Exploring the Invisible Trade: A Case Study of an NGO's Anti-Trafficking Efforts and Challenges in Assam's Cachar District

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Abstract: Human trafficking has become a global issue, affecting millions of individuals, and forcing them to labour, sex, and other forms of abuse. In India, the Cachar district of Assam has emerged as a critical hotspot for trafficking, functioning as both a source and a destination due to its economic vulnerabilities, open borders, and socio-cultural disparities. This study examines the work of an NGO which is at the forefront of anti-trafficking efforts in the district. Using focus group discussions and interviews, the study explores the NGO's efforts and its challenges in delivering anti- trafficking services. Findings reveal the NGO's holistic approach, including raising awareness, providing counselling, vocational training, and collaborating with governmental and non-governmental entities, covering prevention, rescue, rehabilitation, restoration, and reintegration in addressing the multifaceted nature of trafficking. Despite these commendable efforts, the organisation experiences significant barriers, including inadequate funding, lack of support, limited cooperation from law enforcement and government agencies, and social stigma. These challenges hinder the effective delivery of services. This study underscores the need for a robust, multi-stakeholder approach that fosters collaboration between NGOs, government agencies, and local communities. It recommends strengthening local and institutional cooperation, expanding funding and resources, enhancing trauma-informed intervention, and promoting community engagement.

Keywords: Human trafficking; Efforts; Challenges; NGO; Cachar

1. Introduction

The third largest organized crime is human trafficking, with an estimated 20.9 million adults and children having been trafficked and sold worldwide [1]. About 25 million individuals globally are victims of human trafficking, of which 20.1 million are victims of forced labour, and victims of sex trafficking constitute 4.8 million, according to the Report on Global Estimates of Modern Slavery, Forced Labour, and Forced Marriage [2]. Human trafficking in India has emerged as a critical concern. The country is recognized as the source, destination, and transit point [3]. It has now been identified as a significant hotspot with approximately 15.3 million cases, of which India accounts for 11.1 million victims [4]. As per the report of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, a total of 19,223 women and children were victims of trafficking in 2016, compared to 15,448 in 2015 [5]. As per the ILO (2022), around 7,000 instances of human trafficking were reported in India as of 2021 [6].

According to the 2023 trafficking in Persons Report, in India, there are 5934 confirmed trafficking victims and 753 potential victims, of which 3885 were exploited in labour trafficking, including 667 in bonded labour, while 2049 were subjected to sex trafficking. Out

of this, approximately 56 % are adults, 44% are children, and the gender distribution is 62% female to 38% male [7]. The majority of trafficking cases involved forced labour and sexual exploitation [2]. Apart from that, instances of human trafficking in India have also been reported for purposes like child soldiering, coerced begging, and organ trafficking [8], and for working as unpaid domestic workers or engaging in similar activities [9]. People affected by human trafficking, irrespective of their gender and age, are the most mistreated and marginalised individuals in society [10]. They are often subjected to physical and/or sexual violence and other forms of abuse, such as threats and the use of alcohol and drugs forcefully, with higher rates among women and girls [11], which eventually makes them suffer physically, mentally, or sexually. [12]. Studies have shown evidence of sexually transmitted diseases [13, 14], head injuries, broken bones and mental health problems [15] as outcomes of the issue. Women and children of marginalized castes, followed by social groups, are often offered the promises of job prospects for improving living conditions and are subsequently trafficked by agents. The entire process of trafficking likely becomes more convenient for traffickers in an environment characterized by ineffective law enforcement and economic struggles. This frequently occurs when individuals seek a better life in different locations. Most human trafficking victims come from impoverished, marginalized, or disadvantaged backgrounds [16]. Human trafficking occurs for various reasons worldwide, but the underlying causes are similar across countries: poverty, lack of employment, forced migration, and the pursuit of an improved life, along with the devaluation of women and children and high demand for low-cost labor in the construction, agriculture sector, mining sectors, profits, militarism, generalized violence or civil unrest, terrorism, war, weak policies, and corruption, etc. inside the country and at the international level [3,17,18]

