



Human Trafficking as a Non-Traditional Security Threat in Afghanistan: Post 2021

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ABSTRACT

Afghanistan, a South Asian country is known to be a hotspot for trafficking not only drugs but also persons. There exist numerous factors contributing to the human trafficking phenomenon, including weak political culture, ethnic cleavages, economic instability, lack of basic services and security, and decades of war and internal conflicts. The situation worsened in August 2021, when Taliban 2.0 took over political control resorting to amplified human trafficking practices in the name of protecting socio-religious practices and cultural norms, and to deal with an increased economic insecurity. Even boys are made the easy targets by the Taliban to be involved in “Bacha Bazi”. This paper will be qualitative in nature with an attempt to use Conflict Theory, Structural Functional Theory and Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs theory to understand an increasing menace of Human Trafficking of women and children in Afghanistan. It also aims to explain how it can be curbed.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Children, Human Trafficking, Non-Traditional Security Threats, Women.

INTRODUCTION

Non-traditional security threats (NTSTs)¹ refer to challenges that go beyond the scope of conventional military concerns. Unlike traditional threats that typically involve state-centric conflicts and the use of armed forces, non-traditional threats are often transnational in nature and involve a wide range of issues that impact human and societal well-being. These threats have become increasingly prominent in the 21st century due to globalization, technological advancement, and environmental changes. Terrorism and cyber threats also fall under non-traditional security concerns. Unlike conventional warfare, these threats are often asymmetric, involving non-state actors who use unconventional tactics to achieve their objectives. NTSTs like human trafficking, drug smuggling, refugee crisis and transnational organized crime undermine governance, fuel corruption, and erode the rule of law. These issues transcend borders and require coordinated international responses. In conclusion, non-traditional security threats are complex and interconnected, demanding holistic and adaptive strategies. Recognizing these challenges as integral to national and global security is crucial for building a more stable and secure world. Traditional military power alone cannot address these evolving threats; a broadened understanding of security that prioritizes human welfare and international cooperation is more necessary than ever.

As per the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, trafficking is the process of recruiting, contracting, procuring or hiring a person for commercial sexual exploitation. It could be used for other types of violation such as developing pornographic material, sexual exploitation under the disguise of bar tenders, promoting sex tourism and even for exploitative labour with or without sexual abuse. In Afghanistan, two pressing nontraditional security threats are, trafficking of children and trafficking of women. These issues undermine human dignity, social stability, and national development. Unlike traditional security threats that are often external and militaristic, NTSTs emerge from within societies and are deeply rooted in social, cultural, economic, and political structures. (Dutta, 2021). In the Afghanistan's context, children and women trafficking are exacerbated by prolonged conflict, poverty, weak governance, institutional corruption, and entrenched

¹Non-traditional security threats are challenges to a state's security that come from non-military sources. These threats can include climate change, natural disasters, and transnational crime.

patriarchal norms. *Bacha Bazi*, which translates to “boy play,” involves the coercion or manipulation of young boys to dress as women and dance for older men, often followed by sexual abuse. This practice, although illegal under Afghan law, continues due to the complicity or inaction of local power holders, warlords, and even some members of law enforcement. It represents a severe violation of children’s rights and poses a serious internal threat to Afghanistan’s social and moral fabric. Similarly, women trafficking, often for forced marriage, domestic labor, or sexual exploitation, stems from deeply rooted gender inequality and economic desperation. Women, particularly those from rural or displaced communities, are highly vulnerable due to lack of education, employment opportunities, and legal protection.



(Source:https://www.123rf.com/photo_149304806_pastel-colored-labeled-provinces-map-of-asian-country-of-afghanistan.html)

These forms of trafficking not only destroy the lives of individuals but also contribute to broader instability. Trafficking networks often intersect

with other forms of organized crime, including drug trafficking and arms smuggling, further complicating the security landscape. Moreover, the persistence of children and women trafficking reflects the state's inability to enforce the rule of law, protect vulnerable populations, and uphold human rights—all essential components of state security and legitimacy. When citizens lose faith in the state's ability to protect them, it weakens social cohesion and trust in public institutions, potentially fueling unrest, radicalization and militancy (Dorrnsoro, 2005).

Forms of Human Trafficking Existing in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has historically been a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking. The primary form includes forced labor, sexual exploitation, child soldiering, and forced marriage.

