

UNICEF

United Nations Children's Emergency Fund Combating Child Trafficking And Exploitation

Overview

Child trafficking and exploitation are severe violations of children's rights, with millions of minors affected globally each year. Such crimes rob children of their dignity, subjecting them to physical and psychological abuse, forced labor, sexual exploitation, and other forms of mistreatment. The issue is pervasive, affecting children across various regions regardless of socio-economic, cultural, or geographical factors.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), founded in 1946, has long been at the forefront of global efforts to combat these injustices, working with governments, NGOs, and communities to protect vulnerable children and restore their rights. Historically, children have been exploited through child labour, sexual exploitation, and conscription into the armed forces. The international community's recognition of the need to protect children has evolved over time, leading to significant milestones such as the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

What is UNICEF?

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, also known as UNICEF, is a specialized agency of the United Nations focused on promoting the rights and well-being of children around the globe. Established in 1946, it provides humanitarian and developmental assistance to children and mothers, particularly in developing countries. UNICEF's role includes advocacy for children's rights, such as education, healthcare, nutrition and protection. The committee works closely with other governments and UN agencies to implement programs that align with broader UN goals.¹

Current Situation

Child trafficking is a global issue, with an estimated 1.2 million children trafficked every year.² These children are exploited in several forms, such as forced labor, sexual exploitation,

¹ "UNICEF." *United Nations*, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/cco/unicef-United-nations-childrens-fund>.

² UNICEF. "Child Trafficking." *UNICEF Canada : For Every Child*, <https://www.unicef.ca/en/child-trafficking>.

child soldiering and organ trafficking. Often targeted due to their lack of protection and resources, most vulnerable groups include girls, refugees, migrants and children from impoverished backgrounds.

The prevalence of child trafficking varies across regions. In Africa, the issue is particularly common in zones of conflict, where child labor and trafficking rates are high and many are forced into labor or recruited as soldiers.^{3,4} Asia is also a major hub for child trafficking, especially for sexual exploitation and forced labor, with children trafficked both domestically and across borders.^{5,6} Europe serves as both a destination and transit region for trafficked children, where they are exploited for labor and sexual purposes.^{7,8} Finally, in the Americas, child trafficking involves forced labor in sectors like agriculture, as well as sexual exploitation in both rural and urban areas.^{9,10}

Some economic factors include poverty, lack of education, and unemployment, which drive many families into vulnerable situations and put their children at risk. Social factors, including gender discrimination and child marriage also play a significant role. Moreover, weak law enforcement, corruption and conflict create environments where traffickers can operate with relative impunity, especially in regions where government oversight is limited or ineffective.

Addressing all of these factors, bearing in mind which needs are more important for each country, is crucial to combatting this issue on a global scale. For example, improving access to education and economic opportunities can reduce the pressure on families, while strengthening legal systems and promoting gender equality can make communities more resilient against trafficking networks.

³ Fleck, Fiona. "Children Are Main Victims of Trafficking in Africa." *BMJ (Clinical Research Ed.)*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 1 May 2004, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC403882/.

[Genealogy | Free Full-Text | Child Trafficking in Africa: Reimagining the Problem \(mdpi.com\)](https://www.mdpi.com/2313-5778/7/3/64)

⁴ Okorie, Mitterand, and Uchenna Okeja. "Child Trafficking in Africa: Reimagining the Problem." *MDPI*, Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, 11 Sept. 2023, www.mdpi.com/2313-5778/7/3/64.

⁵ Karen, Tumlin C. "Trafficking in Children in Asia: A Regional Overview." *ILO-IPEC*, Feb. 2000, www.ilo.org/media/310161/download.

⁶ "Child Trafficking in Asia." *Love Without Boundaries*, 18 Apr. 2024, www.lovewithoutboundaries.com/blog/child-trafficking-in-asia/.

⁷ "Human Trafficking: The EU's Fight against Exploitation: Topics: European Parliament." *Topics | European Parliament*, 18 Oct. 2023, www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20230921STO05705/human-trafficking-the-eu-s-fight-against-exploitation.

⁸ "Trafficking - Children's Rights - Www.Coe.Int." *Children's Rights*, 6 Oct. 2023, www.coe.int/en/web/children/trafficking.

⁹ "Trafficking of Women and Girls within Central America." *UNODC*, www.unodc.org/documents/toc/Reports/TOCTASouthAmerica/English/TOCTA_CACaribb_trafficking_womengirls_within_CA_merica.pdf.

¹⁰ Seelke, Clare Ribando. "Trafficking in Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean." *Congressional Research Service*, 13 Oct. 2016, www.oas.org/ext/es/seguridad/red-prevencion-crimen/Recursos/Multimedios/ArtMID/1608/ArticleID/219/Trafficking-in-Persons-in-Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean.

International Legal Frameworks

The United Nations has established several key legal frameworks to protect children from trafficking and exploitation. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC¹¹) serves as the most comprehensive international agreement dedicated to upholding children's rights, ensuring their protection, development and participation in society. Additionally, the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, more commonly known as the Palermo Protocol¹², plays a critical role in combatting trafficking globally. With a special focus on women and children, this protocol aims to enhance international cooperation in preventing this issue as well as protecting victims, avoiding impunity.