Human trafficking has become a complicated challenge to all communities, affecting individuals, particularly women and children. This crime is committed not only by organized criminal groups, but also citizens themselves are equally participants in this illegal activity [19]. They operate within organized networks, often collaborating with other criminal enterprises [20]. Their operation is characterised by adaptability utilizing various methods to evade law enforcement [21]. They are motivated by profit, exploiting vulnerable individuals for financial gain, and they exhibit a lack of empathy, with some studies suggesting psychopathic traits may be present [22]. Research highlights a lack of comprehensive studies on traffickers, their characteristics, and operational networks. Existing literature emphasises the need for a deeper understanding of traffickers' motivations and relationships with victims, which is crucial for developing effective preventive strategies [20]. Misrepresentation of trafficking issues can lead to victim hierarchy and secondary victimisation [23].

Nana Derby (2024) presents a comprehensive framework encompassing various dimensions, including economic, social, and structural factors, to understand the complexities of the issue. The Institutional Anomie theory posits that economic globalization fosters human trafficking by increasing inequality and corruption at local levels. Migration Systems Theory explains how migration flows are interconnected with trafficking, highlighting the role of global economic policies in shaping these dynamics [24]. This suggests that trafficking is largely framed as an issue of illegal migration or prostitution. Vidushy (2016) also argues that this perspective prioritized state security over human security and overlooks the underlying cause of trafficking as well as the vulnerabilities of trafficked individuals [25].

Social activists, non-government organisations, and government organisations actively engage in numerous activities to combat challenges, focusing more on imparting education and training to safeguard the vulnerable section of society. The NCRB data of 2015 highlighted the state of Assam as one of the leading trafficking hubs in the country, reporting 1494 cases, 22% of the total incidents of trafficking documented in India. The state has also reported the highest number of child trafficking cases at 1317, presenting 38% of the national total [26]. Assam reported 203 cases of human trafficking, ranking third in the country after Telangana (347) and Maharashtra (320) [27]. To address the issue of trafficking more stringently, Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) have been established by the government of Assam. These units address trafficking cases in collaboration with NGOs, the Social Welfare Department, the Health Department, the Labour Department, and Village Defence Parties in different districts of Assam, including the Cachar district [28].

Despite continuous efforts, issues like poverty, limited access to education, and weak law enforcement challenge the fight against human trafficking in Assam, which requires a multifaceted approach like strengthening law enforcement, generating community awareness, and improving socio-economic conditions to address human trafficking. The paper presents a detailed analysis of an NGO instrumental in combating human trafficking in the Cachar District of Assam. It will shed light on the efforts undertaken by the NGO and the challenges they face in providing anti-trafficking services in the district.

The study was conducted in the oldest district of Assam, i.e., Cachar, situated in the southernmost part of the region. Borail and Jayantia hills border the district's north side, Manipur in the east, and neighbouring districts- Hailakandi and Karimganj in the west, and Mizoram in the south. Cachar district has become a hotspot for various crimes, with frequent news reports highlighting its growing issues. It has been identified as both the source and destination for human trafficking [28]. Local NGO of the district working in this area attributed the reason to its proximity to Myanmar and Bangladesh. Women and children from Cachar are trafficked to different states across the country; meanwhile, other districts in Assam, including Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Dalgaon, Nagaon, and Baksa, often serve as the primary sources for trafficking [29]. Other regions like Cooch Behar and West Bengal are also implicated, while international trafficking links Cachar to Nepal, as per the staff's perspective. Discussion with the organisation's staff also reveals that many trafficking cases remain unreported, and the perpetrators frequently evade justice. Additionally, recurrent flooding in Cachar has significantly disrupted food security and livelihoods, creating economic instability. Trafficking victims, therefore, are often lured with job offers and thus fall into the trap. This hardship often forces young women and girls to leave their homes in search of financial security, making them vulnerable to traffickers. School dropouts and children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those of poor farmers or daily wage earners, are found to be more vulnerable. It is further explored through the interaction of the NGO functionaries, mainly because of online recruitment in modelling, acting, or the hospitality sector, they are falling prey to trafficking. Once they reach their destination, they are forced into exploitation. Some are locked away, threatened, or drugged to keep them compliant. They often feel trapped, ashamed, and afraid to seek help. Romantic manipulation is another reason for trafficking, where traffickers pretend to be a loving boyfriend or caring partner. He builds trust, buys gifts, and isolates the girl from friends and family. Eventually, the boy pressures her to 'help' him by