- *Forced Labor*: Women and men are often subjected to forced labor in agriculture, construction, and mining sectors, both domestically and in neighboring countries like Iran and Pakistan. Debt bondage is a common mechanism where individuals are compelled to work to repay loans under exploitative conditions.
- *Sexual Exploitation*: Mainly young girls and women are trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation within Afghanistan and to countries such as Pakistan, Iran, and India. Illegal Practices like *bacha bazi* has become a deeply entrenched custom persisting across various regions of Afghanistan, notably in the northern, southern, and eastern provinces. This practice remains widespread particularly within Pashtun tribal areas of the southern provinces². Reports indicate that in these regions, *Bacha Bazi* is not only tolerated but also perpetuated by powerful figures, including members of the Taliban and local authorities (Dutta, 2021).
- *Child Soldiering*: Armed groups, including the Taliban, recruit children for combat and non-combat roles. Some children are coerced or abducted, while others join due to poverty or lack of alternatives.

² Historically, this practice has been prevalent among Uzbek communities in the north and Pashtun tribal areas in the south, where it is often regarded as a status symbol among influential men, including police officers and community leaders.

- *Forced Marriage:* Girls are often forced into marriages, sometimes to settle debts or disputes. These arrangements frequently lead to domestic servitude, abuse and sexual exploitation. Women and girls, especially those from impoverished backgrounds, are particularly vulnerable. There have been instances where women are trafficked by their own families or coerced into exploitative situations under the guise of marriage.

UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN AFGHANISTAN: THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Structural-Functional Theory

Human trafficking in Afghanistan can be analyzed particularly drawing the ideas of Talcott Parsons. Parsons viewed society as a system of composed of interdependent parts- such as family, education, government and religion that work together to maintain social stability (Steven Loyal & Siniša Malešević, 2021). Through the lens of Structural Functional theory, the persistence of children and women trafficking in Afghanistan is because of structural and functional lacunas. *Bacha bazi* and trafficking of women for forced marriage or labor, reflect deep structural dysfunctions in the Afghan society. Key social institutions such as the family, legal system, education, and economy are either weakened or complicit. Economic instability and poverty drive families to sell or give up children, while gender inequality and patriarchal norms marginalize women and deny them autonomy. In the absence of effective law enforcement and a functioning judiciary, traffickers often act with impunity. The normalization of such practices in some areas suggests that cultural institutions may also play a role in sustaining harmful traditions. From a structural functionalist perspective, these practices signify institutional failure and social imbalance. For society to regain equilibrium, reforms are needed to strengthen institutions—such as legal protections for children and women, education systems, and economic opportunities—while also challenging cultural norms that perpetuate exploitation. Only then can Afghan society function more cohesively and justly (Barry, 2011).

As per the data collected by conducting survey, majority are of the opinion that the economic collapse that followed the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 has been a major driver of the surge in human trafficking in Afghanistan. With the fall of the previous government and the withdrawal of international forces, Afghanistan faced an abrupt end to foreign aid, the freezing of overseas assets, and the imposition of international sanctions. These economic shocks crippled an already fragile economy, triggering mass unemployment, inflation, and widespread poverty. The humanitarian crisis

that followed created desperate conditions for millions of Afghans, many of whom found themselves without income, food, or access to basic services. In this environment of desperation and survival, human trafficking—particularly of children and women—became more prevalent, as families and individuals were pushed into exploitative arrangements to meet their basic needs (Dutta, 2021).

Poverty and unemployment have historically been key risk factors for human trafficking in Afghanistan, and post-2021, these issues have worsened dramatically. One must not ignore the interconnection between high unemployment rates and poverty wherein people are pushed to look for other means of money, leading to exploitation of young vulnerable population (Srivastava et.al 2025). With over 90% of the population now living below the poverty line, families in both rural and urban areas have been forced to make impossible decisions. In some cases, children have been sold into forced labor or early marriage simply to reduce the number of mouths to feed or to settle debts. Girls have been traded under the guise of marriage, often to older men in exchange for money or goods, essentially becoming victims of trafficking. Boys have been sent to work in dangerous conditions or smuggled into neighboring countries in search of jobs, only to end up in exploitative labor or servitude. The combination of economic need and the lack of regulatory oversight have made it easy for traffickers to prey on vulnerable families by promising employment, education, or safe passage abroad (Bergen, 2013).

