescues of victims of sex trafficking, in November 2020, Prerana's Anti-Trafficking Center conducted a Desk Review of news articles that reported on incidences of the rescue of trafficked persons between May 2020 - October 2020

The objective of the Desk Review was to understand the situation of the rescue of victims of human trafficking in the country, in the light of the COVID-19 induced lockdown between May and October 2020. We analyzed 46 news reports published during this period across various states in India.

DISCLAIMER: Due to limitations in accessing newspapers from across the country, only reports in English, that were available online were reviewed by Prerana. Please note that the information shared below is based on the information available in the news reports and has not been corroborated by Prerana. All details have been derived ONLY from what was reported in the media.

FINDINGS OF THE DESK REVIEW

The review titled 'Understanding the situation of Human Trafficking amid COVID-19' through a desk review of news articles published between 1st May and 15th October 2020. 46 Reports by 22 online news platforms, across 17 states were reviewed by the Anti-Trafficking Center.

The following regions across states reported cases of rescues of victims of human trafficking through the print media during this period :

Maharashtra	Odisha	Andhra Pradesh	Karnataka
Uttar Pradesh	Jharkhand	Tamil Nadu	Telangana
Delhi	Bihar	West Bengal	Uttarakhand
Chandigarh	Rajasthan	Madhya Pradesh	Gujarat
Goa			

There were 151 reported victims of rescues of commercial sexual exploitation, 278 victims of labor trafficking, and 06 victims of the sale of infants.

Among the victims of commercial sexual exploitation rescued, 148 victims were adults, and 3 were child victims. There is a possibility of there being more child victims that had been rescued but the information provided in the news reports was limited.

In the cases of trafficking, 49 cases were reported to have filed charges under the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act and/or IPC Section 370, which is primarily the provision of trafficking. Other legal provisions that have been used include:

- IPC 365, 366, 376, 366A, 323, 420, 419, 468,471
- Violation of COVID Rules (Maharashtra)
- Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012
- Section 17 of Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2015
- Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act-2016

****Please note that the legal provisions are only listed if they have been mentioned in the news report. More provisions might have been added in the First Information Report or filed additionally, but information about the same in the news reports was limited.***