selling sex or doing favours. In turn, if the girl resists, the boy uses emotional abuse, threats, or violence. Rape is a control method used in the process of trafficking. Rape is often used early on to 'break' the victim emotionally and physically, which creates fear, shame, and dependence on the trafficker. Repeated assaults leave the girl traumatised and become easy to control. In some cases, it has filmed or photographed girls for blackmail purposes when girls stop resisting because of fear or psychological trauma. Kidnapping is another form used in trafficking where girls are kidnapped from their homes or the streets, which is the standard way to engage a girl in prostitution. They are often moved quickly across borders or into isolated locations. It has been explored during the conversation with the functionaries that these days, mainly due to mobile phones, boys and girls quickly come to know each other, and after building trust, they arrange meetings and plan to run away to get married. Once the girl runs out of the family and gets married, the boy starts blackmailing, and that person runs away, leaving her alone. The common locations for traffickers to target victims include roadsides, temples, grocery shops, school premises, and other public spaces.

2. Materials and Methods

The author reviewed existing literature to build a theoretical framework regarding human trafficking and its processes. This study used a qualitative case study approach to investigate the efforts and challenges related to human trafficking by a chosen NGO in Cachar District, Assam. The case study method was selected to comprehensively understand the contextual factors, operational difficulties, and community interactions associated with the NGO's operations. The research sought to explore the visible efforts and the unseen challenges encountered by practitioners who combat trafficking. A purposive sampling method was employed to identify one local NGO actively involved in anti-human trafficking initiatives in Cachar for over five years. Selection criteria included: a verified history of anti-trafficking actions, active engagement with rescued survivors, collaboration with government or law enforcement entities, and a willingness to participate in the research. The name of the selected NGO has been anonymized in this paper to maintain ethical integrity and ensure confidentiality. The study participants consisted of NGO personnel and survivors living in the organisation's shelter home (comprising six NGO staff members, including an outreach worker, a program coordinator, and a case manager, along with five trafficking survivors who had benefited from the NGO's rehabilitation services). The semi-structured interview tool examined respondents' experiences, their views on trafficking trends, the NGO's initiatives, and primary challenges faced. Before data collection, ethical approval was secured from both the organization and the trafficking survivors. All interviews were translated into English and presented in descriptive narratives. This study focused on a single NGO, which constrained the potential for generalization.

The select non-government organization started its journey for the welfare and development of society way back in 2003 with a commitment to working for the weaker sections of society in the city of Silchar, Assam. Its objectives include: a) To provide vocational training to backwards classes for self-employment; b) Development of slum areas, provision for safe drinking water and sanitation; c) Working women's hostel and a care centre for babies; d) Crèches for children of working mothers and many more. The organization is registered

under the Indian Societies Registration Act XXI of 1860, the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act 1976, Section 12A & 80G of the Income Tax Act 1961. The organization runs multiple projects to meet its objectives, including the anti-trafficking project under the Ujjawala scheme. Today, the Ujjawala Scheme has been merged with Swadhar Greh for administrative purposes, and together, they are known as 'Shakti Sadan' of the Ministry of Women and Child Development. Both schemes aimed at creating a safe and enabling environment for women in distress, including trafficked women, thereby giving them the strength to overcome their difficult circumstances and make a fresh start [29]. Beyond providing shelter, food, and clothing, the organization follows a holistic approach to empowerment, offering counselling, healthcare, vocational training, and financial literacy. Through personalized counselling, residents confront and conquer the root causes of their circumstances, while primary healthcare services ensure their physical well-being. Vocational training programs equip them with essential skills, fostering self-sufficiency and enhancing employability. Moreover, financial literacy initiatives empower residents to manage their finances wisely, promoting independence and resilience.