International sanctions and the abrupt cut-off of foreign aid—once the backbone of Afghanistan’s public sector—have played a direct role in deepening these vulnerabilities. Prior to the Taliban’s takeover, foreign assistance accounted for around 75% of the Afghan government’s public spending. Its sudden withdrawal caused the collapse of public services, including education, healthcare, and welfare systems. Government salaries went unpaid, social support programs were halted, and NGOs that relied on international funding were forced to scale down or close altogether. These disruptions left millions of people without jobs or safety nets. As public sector workers lost their livelihoods and businesses shuttered due to the economic downturn, the informal and underground economies grew stronger, often linked to criminal networks—including those involved in trafficking (Brooke, 2013).

The situation is particularly dire for women, who have been disproportionately affected by both economic decline and Taliban-imposed restrictions on their rights and mobility. Women were banned from many types of employment, excluded from most public roles, and forced out of

education. This not only limited their ability to support themselves and their families but also increased their dependency and exposure to exploitative arrangements. In many cases, women have been trafficked under the guise of marriage, forced into domestic servitude, or lured into labor abroad with false promises. With no access to the justice system, no functioning institutions to protect them, and no financial independence, women and girls have become easy targets for traffickers operating both within Afghanistan and across borders (Dutta, 2021).

In addition, the collapse of banking systems and the restricted movement of funds has made it difficult for humanitarian organizations to respond effectively to the crisis. As a result, services for trafficking survivors, such as shelters, legal aid, and psychosocial support, have become even scarcer. International agencies, constrained by sanctions and a lack of diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, face immense challenges in delivering aid that directly reaches the most vulnerable populations. In the absence of these safety nets, trafficking becomes a more viable option for survival, both for traffickers seeking profit and for families forced to choose between life-threatening poverty and morally devastating alternatives (Dodge, 2011).

In conclusion, with resurgence of Taliban, many of the societal institutions, norms and values which are required for maintaining equilibrium and social cohesion have faltered, paving the way for illegal human trafficking activities.

Conflict Theory

In general, the basic premise of conflict theory is based on exploring nature and different dimensions of conflicts occurring in society. Unlike functionalists, which mainly focuses on establishing equilibrium in society by bringing each part of the society to work together to promote harmony and stability, social conflict theorists focus on the constant conflict over limited resources.³ Conflict theorists view unequal distribution of resources and power as the central components of conflict theory. For them, it is power that plays a key role in defining social relations and social structure in society. One of the prominent works, “The functions of the Social Conflict” by an eminent sociologist, Lewis Coser, argues that conflicts are persistent and

³ The meaning of resources would mean different to different theorists. But conflict theorists generally align with the Weberian classification of resources i.e. class, status and power.

inherent in social relationships in our daily lives (Nepstad, 2005). The level of conflict is proportional to the level of violence. In Coser's words, "If people perceive conflicts as a means to achieving clearly expressed rational goals, then conflict will tend to be less violent...two factors can produce violent conflicts- emotional involvement and transcendent goals. The more involved we are with a group, the greater is our emotional involvement and the greater the likelihood of violent conflict if our group is threatened" (Allan, 2006).

He further argues that there are functional consequences of conflict occurring at two levels i.e. internal and external. On the one hand, if the conflict is with the outside groups, it will increase cohesiveness, conformity and commitment within/between the internal groups (Budiman, 2023). As the group faces external conflict, it solidifies the group boundaries with defined yet different behaviors, values and cultural symbols. It results in the inclusion and exclusion process with a clear-cut demarcation of us v/s them. On the other hand, at the internal level, if frequent conflict emerges between or among various groups and governmental authority, it results in the release of bitterness through the safety valve in the form of creation of new norms and laws defining social relations. This does not suggest that there is functional utility for all internal conflicts. Those internal conflicts which question the basic assumption of the fundamental basis of the group existence result in dysfunctional conflict.