In addition to international conventions, various regional agreements have been established to address child trafficking. In Europe, the European Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings¹³ strengthens regional collaboration by focusing on the protection of victims, prevention of trafficking, and prosecution of offenders within European countries. Similarly, in Africa, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child¹⁴ outlines specific measures to combat child trafficking and exploitation, emphasizing the need for African nations to cooperate in protecting children's rights and welfare across the continent.

Challenges and Barriers

One of the biggest challenges in combatting child trafficking is the underreporting of cases. In fact, many instances go unnoticed and unreported due to fear, stigma, and a general lack of awareness among victims and their communities. Trafficked children and their families also often fear retaliation from the captors or distrust authorities, which prevents them from seeking

¹¹ General Assembly resolution 44/25. "Convention on the Rights of the Child | Ohchr." *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, 20 Nov. 1989, www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child.

¹² General Assembly resolution 55/25. "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime | OHCHR." *United Nations Human Rights Office of The High Commissioner*, 15 Nov. 2000, www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons.

¹³ "Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings - Impact of the European Convention on Human Rights - Wwww.Coe.Int." *Impact of the European Convention on Human Rights*, 7 Oct. 2023, www.coe.int/en/web/impact-convention-human-rights/council-of-europe-convention-on-action-against-trafficking-in-human-beings#.

¹⁴ Ababa, Addis. "African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child." *African Union*, 29 Nov. 1990, au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36804-treaty-african_charter_on_rights_welfare_of_the_child.pdf.

help.¹⁵ Additionally, misidentification is a common problem, as victims are frequently unrecognized by law enforcement and community members. This can happen because victims may not fit the stereotypical image of a trafficked person, or their circumstances are misunderstood by those who would otherwise intervene.

The effectiveness of law enforcement and judicial systems in addressing child trafficking is often hindered by capacity issues.¹⁶ ¹⁷ Many countries lack the necessary resources, including trained personnel and specialized units, to effectively identify, investigate, and prosecute trafficking cases. This deficiency leads to delayed or inadequate responses, allowing traffickers to evade justice. Furthermore, corruption within law enforcement and judicial systems can impede efforts to protect victims and punish traffickers.¹⁸ In some regions, officials may turn a blind eye to trafficking activities or actively participate in them, making it difficult for victims to receive the protection and justice they deserve.¹⁹

Socioeconomic factors, particularly poverty, play a significant role in making children and their families vulnerable to trafficking. Poverty drives many families into desperate situations, where they are more likely to fall prey to traffickers promising better opportunities. Additionally, the lack of access to education exacerbates vulnerability, as children who are not in school are more likely to be exploited. Education provides not only knowledge but also protection, giving children and their families the tools to recognize and avoid dangerous situations. Without these resources, children are left more susceptible to traffickers who exploit their socioeconomic circumstances.

Current Efforts and Best Practices

The United Nations and UNICEF have been at the forefront of efforts to combat child trafficking and exploitation. UNICEF's Child Protection Programs focus on prevention, rescue, and rehabilitation, working to protect vulnerable children from trafficking while providing

¹⁵ Canada, Public Safety. "National Consultations Discussion Paper: The Way Forward to End Human Trafficking." *National Consultations Discussion Paper: The Way Forward to End Human Trafficking*, 26 July 2022, www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsres/pblctns/wy-fwrd-nd-hmn-trffckng-ppr/index-en.aspx.

¹⁶ "Child Trafficking: Addressing Challenges to Public ..." *GAO*, 11 Dec. 2023, www.gao.gov/assets/d24106038.pdf.

¹⁷ Parsons, Chelsea, et al. "3 Key Challenges in Combating the Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States." *Center for American Progress*, 8 Apr. 2014, www.americanprogress.org/article/3-key-challenges-in-combating-the-sex-trafficking-of-minors-in-the-united-states/.

¹⁸ "How Corruption Facilitates, Fuels and Fosters Human Trafficking." *United Nations : Office on Drugs and Crime*, www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/Webstories2023/how-corruption-facilitates--fuels-and-fosters-human-trafficking.html.

¹⁹ Noris, Ann. "The Nexus of Human Trafficking, Democracy, and Corruption." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 12 Oct. 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/nexus-human-trafficking-democracy-and-corruption>.

support for victims. Additionally, the UN Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons²⁰ offers a comprehensive framework for international cooperation, aiming to harmonize efforts across borders to address trafficking more effectively. At the national level, governmental strategies play a key role in addressing trafficking. Many countries have implemented National Action plans, though their effectiveness varies depending on resources and political will.

Legislative measures are also crucial, as strengthening legal frameworks ensures greater protection for children, helping to prevent trafficking and hold offenders accountable.

