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## A Study on the Reintegration Challenges Faced by Trafficked Women in Indian Society

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### Abstract:

*Human trafficking, especially of women, remains a pervasive violation of human rights in India. While legal and institutional mechanisms have evolved to address prevention and rescue, the post-rescue phase—reintegration into society—remains fraught with obstacles. This study explores the multifaceted challenges faced by trafficked women during reintegration, including social stigma, psychological trauma, economic dependence, legal hurdles, and the limitations of rehabilitation programs. Based on secondary data analysis, the paper critically examines existing support systems and highlights the gap between policy provisions and ground realities. The study concludes with recommendations for a survivor-centric, trauma-informed, and rights-based approach that addresses the long-term needs of trafficked women and facilitates their meaningful reintegration into society.*

**Keywords:** Trafficked Women, Reintegration, Social Stigma, Psychological Trauma, Rehabilitation Programs.

### Introduction

Human trafficking is one of the most heinous violations of human rights, affecting millions of individuals worldwide, with women and girls comprising a significant portion of those trafficked. In the Indian context, trafficking is deeply intertwined with structural inequalities such as poverty,

gender discrimination, caste-based marginalization, and lack of access to education and employment. While numerous efforts have been made to combat human trafficking—ranging from stringent legal measures to the establishment of rescue and rehabilitation mechanisms—these interventions have often been heavily focused on the early

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stages of the anti-trafficking response, particularly rescue operations and legal prosecution of traffickers. However, the critical post-rescue phase, namely the **reintegration of survivors into society**, remains significantly underexplored and under-addressed.

Reintegration refers to the process through which a trafficked survivor attempts to return to a dignified, self-sustaining, and socially accepted life within the community. Unlike rescue or shelter, reintegration is not a one-time event but a prolonged and dynamic process involving psychological recovery, economic empowerment, legal support, and social acceptance. It involves not just physical relocation but also emotional healing, social rebuilding, and economic rehabilitation. Unfortunately, this phase is often the weakest link in India's anti-trafficking framework. Many survivors, after being rescued, find themselves in an unfamiliar world where they face rejection, stigma, and inadequate support systems.

The **social stigma** attached to trafficking, particularly in cases involving sexual exploitation, often results in survivors being treated as morally culpable rather than as victims. This perception is rooted in deep-seated patriarchal norms and moralistic attitudes that dominate Indian society, where women are often judged based on notions of purity and honor. As a result, trafficked women are frequently shunned by their families and communities, leading to

emotional isolation and mental health issues.

Moreover, **psychological trauma** is a significant challenge. Survivors often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders due to the violence, abuse, and confinement they endured. These emotional burdens are exacerbated by the lack of adequate mental health care in shelter homes and communities, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. Reintegration efforts that fail to address mental health ultimately hinder survivors from rebuilding their lives with confidence and dignity.

**Economic reintegration** poses another serious challenge. Many trafficked women come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and lack education or vocational skills. After rescue, they often find themselves with no sustainable source of income and limited opportunities for skill development. Though vocational training and livelihood support schemes exist, they are often generic, poorly implemented, and fail to align with local employment markets or individual aspirations.

In addition to these social, emotional, and economic barriers, survivors often face **legal and institutional challenges**. India's legal framework, including the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act and other criminal laws, focuses heavily on punitive measures against traffickers but provides limited, inconsistent, and poorly

coordinated support for survivors' rehabilitation. Bureaucratic delays, lack of coordination among agencies, inadequate legal aid, and limited awareness about entitlements leave survivors vulnerable and disempowered.

Governmental and non-governmental organizations have launched numerous rehabilitation programs and schemes to support survivors. However, many of these programs are short-term, inadequately funded, and lack proper monitoring and follow-up mechanisms. Without comprehensive and survivor-centric approaches, these initiatives often fail to achieve long-term reintegration, and in some cases, survivors are re-trafficked or forced back into exploitative conditions due to the absence of viable alternatives.