In fact, Afghanistan appears to be a unique case to be fitted into Coserian analysis, in which external conflict and group/s became integral part of the social structure. In the aftermath of 9/11, US-led war on terror coalition group had a clear-cut necessary function to exist. However, US led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and dismantling of the Taliban regime outturned into a long-term presence of foreign forces on the Afghan soil contributing to increased internal group solidarity. It resulted in the reassertion of Taliban's group consciousness, separate identity and a distinct value system derived from the Sharia law. Taliban's insistence on being recognized as separate and socio-culturally distinctive led to the 20-year odd long war against the external forces contributing to the political instability, weak economy and socio-culturally fractured society in the country. Such a chaotic situation created a vacuum to be exploited by the organised crime groups including human traffickers. Eventually, it also enabled the resurging Taliban group to accommodate other militant groups based on religious ideology vis-a-vis external power. A sense of functionality about the sacredness of the group was generated. Recently, it manifested with the ultra-conservative extremist group coming back to power in August 2021.

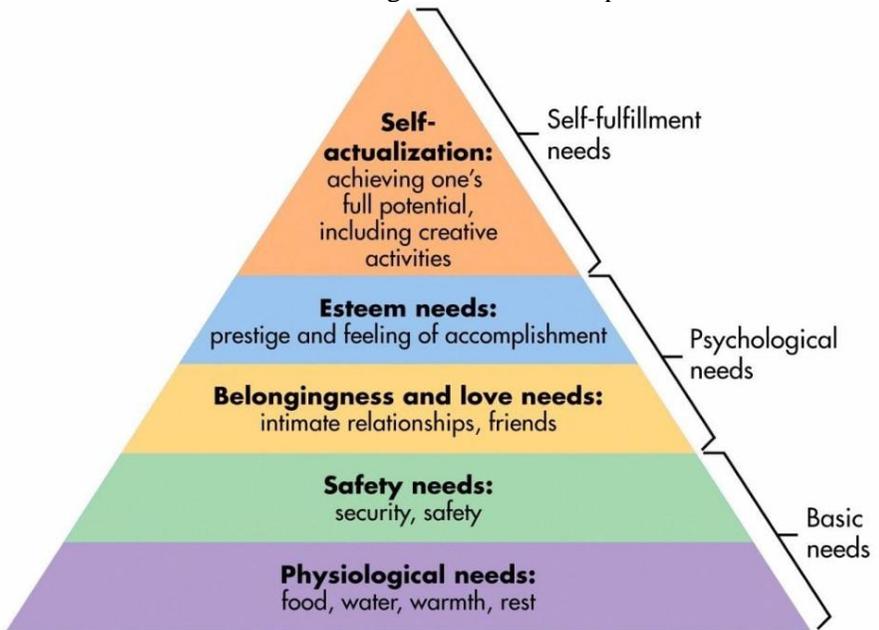
At the internal level, with the coming of radical Sunni Taliban 2.0 to political helm, the role of groups including international organisations and NGOs that aim to promote democracy and egalitarian society-propagating for the protection of rights of minorities including women and children has resulted in contradiction with the predominant ultra-conservative Sunni Islamist values defined by the Taliban. Afghanistan's governance and legal structure have altered following the Taliban's return, fundamentally challenging the conventional rule of law principles. Taliban's governance model with extreme personalized interpretation of Islamic law has served as a mechanism for power consolidation, legitimization and social control, resulting in a conflict where power imbalance is extreme and oppressive. The oppressed including trafficked women and children have no safety valve to express their concerns. According to the U.S Department of State, 2023 trafficking in Persons Report: Afghanistan, Taliban's actions did not confirm any law enforcement mechanisms to address the concerns of the "other group/sections" of the Afghan society. Rather, the Taliban's implementation of self-styled Sharia based rules has created an environment where exploitation of vulnerable population continues. For instance, Taliban categorically banned all NGOs employing women in Afghanistan which has severely hindered the ability of these organizations to provide essential support and protection to trafficked victims, leading to an increased vulnerability to labour or sex trafficking (Farzan, 2022).

Hence, as per Coser's model, in Afghanistan, the external conflict produced an increased sense of group consciousness, solidarity and a high network density group i.e. predominance of a Pashtun, ultra conservative Sunni Islamist group in the social structure. At the internal level, Taliban's rigidity has resulted not only in political instability, weak institutions, poverty, gender inequality, ineffective law enforcement but has affected the entire structure of the Afghan society with extreme power imbalance. It has further ethnically fragmented the Afghan society and oppressed/suppressed vulnerable sections, thereby creating a deep void to be filled by non-state actors like human traffickers.