This study primarily relied on data collected through interviews and focus group discussions. This reflects the potential influence of group dynamics. This is tackled by ensuring confidentiality among interviewees, and conducted in a safe environment to help participants feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and experiences.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Anti-trafficking Efforts Undertaken by the NGO

The organisation operates anti-trafficking activities under Ujjwala, which aims to prevent the trafficking of women and children from commercial exploitation, facilitate the rescue of victims, extend immediate and long-term rehabilitation services, support the victims with reintegration into their families and society at large, and assist in the repatriation of cross-border victims to their country of origin. The scheme comprises the following components: Prevention, Rescue, Rehabilitation, Reintegration, and Repatriation (25). Under each element, the organization puts in different efforts, as found from the interview

3.1.1. Prevention

Human trafficking is severe in the city. One reason behind this is the lack of awareness among people. One of the functionaries reported, *"I feel that many teachers do not know the signs of grooming and that is why they are unable to discern the possibility of trafficking from within the school compound".* To tackle the issue proactively, NGOs are taking steps to prevent it by raising awareness and educating people about it. They have initiated programs like Balika Sangha and community vigilance groups, distributed educational materials, and organized workshops, seminars, and panel discussions to foster dialogue and understanding. Their efforts also include running targeted awareness campaigns, providing rescue and shelter services, offering legal counselling, and partnering with medical professionals to ensure access to healthcare. NGOs also conduct home investigations of the survivors, assessing household economic status, the experience of the survivor, particularly during the grooming stage, etc.

This helps to understand what makes the survivor vulnerable to trafficking and to plan preventive intervention programs. Further, they empower victims through livelihood programs that provide life skills and vocational training, aiming to reduce the likelihood of risky migration for work, an all-too-common precursor to human trafficking and exploitation.

3.1.2. Rescue

NGO in the Cachar district also helps rescue victims of trafficking. Upon receiving information about trafficking or potential trafficking, these NGOs promptly inform the local police, who then coordinate and schedule a raid. *"We don't wait for proofs when one's life is at stake-one call and we move like shadows in the night''* stated a respondent. A female social worker from these NGOs accompanies the rescue team to provide support throughout the operation. The rescue squad upholds complete discretion regarding the operation, with each member assigned specific roles and meticulously preserving all evidence for further investigation. Once the victims are rescued, these NGOs send them to a shelter, where they receive the necessary assistance.

3.1.3. Rehabilitation

The NGO also feels the need to rehabilitate the victims after rescue. NGO staff stated that *"Rescue is just the first breath of freedom. What comes next is rebuilding a life that was shattered piece by piece".* The NGO therefore relocates a victim immediately to a rehabilitation home, receiving urgent medical care, counselling, nutritious meals, and clothing. Each victim is granted access to free legal assistance. Non-formal learning opportunities are made available for those who have discontinued their education. Additionally, tailored, market-driven vocational training equates survivors with employable skills. They are also encouraged to establish self-help groups, fostering mutual support.

3.1.4. Reintegration

The NGO also engage in reintegrating victims with their families, education and livelihood. The NGO successfully restores an average of 20 to 25 victims each year. Before reintegrating a victim, comprehensive information about their home and background is gathered through the NGO's field workers, the police, and the civil administration. One FGD participant reported, *"We run a background check through our workers or the police and the administration, and we make sure that the victims are watched closely upon restoration."* This shows that utmost care is taken to prevent any possibility of re-trafficking. If the survivor is a female, she is escorted by a female during the restoration or reintegration process. The victim's well-being is closely monitored. When needed, the local community is actively involved in the process. Reintegration of victims with livelihood is also done by the NGO through seed funding to help them purchase tools with raw materials required to create sustainable livelihood opportunities. The NGO establishes strong networks with governmental and other social organizations to strengthen support systems. To ensure long-term success, the NGO and its partner organizations maintain contact with survivors for up to two years, monitoring on whether survivors are accepted by family and community or not, whether they return to school

(if survivor is a child) or to employment (if survivor is an adult), whether they improved mental health, whether they are able to cope up with daily task.