Given these complexities, there is a pressing need to shift the discourse from rescue and short-term rehabilitation to **long-term, sustainable reintegration**. This study seeks to explore the multiple dimensions of reintegration, including the social, psychological, economic, legal, and institutional challenges faced by trafficked women in India. By relying on secondary sources, including academic literature, government reports, legal documents, and NGO publications, the study critically examines existing frameworks and proposes a more holistic, survivor-centered approach to reintegration. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the discourse on human trafficking not just as a criminal justice

issue, but as a profound humanitarian and social challenge that requires inclusive, empathetic, and long-term policy responses.

### Review of Literature

Human trafficking, particularly the trafficking of women and girls, remains a pervasive issue that has attracted significant global attention in recent decades. Much of the focus has traditionally centered on prevention, prosecution, and the rescue of victims, while relatively less attention has been given to the complex and ongoing process of reintegration. In the Indian context, reintegration of trafficked women presents unique challenges shaped by cultural, socio-economic, and institutional factors.

One of the major obstacles to reintegration is the intense social stigma attached to victimization. Trafficked women are frequently perceived as "tainted" or "dishonored," leading to discrimination and exclusion from their families, communities, and social networks (Ghosh, 2013). This stigma is further reinforced by patriarchal norms and perceptions of female sexuality. As noted by Chatterjee (2017), such societal rejection often pushes survivors into isolation, making it difficult for them to rebuild their lives or form new relationships.

The psychological consequences of trafficking are equally severe. Survivors often experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and

low self-worth (Bansal, 2015). These emotional scars hinder their ability to trust others, including professionals such as social workers, police, and family members. Singh and Gupta (2019) emphasize the necessity of a trauma-informed approach in rehabilitation, focusing on sustained mental health care and emotional support to aid the recovery process.

Economic independence plays a crucial role in the reintegration of trafficked women. Many survivors lack formal education or employable skills, limiting their access to secure and well-paying jobs (Kaur, 2014). Consequently, they are often relegated to informal or exploitative work, including domestic labor or low-wage employment, which perpetuates their vulnerability. Desai (2016) critiques existing vocational training programs, arguing that they often fail to address the specific needs of trafficked women, such as gender sensitivity and the development of soft skills required for meaningful employment.

Legal and institutional barriers further complicate the reintegration process. Although India has laws such as the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (1956) and more recent legislative measures like the Anti-Trafficking Bill (2021), their implementation remains inconsistent. Survivors often struggle to navigate complex legal procedures to claim entitlements such as compensation and rehabilitation services (Rao, 2018). The lack of coordination among law

enforcement agencies, social services, and legal institutions further exacerbates these challenges.

Governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have launched numerous rehabilitation programs aimed at supporting trafficked women. These include provisions for shelter, legal aid, and vocational training. However, the effectiveness of such programs is often questioned. Patel (2017) acknowledges the important role NGOs play, but Soni (2020) argues that many initiatives are underfunded and lack the infrastructure to meet survivors' multidimensional needs. Sharma and Khan (2018) further highlight the absence of effective follow-up services, which contributes to high rates of re-trafficking or return to vulnerable conditions.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The study aims to explore the challenges and prospects involved in the reintegration of trafficked women in India, with a focus on the social, psychological, economic, legal, and institutional dimensions that shape their post-rescue experiences.

### **Objectives:**

1. To examine the social stigma and cultural barriers faced by trafficked women during reintegration.
2. To analyze the psychological and emotional impacts of trafficking on survivors and their implications for rehabilitation.

3. To evaluate the economic challenges encountered by trafficked women in achieving financial independence.
4. To investigate the effectiveness of legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms in supporting reintegration.
5. To assess the role and limitations of governmental and non-governmental rehabilitation programs in facilitating the reintegration process.
6. To recommend policy measures and support systems that enhance the long-term reintegration of trafficked women into mainstream society.

### Research Methodology

The present study relies exclusively on secondary data collected from a wide range of credible and scholarly sources. These include academic journals, peer-reviewed articles, books, and edited volumes that focus on human trafficking, gender-based violence, and the rehabilitation of women. In addition, official government documents such as the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, the Anti-Trafficking Bill, and policy guidelines related to victim support were reviewed to understand the institutional response to reintegration. Reports and publications from national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the field of human trafficking and women's welfare were also examined to assess the practical implementation of rehabilitation programs. Furthermore, statistical data

and research findings from organizations such as the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and Human Rights Watch provided valuable insights into the scale of trafficking and post-rescue interventions in India.