Maslow Hierarchy of Needs Theory

Wants are instinctive to human nature which human beings strive to fulfil for their satisfaction. A psychologist, Abraham Harold Maslow advocated a theory of Human motivation based on a five-tier hierarchical model of human needs within a pyramid. It follows a bottom-up approach, having a largest base comprising of the most basic and fundamental needs and at the top- need for self-actualization (McLeod, 2024). According to Maslow,

as human needs are not constant but continuously growing, they can be well arranged based on their importance into a hierarchical structure⁴. Food, water, shelter and clothing are the primary basic needs of any individual, forming the base of the pyramid. Once these primary needs are fulfilled, then those on second level of hierarchy will emerge and demand satisfaction. This process of fulfillment of needs and satisfaction derived from fulfilling it will continue till the peak is reached i.e. higher level psychological and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Climbing up a needs' fulfillment pyramidal ladder provides motivation as it is seen with human growth and development.



Source: Saul Mcleod (2024), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model provides an understanding of causal factors in contributing to human trafficking in Afghanistan. With the return of Islamist militant group to power in Afghanistan in 2021, the society's socio-cultural, economic and political fault lines have come to the fore highlighting the struggles of most of the Afghan population to fulfill their basic needs. With the exclusionary and centralized Taliban rule, the Afghan

⁴ The hierarchy includes physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs.

economy which has mainly been dependent on foreign aid and organized crime activities like poppy cultivation further faced severe economic mismanagement resulting in more than 90 percent Afghans reeling under poverty and food insecurity (Brown, 2024). Economic stagnation and rising level of insecurity has left many Afghans without the fulfillment of the basic needs (Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan Afghanistan, 2025). Taliban resurgence has isolated Afghanistan from the global economy leaving around 400,000 to 500,000 Afghans without jobs underlined by “gender apartheid” (ibid) highlighting the lack of basic security for many of the Afghans and the increased vulnerability of women and children at the hands of human traffickers.

The fear of the authoritarian Taliban rule and larger scale displacement of the Afghans have further added pressure on the uneven/unequal societal structure. Around 800,000 Afghans⁵ have travelled back to Afghanistan since November 2024, amidst rising unemployment, dysfunctional healthcare infrastructure and denial of basic rights and opportunities (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Such uncertainties provide good opportunities to human traffickers to exploit the deteriorating security situation in the name of providing economic and social empowerment. This impacts the psychological well-being of the vulnerable sections, wherein psychological needs are not met, and most of them are left reeling under depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (Sheikh, 2021). As the vulnerable sections including trafficked women and children struggle to fulfill their basic needs in a rigid disintegrated social structure, their self-worth and self-esteem is questioned. For vulnerable groups, reaching the top of the pyramid in terms of self-actualization becomes not only a distant but an impossible reality.

FROM CONFLICT TO CRISIS: TRACING THE HISTORY OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan’s long history of conflict, poverty, and weak governance has made it a persistent hotspot for human trafficking, both as a source and a transit country. For decades, the country has struggled with internal

⁵This is in addition to the three million displaced by decade’s long conflict and adding to it- 700,000 Afghans internally displaced. LSE Press (2023), “Human Trafficking in Afghanistan- What Hope for Change?”, [Human Trafficking in Afghanistan – What Hope for Change? | WHD2023 - LSE Press](#)

instability, beginning with the Soviet invasion in 1979, followed by civil wars, the rise of the Taliban, and the prolonged insurgency and occupation that followed the U.S.-led intervention in 2001. These events severely damaged Afghanistan's social, economic, and institutional structures, creating fertile ground for organized crime, including human trafficking networks. The breakdown of law enforcement and judicial systems allowed traffickers to operate with near impunity, while widespread poverty and displacement made large segments of the population vulnerable to exploitation. In the absence of effective governance, traffickers have taken advantage of the porous borders with Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia to move victims across regions, often for forced labor, sexual exploitation, child soldiering, and domestic servitude (Rubin, 1992).

One of the most disturbing forms of human trafficking in Afghanistan has been the exploitation of children and women. Many boys have been trafficked to work as child laborers in harsh conditions such as brick kilns, carpet weaving factories, or agricultural fields, often under systems of debt bondage. An even more insidious practice has been *bacha bazi*, wherein the young boys more often from impoverished families, are coerced into the exploitative practices. Despite being criminalized, this practice persisted in several parts of the country, with reports of complicity or inaction by local authorities and influential figures. Girls have been trafficked for both forced labor and sexual exploitation, as well as through forced child marriages, often as a means for families to resolve debt, disputes, or tribal obligations. These girls are frequently subjected to violence and lifelong servitude, stripped of their basic rights and freedoms (Rubin, 1992).