3.1.5. Repatriation

The repatriation procedure is initiated with a Home Investigation Report (HIR) from a state partner organization, an anti-human trafficking unit, or an accredited social worker. This investigation assesses the survivor's safety and security if they return to their family. A functionary reported, *"We wait for a report through which we can decide whether it is safe or not for the victim to be returned to their family."* If the investigation ends with a positive report, the survivor's custody is transferred to the family through a consent letter. In the case of survivors who fail to reunite with their families, the NGOs collaborate with the social welfare department to secure long-term housing facilities where the survivors are provided with tailored support, including education, vocational training, or employment opportunities, based on their age, needs, and personal interests.

3.2. Challenges in Undertaking Anti-Trafficking Activities

Although significant strides have been made in implementing anti-trafficking initiatives within the district, the process is not without hurdles. Conversations with NGO staff highlighted that every aspect of service delivery faces persistent challenges. These include:

3.2.1. Challenges in Seeking Support and Cooperation

NGOs often face challenges in obtaining the necessary support and cooperation from Panchayat members to foster community involvement in forming groups and sanghas. This lack of collaboration hinders effective community participation in implementation and proper follow-up on the activities of community vigilance groups in rural areas. Additionally, despite the organization being actively involved in rescue operations alongside the police, they often lacked support and cooperation from law enforcement. This is seen through the police and law enforcement officials' refusal to provide information and documentation about the victim. This lack of cooperation is also evident when the organization requested the filing of missing person reports for trafficked survivors who had fled shelter homes due to inadequate infrastructure and facilities. *"The police often showed distrust in us when children fled from the shelter homes"*, said the shelter home warden. Officials hold shelter homes wardens responsible for taking care of the children, and therefore show unwillingness to file missing reports. The NGO also often faces negative responses from the social welfare department when seeking support for the long-term accommodation of victims. On some occasions, delays in paperwork from government officials are causing significant delays in the repatriation process. This challenging experience by this NGO mirrors the state of NGOs in many African countries, where poor cooperation with government entities hinders effective implementation of their work [30]. Similar issue is also seen in Sri Lanka, where poor cooperation with government entities hinders NGOs by creating a gap between project planning and implementation, limiting local government engagement, and complicating funding processes, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of NGOs in addressing local development needs [31]. The historical context in Asia shows that governments sought to maintain their dominant position in pursuing development plans,

limiting NGO participation and collaboration in the development process [32]. Similarly, history in South Africa shows that service delivery became disjointed as a result of a lack of collaboration between government departments and NGOs, thereby hindering collaboration, information sharing, and resource exchange. Organizations work in isolation, limiting their ability to address community needs and enhance service user experiences [33]. This poor cooperation between NGOs and government entities, like Panchayats, leads to a lack of community involvement in rural development programs, resulting in ineffective implementation and failure to address issues such as poverty, unemployment, and gender inequality in rural India [34].

3.2.2. Challenges in Seeking Funds

Since the NGO relies on government funding, it is often under considerable financial strain. This limits their ability to offer quality services to victims and the broader community. As a result, victims are deprived of basic livelihood opportunities. Financial limitations make it challenging to organize awareness programs and ensure adequate monitoring and follow-up of ongoing initiatives. Financial constraints also make it challenging to establish halfway homes necessary for victims whose family members refuse to accept them for fear of social stigma. A respondent noted, *"We experience a shortage in funding for which we have to either delay or withdraw certain activities."* This indicates that the organisation cannot provide the level of support needed in the district. This complements the findings of Malambo et al. (2024), where operational inefficiencies among NGOs result from their struggle with funding issues in Zambia [35]. Similarly, in Iran, because of financial struggle, NGOs got diverted from their focus on service delivery and shifted into competition in obtaining and accessing funds among themselves [36]. The funding issue is therefore not unique to this NGO or these two countries, but also globally. This has further implications as NGOs might also find it difficult to offer competitive remuneration packages, making it difficult to attract and retain professional talents, thereby affecting their human resources, as seen from a case of the high turnover rate of professional talents among NGOs in China [37]. In fact, it can also lead to closure as a lack of funding can threaten the survival potential of NGOs, as seen in Uganda [38].