A thematic content analysis was used to review and interpret the secondary data. The data were systematically categorized into key themes such as social stigma, psychological trauma, economic vulnerability, legal barriers, and institutional support. Comparative analysis was also carried out to identify gaps between existing policies and the lived realities of survivors.

### Limitations of the Study

As this study is based solely on secondary data, it does not include primary insights from trafficked survivors, NGOs, or institutional stakeholders. The findings are therefore limited to the perspectives and interpretations available in existing literature.

### Discussion

The reintegration of trafficked women into mainstream society presents a complex and multi-layered challenge that extends far beyond rescue and short-term rehabilitation. In the Indian context, this process is significantly shaped by deep-seated cultural beliefs, patriarchal social structures, economic deprivation, institutional limitations, and the psychological aftermath of trauma.

Although various legal and policy interventions have been implemented to address trafficking, their focus remains largely on prevention and rescue, often neglecting the long-term needs of survivors. A critical analysis of these reintegration challenges reveals the need for a more holistic and survivor-centric framework.

One of the most significant barriers trafficked women face after their return is the social stigma and cultural rejection associated with their past experiences. In many Indian communities, notions of family honor and female chastity dominate the cultural landscape. Women who have been trafficked—particularly those forced into sexual exploitation—are often viewed as "impure" or "dishonored," regardless of the fact that they were victims of coercion and violence. Such attitudes result in ostracization not only from the larger society but frequently from their own families. This rejection reinforces the trauma experienced during trafficking and isolates survivors at a time when social support is most crucial. Community-based stigma also manifests in exclusion from local institutions, workplaces, and even places of worship. The moral judgment embedded in cultural narratives portrays survivors not as victims but as transgressors, severely undermining efforts toward their social reintegration.

In addition to these external barriers, survivors carry profound psychological and emotional scars. Trafficked women

are often subjected to prolonged physical and emotional abuse, sexual violence, confinement, and control. These experiences result in long-lasting psychological conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, dissociation, and suicidal ideation. These emotional burdens impair their ability to trust others, form relationships, or engage in social settings. Furthermore, the rehabilitation process itself can be retraumatizing if it lacks sensitivity to survivors' emotional states. Without professional psychological intervention and sustained counseling support, survivors may internalize guilt and shame, which further inhibits their ability to re-enter society with confidence. The prevailing mental health infrastructure in India, especially in rural or semi-urban regions, is ill-equipped to handle the specific needs of trafficked survivors. The absence of trauma-informed care models and culturally responsive mental health services compounds the problem, leaving many survivors emotionally unanchored.

Economic empowerment is a vital pillar of successful reintegration. However, trafficked women frequently encounter severe financial and employment challenges after rescue. Many of them come from impoverished rural backgrounds and have little or no formal education. Trafficking disrupts whatever small livelihood activities they may have been engaged in before victimization. Upon return, they are often



found unskilled, uneducated, and economically dependent. Even when vocational training is provided, it is not always aligned with local job markets or the individual's interests and capacities. Many such programs focus on stereotypically "feminine" skills like tailoring, handicrafts, or beauty services, which do not always guarantee sustainable income. Moreover, these training modules often fail to include financial literacy, job placement support, or confidence-building measures, making them insufficient in enabling long-term financial independence. As a result, many survivors are forced to return to exploitative labor conditions or become economically dependent on abusive households, which can increase their risk of being re-trafficked.

Another dimension of reintegration relates to the legal and institutional frameworks that govern anti-trafficking responses. Although India has enacted several laws, including the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (1956) and has proposed newer mechanisms such as the Anti-Trafficking Bill (2021), the actual implementation of these provisions remains uneven and inconsistent. Survivors often struggle with navigating the criminal justice system, which is intimidating, complex, and frequently unsympathetic. Many survivors are unaware of their rights or lack access to legal aid. Even when compensation or rehabilitation benefits are legally mandated, bureaucratic red tape and

corruption often prevent timely delivery. Additionally, frontline personnel such as police officers or shelter home staff may not be sensitized to the needs of survivors, leading to insensitive handling of cases. The absence of survivor-friendly legal environments not only delays justice but also contributes to the erosion of survivors' faith in institutions meant to protect them.