Afghanistan's role as a transit route in regional human trafficking has also been significant. Due to its geographical location and limited border enforcement, traffickers have moved people from South and Central Asia through Afghanistan into Iran, Pakistan, and the Gulf states. Many Afghans seeking better economic opportunities or fleeing violence were deceived by traffickers posing as agents of legal migration. Instead, they were sold into exploitative labor or prostitution rings abroad, particularly in Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and beyond. Migrant smuggling often blurred into human trafficking, especially for women and unaccompanied minors, who were at greater risk of being coerced or abused. Women refugees and internally displaced persons, already stripped of legal protections and family support, were easy targets for traffickers who promised employment or safety.

Government efforts to address trafficking prior to 2021 were inconsistent and often ineffective. Although Afghanistan passed anti-trafficking laws and joined international agreements, the enforcement of these

laws was undermined by corruption, lack of training, and poor institutional coordination. Victims were sometimes treated as criminals or undocumented migrants, rather than as people in need of protection and rehabilitation. Social stigma, especially against victims of sexual exploitation, further discouraged survivors from seeking help, while support services like shelters and legal aid were scarce and underfunded.

In conclusion, Afghanistan's historical conditions—marked by conflict, poverty, cultural practices, and institutional weakness—have long made it a fertile ground for human trafficking. The interconnection of domestic vulnerabilities and international trafficking routes has resulted in widespread exploitation that continues to affect thousands of Afghans, especially women and children. Understanding this history is essential to forming policies and strategies aimed at dismantling the systemic drivers of trafficking in the country.

THE HUMAN COST OF TRAFFICKING AND GENDERED OPPRESSION: TALIBAN 2.0

The return of the Taliban 2.0 to power in August 2021 significantly altered Afghanistan's political, legal, and institutional landscape, with profound consequences for the country's ability to combat human trafficking. One of the most immediate impacts was the collapse of the fragile democratic governance structures that had been slowly built over the previous two decades with international support. The fall of the Afghan Republic brought an abrupt halt to the development and enforcement of anti-trafficking legislation, victim protection programs, and civil society initiatives. Legal frameworks that had previously aligned—at least in principle—with international anti-trafficking standards were suspended, dismantled, or rendered ineffective under Taliban rule. Although the Taliban have claimed to support Islamic principles of justice, they have yet to establish a transparent or codified legal system that adequately addresses complex human rights violations such as trafficking. The group's strict interpretation of Sharia law, coupled with their resistance to international human rights norms, has created a legal vacuum in which traffickers can operate with relative impunity (Rubin, 1992).

The absence of a functioning legal system has had devastating consequences for victims of trafficking. Institutions that once supported victim identification, prosecution of traffickers, and the reintegration of survivors have either ceased operations or drastically scaled back due to a combination of funding cuts, security concerns, and ideological suppression. Key governmental bodies—such as the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which

played a crucial role in addressing gender-based violence and trafficking—were abolished or replaced with Taliban-controlled alternatives that lack expertise, resources, and legitimacy. Similarly, courts and law enforcement agencies have been repopulated with Taliban loyalists, many of whom are untrained, ideologically rigid, or complicit in the abuse of vulnerable populations. Corruption and favoritism, already problematic under the previous regime, have worsened under the current administration, allowing trafficking networks to flourish with little fear of legal consequence (Rashid, 2008).

Weakened state institutions have also led to a sharp decline in victim reporting and access to justice. Women and girls, who are among the most at-risk groups for trafficking, face heightened barriers under Taliban rule. Restrictions on their movement, education, and employment have not only increased their economic dependency but also isolated them from social services and support networks. This isolation has made it easier for traffickers to exploit them, whether through forced marriage, domestic servitude, or sexual exploitation. With few legal avenues for recourse and an environment that punishes rather than protects victims, survivors of trafficking are often forced into silence or re-traumatization. Human rights organizations and shelters that once provided refuge for victims—particularly women fleeing forced marriage or sexual abuse—have been forced to close or go underground, further shrinking the already limited safety net (Rashid, 2002).