3.2.3. Inconsistency of the Victims

According to the functionaries, in many instances, survivors, especially those from child age groups, alter their statements in the presence of the Child Welfare Committee after their rescue. One staff reported, *"Since victims often change their statements when present before CWC members, it makes it complicated to uncover the whole truth and provide the necessary counselling".* In such situations, the police typically withhold vital information from NGO staff, even when requested, leading to unnecessary delays in delivering further support services to the victim. Ramachandran (2022) asserts that in India, socio-legal challenges, including fear, stigma, a lack of trust in the legal system, and perception of the legal process as re-traumatising, lead to reluctance of the victims in participating in testimonies [39]. These complexities in testimonies, in turn, impact the prosecution of traffickers and the overall success of anti-trafficking initiatives. Victims in shelter homes often engage in disruptive behaviours, such as threatening self-harm, attempting to harm others, throwing objects,

refusing food, and rejecting clean clothes. These actions not only affect the mental well-being of the victims themselves but also disrupt the environment for other residents, caregivers, and staff. Many victims also refuse medical check-ups, and some, taking advantage of the shelter's inadequate infrastructure, attempt to escape.

3.2.4. Non-acceptance of Victims

Another significant challenge faced by the NGO is the difficulty in accommodating victims whose families refuse to accept them. Sometimes, family members, influenced by societal pressure or fear of social stigma, reject the victims. "*What hurt the victims more is not what traffickers do to them, but the shame society forced on their names*", said one organisation functionary. This is also seen in Bangladesh, where victims face social stigmatisation, victim blaming, and family rejection during the restoration and repatriation process, especially for female survivors due to misconceptions about sex work and trafficking, hindering their social reintegration [40]. A similar case is seen in Nepal, where victims are viewed as impure, corrupt, and unworthy of acceptance [41]. In Assam, Kamrup metropolitan, studies found that victims of human trafficking often face social stigmas such as shame, blame, and distrust from society, and being considered as 'second hand' [42]. These stigmas can cause emotional distress, disrupt self-esteem, and stability, thereby hindering their reintegration into society. Such stigma is not necessarily exclusive to the community or relatives of the victims, but also by law enforcement agencies. It was found that victims are 're-victimised' by the law enforcement officials and the jury during trials, and also by the listeners of the court when they disbelieve, blame and humiliate the victim as seen in the US [43]. Financial constraints make it challenging to establish halfway homes necessary for these victims.

3.2.5. Exclusion of NGOs From Networking Meetings

As reported by functionaries, NGOs are often excluded from participating whenever the district administration organises networking meetings before the restoration and reintegration process. One functionary reported, "*As an NGO, we are expected to build a bridge, but we are not given a blueprint. How can we walk survivors' home if we ourselves are kept in the dark?*" This lack of involvement hinders their understanding of the discussions and the overall plan, leaving them unaware of the future course of action. Such absence from networking forums can lead to fragmented efforts and a lack of coordination among service providers, ultimately affecting the quality and reach of services offered. There is therefore a need for networking among government departments and NGOs. In fact, these networking forums can form the bedrock for partnerships and collaborations [33].

Chikadzi & Mafetsa (2014) provide evidence that networking led to various benefits such as the curbing of duplication services, improved coordination and delivery of services, cost effectiveness and capacity building amongst organisations that participated [33]. The absence of networking can therefore indicate otherwise, as found from this particular case. Their exclusion, perhaps, could be because their contributions are seen merely as small-scale success stories and not as large-scale development. Holmén (2002), therefore, asserts that there is a need for NGOs to step up and prove that they are a democratic alternative and that they

actually accomplish things that governments can't in order to strengthen their claim for representation in governmental and intergovernmental forums [44].

All these challenges delay the resolution of cases and discourage staff members from carrying out their duties with the dedication and sincerity required to achieve meaningful progress.