While both governmental and non-governmental organizations play a role in providing post-rescue care, the rehabilitation programs they offer often suffer from structural limitations. Government-run shelter homes are frequently overcrowded, underfunded, and lack trained staff. Many do not provide comprehensive care, focusing only on basic needs like food and shelter while neglecting psychological counseling, legal support, or livelihood training. On the other hand, NGOs, though often more flexible and community-oriented, face funding constraints and may not be able to offer long-term support. There is also considerable variation in the quality and scope of services provided across states and regions. Rehabilitation programs tend to operate in silos without adequate coordination among stakeholders such as police, legal aid cells, healthcare providers, and vocational trainers. Moreover, many programs are designed from a top-down perspective and do not include survivor voices in planning or implementation, resulting in interventions that may not address real needs.

Given the multifaceted nature of these challenges, there is a pressing need to formulate comprehensive policy measures and support systems that enable the long-term reintegration of trafficked women. Policies must go beyond token rehabilitation and focus on empowering survivors to reclaim their dignity and autonomy. Public awareness campaigns should be launched to combat societal stigma and educate communities about trafficking as a crime, not a moral failing. Mental health care should be made an integral component of reintegration, with investment in trauma-informed training for counselors and healthcare workers. Economic support must be tailored to survivors' local contexts and individual aspirations, including access to education, entrepreneurship training, and financial assistance. On the legal front, the establishment of fast-track courts for trafficking cases, simplification of compensation procedures, and survivor-protection protocols can significantly improve the justice delivery system. Most importantly, reintegration policies and programs must be developed in consultation with survivors, respecting their agency and empowering them to become advocates and change-makers within their communities.

### Conclusion

The reintegration of trafficked women is not merely a procedural task following their rescue but a deeply human, multidimensional journey that requires sustained and coordinated efforts. This

study has explored the social, psychological, economic, legal, and institutional challenges that impede the reintegration of survivors in the Indian context. The findings reveal that while anti-trafficking laws and rescue mechanisms are in place, reintegration remains an under-prioritized and under-resourced phase of the rehabilitation process.

Social stigma emerges as one of the most formidable barriers, rooted in cultural perceptions of honor, shame, and purity. Survivors are often isolated or rejected by their families and communities, forcing them into emotional and social marginalization. Psychological trauma, which is both a consequence of trafficking and a product of societal rejection, continues to haunt survivors long after rescue. Without trauma-informed and culturally sensitive mental health support, many struggle to rebuild their self-worth and trust in others.

Economic instability further hinders the reintegration process. The lack of education and marketable skills places survivors in vulnerable economic conditions, sometimes compelling them to return to exploitative environments. While some vocational training programs exist, they often lack relevance, inclusivity, and sustainable outcomes. Legal and institutional mechanisms, though well-intentioned, frequently fail survivors due to bureaucratic delays, lack of coordination among agencies, and limited access to justice and compensation.



Rehabilitation programs, whether run by the government or NGOs, are often fragmented, poorly monitored, and inadequately funded, failing to respond to the long-term and individualized needs of survivors.

To address these gaps, reintegration must be recognized as a central component of the anti-trafficking agenda rather than a peripheral concern. It demands a shift from short-term shelter-based support to a long-term, survivor-centered model that includes legal empowerment, mental health services, economic inclusion, and community reintegration. Most importantly, survivors must not be viewed as passive recipients of aid but as individuals with agency, resilience, and the right to participate in shaping policies and programs that affect their lives.

Ultimately, the success of reintegration lies in society's willingness to not just rescue survivors from physical bondage, but to restore their dignity, autonomy, and rightful place in the community. A holistic, rights-based, and empathetic approach is essential to transform the reintegration process from an administrative formality into a pathway toward true freedom and justice for trafficked women in India.

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