In rural and conflict-affected areas, where the Taliban's control is strongest and oversight weakest, local commanders and warlords often act with unchecked authority. Reports have emerged of Taliban members engaging in forced marriages with girls, abducting women under the guise of "moral correction," or demanding wives from families as part of tribal negotiations or as retribution and use coerced labor to support their logistical and military needs. Such practices mirror forms of human trafficking but are often shielded by religious or cultural justifications, making it nearly impossible to challenge them legally or socially. Additionally, the economic crisis triggered by the Taliban's return—exacerbated by international sanctions, frozen assets, and the withdrawal of foreign aid—has pushed more families into desperation (Rashid, 2002).

In summary, the Taliban's return to power has significantly undermined Afghanistan's capacity to combat human trafficking, which has rather increased since 2021, reflects a surge in trafficking-related practices driven by economic collapse and societal breakdown. The dismantling of legal frameworks, the collapse of protective institutions, and the intensification of socio-economic pressures has created necessary conditions

for the resurgence of trafficking. With little oversight, minimal international engagement, and a ruling regime indifferent—or in some cases, complicit—to the plight of victims, Afghanistan remains a high-risk environment where human trafficking can thrive largely unchecked.

LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

Afghanistan, a state riven with decades of conflict, violence and large-scale displacement has a fragmented infrastructure and a disrupted social protection system (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs Martyr and Disable, 2004). Afghanistan acts as a source, transit and destination country for men, women and children subjected to forced labor and trafficking for sexual exploitation has worsened the conditions of its vulnerable groups (US Department of State 2014). Pre-2021 government of Afghanistan tried to make irregular efforts to deal with the menace of trafficking but were inadequate to not comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. A few efforts included- enactment of Afghanistan's 2008 Law Countering Abduction and Human Trafficking/Smuggling, along with Article 516 of the penal code which prohibits many, but not all, forms of human trafficking (Official Gazette No. 952, 2008). It was amended in January 2017 to recognize *Bacha Bazi* as children's trafficking, which was not the case of 2008 (Penal Code, 2017). Also, in order to strengthen and uplift women and children, whose conditions deteriorated to unprecedented levels due conflict, pre 2021 government of Afghanistan with the support of international agencies⁶ adopted National Action Plan for Children 'at-risk' in November 2004 and Afghanistan National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in June 2015 (Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs Martyr and Disable, 2004; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). Many are of the view that the response of the government to human trafficking was not sufficient to hold traffickers accountable for their crimes.

The situation worsened with the resurgence of Taliban in 2021, leaving vulnerable sections at the mercy of the ultra-conservative Islamist

⁶ Afghanistan remains a signatory to several international conventions aimed at addressing human trafficking. These include the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC)⁶ and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (also known as the Palermo Protocol). Afghanistan's commitments under these frameworks oblige it to take preventive measures, criminalize trafficking, protect victims, and cooperate with other countries.

group. It is reported that Taliban's lack of committed response to human trafficking was highlighted by rising number of intermixing of human trafficking cases with other criminal cases; lack of standard procedures for preliminary investigation, victim identification and collecting evidence; and forcing all shelters run by international organisations to shut down⁷ (Kandiwal, 2018). US Department of State, 2024 Trafficking in Persons report clearly stated that the Taliban did not make any efforts to investigate, prosecute or convict individuals accused of illegal human trafficking activities. Taliban categorically mentioned of reviewing all existing criminal laws in accordance with Sharia, but no progress has been made on the same. They also did not make any serious effort in framing robust anti-human trafficking framework and did not carry out any enforcement measures. Rather, they use trafficked children for combat roles (US Department of State, 2024).

Hence, there is no denial of the fact that following the Taliban's return to power, implementation of anti-trafficking laws has been inconsistent due to weakened institutional capacity, reduced international support, and overall instability. Many governmental bodies responsible for enforcing anti-trafficking measures have been disrupted or dissolved, leaving a gap in enforcement and victim protection. Furthermore, the current administration's approach to human rights and legal reform has raised concerns about its willingness and ability to combat trafficking effectively, especially in cases involving women and children (Nicoll, 2011).