4. Conclusions

The phenomenon of human trafficking is a complex socio-economic and legal challenge that requires a multifaceted approach. The study findings underline the alarming prevalence of human trafficking in the Cachar district, particularly among women and children, highlighting the district's position as both a source and destination for trafficking. NGOs like this one have demonstrated commendable efforts to address this issue. Their focus on generating awareness campaigns, providing rehabilitation homes, non-formal learning opportunities, vocational training, employment opportunities, providing rescue and shelter services, offering legal counselling, ensuring healthcare, etc., addressing issues of education, health, poor livelihood, income, safety and such that put victims in a vulnerable position. The efforts put in by this NGO emphasise human security and do not overlook the underlying vulnerabilities of trafficked individuals. While the argument presented by Vidushy (2016) and the theories presented by Nana Derby (2024) may be true in a global context, understanding factors influencing the issue at a local level is equally significant.

However, their initiatives reveal significant challenges and gaps that hinder their effectiveness. Understanding the systematic complexities of the challenges faced by NGOs is crucial. The exclusion of the organisation from the government networking meeting reflects the lack of regulatory frameworks that ensure the representation of NGOs in the process. The lack of cooperation of government entities reflects the dominant position that the government has to be exempted from cooperating and collaborating with this organisation. Both indicate a weak governance framework as the root of the challenges faced by the organisation. Secondly, society's stigmatised perception of victims of trafficking hinders the successful restoration of the victims. It reflects cultural attitude as a challenge that NGO encounter in addressing specific issues, such as the stigma faced by the people living with HIV [45]. This indicates that the challenges faced by NGO stem from external forces.

With regard to internal forces, the finding shows that the inability of the organisation to scale up activities is a result of the lack of funds. The challenges faced by the organisation reflect a broader systematic issue in addressing human trafficking. These inadequate funding limits the scope and quality of services, affects awareness campaigns, infrastructure development, and the establishment of long-term support systems like halfway homes. Also, the delay in service delivery is influenced by the lack of cooperation from government entities. This shows that the lack of a streamlined, multi-stakeholder approach creates redundancies and inefficiencies in operation. Furthermore, the exclusion from networking forums that leave the organisation clueless about the future course of action leaves the NGO grappling with decision-making in the helping process. This hinders NGOs from responding to crises and operational demands. This reflects a broader systematic issue in which internal issues are often influenced by external issues.

Last but not the least, the inconsistent support from victims themselves, such as altering statements or refusing assistance, highlights the psychological trauma and distrust that trafficking survivors experience, which underscores the need for trauma-informed approaches and specialized training for the NGO staff and law enforcement to address victims' needs sensitively.

Despite these challenges, the Barak Valley Welfare Development Society exemplifies resilience and dedication. Their collaboration with governmental bodies, social organizations, and international partners underscores the importance of a collective response to trafficking. By fostering partnerships and engaging with diverse stakeholders, the NGO has set a foundation for a more coordinated approach to combating trafficking. However, stronger institutional support and policy reforms are necessary to amplify these efforts. The following recommendations emerge to address the gaps:

- Strengthened local and institutional cooperation: Building trust and enhancing collaboration with local authorities, law enforcement, and government departments are crucial. It includes mandatory NGO inclusion in networking meetings and streamlined processes for reporting and responding to trafficking cases.
- Expand funding and resources: Adequate financial support is the key to sustaining any initiatives, including awareness campaigns, improving shelter infrastructure, and establishing halfway homes.
- Enhance trauma-informed interventions: With many victims showing inconsistency in their statements, which could be a result of trauma, training NGO staff and law enforcement in trauma-informed care can improve interactions with victims and address their psychological needs effectively.
- Promote community engagement: Strengthening community-based prevention initiatives, such as vigilance groups and livelihood programs, can address trafficking risks at the grassroots level.

Multidisciplinary Domains

This research covers the domains: (a) social work, (b) human rights, (c) development studies, and (d) gender studies.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration on AI Usage

Artificial Intelligence (AIl tooi like crammarl, developed by Max Lytvyq Alex Shevchenko, and Dmybo Lider, was utilised for language and flammar editing, with all outputs reviewed and edited by the authors. The authors remain responsible for the content's integrity and originality

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