TOTAL NUMBER OF VICTIMS

 **287** Adult Victims

 **149** Minor Victims

DESTINATION CRIMES

151

COMMERCIAL SEXUAL
EXPLOITATION

278

LABOUR
TRAFFICKING

06

SALE OF
BABIES

VICTIMS OF COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

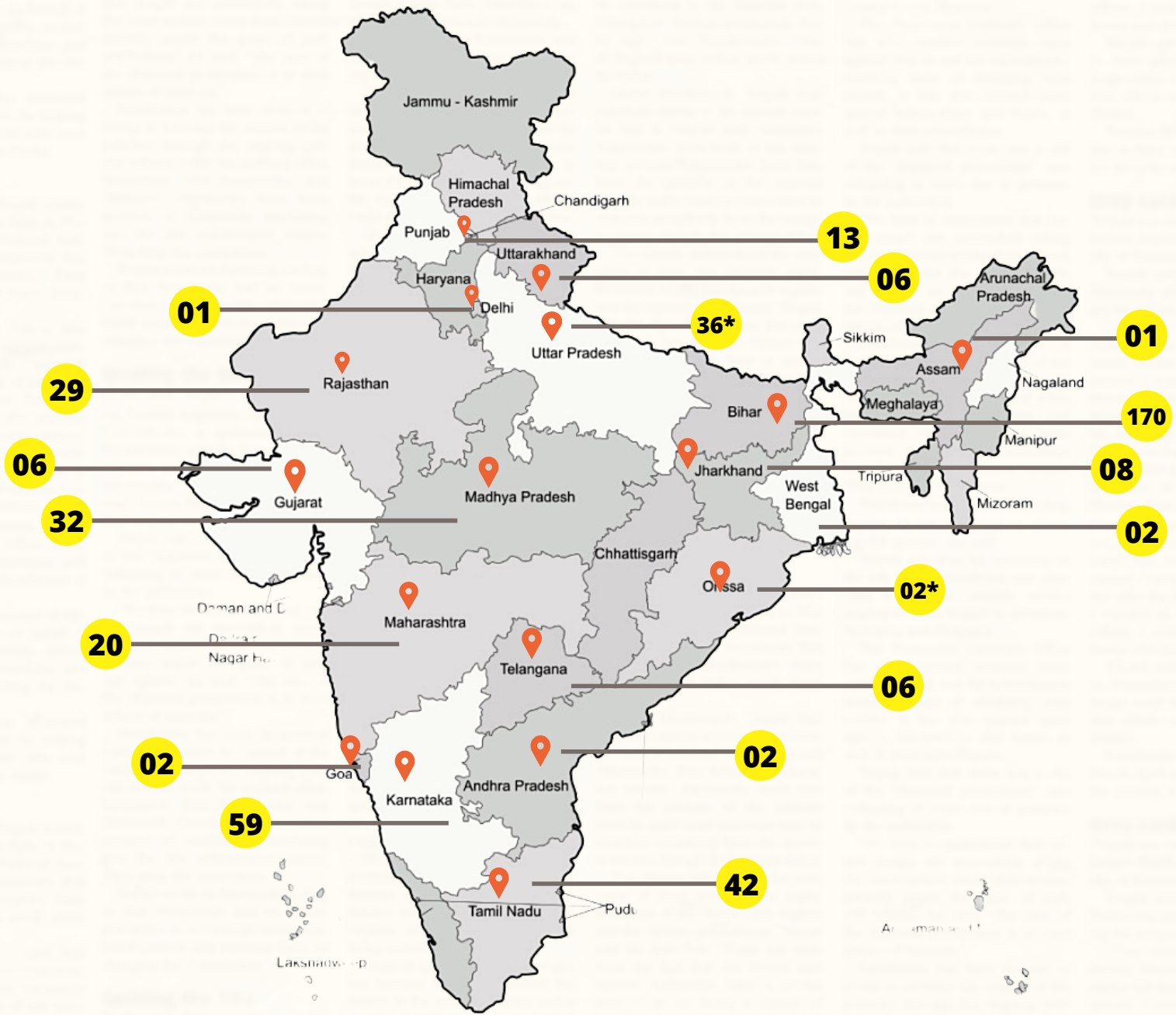
148

ADULTS

3*

MINORS

*Information on
minors unavailable in
some reports



No of victims rescued - 436

While we did come across cases of child marriages being reported in the media, we found only one case where a victim was trafficked for the purpose of marriage. This case was reported from Maharashtra. Prerana's Anti Trafficking Center team was subsequently involved in this case to provide assistance to the victim.

Only 5 cases reported the involvement of Anti-Human Trafficking Units. These cases were reported from Uttar Pradesh (Gorakhpur), Telangana (Rachakonda), Gujrat (Surat), and Maharashtra (Navi Mumbai).

Three cases mentioned the use of online media for soliciting (posting numbers by pimps online to get customers). Two of these cases were reported from Uttar Pradesh (Kanpur) and one from Telangana (Hyderabad). One case cited the use of Twitter to seek customers. In both cases that were reported from UP, FIRs were filed under ITPA. The case from Hyderabad also mentioned the use of online payments. In the case from Odisha (Puri), online media was being used to share intimate videos of trafficked women without their consent.

The reports do not mention the use of online space to lure, recruit, deceive the victims for the purpose of trafficking. This is not to say that the online medium may not have been used to traffic children, but that it is not being reported as such. Our pre-COVID experience has shown that the sex trade has moved to the online space, where platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media and instant messaging platforms are surreptitiously used to share information of girls and women with prospective customers.

The cases of child trafficking for labor were mainly reported as rescues in Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. In the cases reported from Uttar Pradesh, the AHTU was involved in the rescue operations. Many children were rescued through one operation. Eight rescues were reported in the news, inclusive of both male and female child victims.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

- In one case in Nagpur, the victim was lured to join the sex trade after she lost her job due to the lockdown measures.
- In a case of sale of infant, reported from Assam, a father sold his 15-day old child due to loss of income from COVID-19 lockdown measures. The mother was not involved in the case. The case was reported shortly after floods hit the region.
- A case of systemic sexual exploitation was also reported, where minor girls were being exploited in Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh. These girls had been employed to work in the illegal mines in the area and were being sexually exploited by the contractors. The lack of income in their families due to lockdown measures had significantly added to their vulnerabilities.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 doesn't take class, caste, or stature into consideration before infecting people but it does affect the poor and the marginalized in ways that go beyond their physical health. While the children from economically stable families may be vulnerable in the confines of their homes, to cyberbullying, and abuse from elders and parents, the children from marginalized backgrounds will also be vulnerable to hunger, malnutrition, conscription into the labor force, and trafficking for labor, sexual exploitation or marriage. It is the poor that would be more likely to fall through the cracks. Through our analysis, we observed that the vulnerability of children to be trafficked for labor remains high. COVID-19 has increased the vulnerability of economically weaker families, as highlighted by the reports. Lack of income for parents may lead to them pushing their children into exploitation. Thus, it is important to ensure that the recovery measures of COVID-19 do not leave children out of the picture.

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Know the Laws

Section 365 in The Indian Penal Code

365. Kidnapping or abducting with intent secretly and wrongfully to confine person.

Section 366 in The Indian Penal Code

366. Kidnapping, abducting or inducing woman to compel her marriage, etc.

Section 376 in The Indian Penal Code

376. Punishment for rape.

Section 366A in The Indian Penal Code

366A. Procurement of minor girl

Section 323 in The Indian Penal Code

323. Punishment for voluntarily causing hurt.

Section 420 in The Indian Penal Code

420. Cheating and dishonestly inducing delivery of property.

Section 419 in The Indian Penal Code

419. Punishment for cheating by personation

Section 468 in The Indian Penal Code

468. Forgery for purpose of cheating.

Section 471 in The Indian Penal Code.

471. Using as genuine a forged 1[document or electronic record]

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