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study highlight a deeply entrenched relationship between organised crime like human trafficking (mainly of children and women), insecurity, fragmented social structure, political instability, crippling economy, and weak infrastructure in Afghanistan. The interconnected dynamics is intricately tied to the broader context of state failure that has worsened since the withdrawal of international forces and the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Qualitative data collected from interviews, focus group discussions, and observational studies reveal that the state's inability to deliver basic services, enforce the rule of law, and manage economic resources has created fertile ground for criminal enterprises. In fact, majority of the respondents have reinforced the predominance of economic factors i.e. weak and fractured economy resulting in the recent spike in human

⁷ It was due to the regressive policies of the Taliban and reduced international support.

trafficking of women and children. In the vacuum left by the collapse of formal state institutions, widespread corruption has flourished, particularly within law enforcement agencies. Several participants noted that the Taliban regime, rather than curbing criminality, has often been complicit in it. Reports suggest that Taliban cadres frequently exploit their authority for personal gratification by exploiting vulnerable sections by resorting to an illegal human trafficking means. Their abuses are further exacerbated by the misuse of armed power and the abrupt cessation of foreign aid, which has plunged vast sections of the population into extreme poverty. Desperation for survival has driven many families to either become victims of or complicit in trafficking networks.

Secondary sources, including reports from Human Rights Watch, reinforce these observations, documenting numerous instances of administrative apathy and corruption. This has severely undermined public trust in state institutions, creating a landscape in which insecurity and instability becomes both a cause and consequence of organised crime. The failure of the state to respond to local grievances has led to a sense of hopelessness and fear, leaving communities vulnerable to coercion and exploitation. Interviews conducted during the study indicated that the absence of an effective governing structure has enabled insurgent and criminal groups to manipulate socio-economic vulnerabilities, recruiting from among the most marginalized—particularly women and children. These findings align with Rotberg's (2004) theory of state failure, which posits that when a state loses the capacity or will to perform essential governance functions, non-state actors' step in, often intensifying instability and violence.

The economic implications of this insecurity are significant. Organised crime, far from being a symptom, is a driver of persistent poverty, as it perpetuates cycles of exploitation and deprives communities of economic opportunities. Trafficking of women and children serves both as a revenue source for criminal networks and a mechanism of social control. The research thus illustrates how the collapse of governance structures in Afghanistan has enabled the symbiosis between crime, poverty, and human rights abuses. The power vacuum created by the Taliban's administrative inefficiencies and ethical lapses has allowed these illicit practices to flourish unchecked, entrenching poverty and destabilizing entire regions. Ultimately, this study underscores the urgent need for international attention, robust human rights monitoring, and context-specific policy interventions to disrupt these deeply embedded cycles of exploitation.

In conclusion, trafficking of children and women in Afghanistan is not merely a social issue—it is a serious non-traditional security threat that

requires urgent attention from both national and international actors. In order to effectively deal with the menace of human trafficking in Afghanistan, the state must use 4 P's approach i.e. Prevent, Protect, Prosecute and Partnership. It focuses on preparing Afghan institutions to effectively prosecute traffickers, protect victims and improve regional coordination to combat both internal and cross border trafficking. There is a need for better implementation of anti-trafficking legislation such as 2017 law which combats crimes of trafficking in Persons and smuggling of migrants, and criminalizes labour and sex trafficking, along with a proactive role of the parliamentarians.

Moreover combating human trafficking of women and children in Afghanistan involves not just punitive measures but structural changes, capacity-building programs, and a long-term commitment to justice, equality, and human dignity, which will eventually turn Afghanistan into a secure and an inclusive state/society for all its citizens. The Yokohama Strategy (1994)⁸ and Plan of Action for a Safer World and the Sendai Framework (2015–2030)⁹ for Disaster Risk Reduction are both key international frameworks related to disaster risk reduction, but they do not directly focus on human trafficking. However, their principles can be applied to combat trafficking, especially in the context of disasters and humanitarian crises.

⁸Developed at the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in Yokohama, Japan in 1994, it focuses on disaster risk management, resilience, and preparedness; it recognizes the vulnerability of affected populations, which can include displaced individuals at risk of trafficking.

⁹Adopted at the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan and It Aims to reduce disaster risks, protect livelihoods, and build resilience. It Acknowledges that disasters and conflicts increases vulnerabilities, including the risk of human trafficking as it encourages international cooperation to protect displaced people from exploitation.

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