Several countries have made notable progress through targeted interventions. In Thailand, a collaborative approach involving the government, NGOs, and international organizations has resulted in significant strides toward reducing child trafficking.²¹ These efforts have included improving legal frameworks, increasing awareness, and enhancing victim support services.

In Nigeria, community-based strategies have proven effective, with partnerships between local governments, NGOs, and civil society groups helping to reduce trafficking.²² India has established various initiatives to tackle child labor and trafficking. The government launched the National Child Labor Project (NCLP), which rescues children from trafficking and provides them with education and vocational training.²³ Nepal has implemented the "Free the Slaves" program, which focuses on community-based anti-trafficking measures. These efforts involve mobilizing community members to protect at-risk children, providing education about trafficking, and creating local vigilance committees to monitor and report trafficking activities.²⁴

These approaches, which emphasize prevention and rehabilitation, have shown positive results in addressing the root causes of trafficking and providing long-term support for victims. Both examples highlight the importance of cooperation and tailored strategies in combating child trafficking.

Case Study: Child Trafficking in Nepal

²⁰ "General Assembly Appraises the UN Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons." *United Nations : Office on Drugs and Crime*, 23 Nov. 2021, www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2021/November/general-assembly-appraises-the-un-global-plan-of-action-to-combat-trafficking-in-persons.html.

²¹ Kohkaew, Dhanabara. "A Light at the End of the Tunnel for Survivors of Trafficking in Thailand." *IOM Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific*, 6 Apr. 2023, roasiapacific.iom.int/stories/light-end-tunnel-survivors-trafficking-thailand.

²² "National Action Plan on Human Trafficking in Nigeria." *UNODC*, 2022, www.unodc.org/documents/nigeria/National_Action_Plan_on_Human_Trafficking_in_Nigeria.pdf.

²³ "National Child Labour Project SCHEME." *NCLP | Ministry of Labour & Employment | Government of India*, 2021, labour.gov.in/childlabour/nclp.

²⁴ "Nepal." *Free the Slaves*, <https://freetheslaves.net/our-work/where-we-work/nepal/>.

Background

Nepal has faced significant challenges with child trafficking since the 1980s, becoming both a source and transit country for trafficked children. Due to its mountainous terrain, and limited economic opportunities, this problem has exacerbated and led to a long-standing complex crisis.

Key Issues

1. Child labor and Exploitation

Trafficked children in Nepal have historically been forced into labor in industries such as carpet factories and agriculture. Many children, particularly girls, have been subjected to domestic servitude under exploitative conditions. The 1990s saw a significant increase in this, with traffickers taking advantage of economic instability and natural disasters to exploit vulnerable communities.²⁵

2. Cross-Border Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation

Nepal has also been a source country for girls trafficked to India, often under the guise of job opportunities. The cross-border trafficking routes between Nepal and India are among the most active in South Asia.²⁶ Girls, sometimes as young as 10, have been trafficked into brothels in Indian cities like Mumbai and Delhi.²⁷ This issue gained international attention in the late 1990s, sparking a wave of regional cooperation but with limited initial success.

3. Impact of the Civil War (1996-2006)

During Nepal's civil war, displacement and instability increased the number of unaccompanied children, making them easy targets for traffickers.²⁸ Both the Maoist insurgents and government forces were accused of using child soldiers.²⁹ As communities struggled to

²⁵ Gurung, Ganesh. "Nepal Country Report on Trafficking and Human Security." *RMMRU*, www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/5.-Nepal-Trafficking-final1.pdf.

²⁶ "Visit to Rupyadiha: One of the Prominent Trafficking Routes between India and Nepal." *Caritas India*, www.caritasindia.org/visit-to-rupyadiha-one-of-the-prominent-trafficking-routes-between-india-and-nepal/.

²⁷ ONRT. "Trafficking in Persons Especially on Women in Nepal." *ONODC*, 2006, www.unodc.org/pdf/india/Nat_Rep2006-07.pdf.

²⁸ "Nepal: Children Caught in the Conflict." *Amnesty International*, 2005, www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/asa310542005en.pdf.

²⁹ "Children in the Ranks | The Maoists' Use of Child Soldiers in Nepal." *Human Rights Watch*, 1 Feb. 2007, www.hrw.org/report/2007/02/01/children-ranks/maoists-use-child-soldiers-nepal.

recover from the conflict, traffickers exploited the lack of effective governance and the period saw a surge in trafficking cases.³⁰

4. Natural Disasters and Trafficking

The 2015 earthquake in Nepal left thousands of families homeless and devastated infrastructure.³¹ This created a new wave of trafficking risks. Children orphaned or separated from their families became prime targets for traffickers, who promised them safety or work opportunities, only to exploit them once relocated.³² This period highlighted the need for better disaster response mechanisms to prevent trafficking spikes following crises.

5. Government and International Response

The Nepalese government, with support from international organizations like UNICEF, has taken steps to strengthen its legal framework against trafficking, such as the 2007 Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act.³³ However, enforcement remains inconsistent, especially in remote areas. Regional cooperation with India has helped to some extent in repatriating victims, but the lack of economic opportunities and awareness in rural communities continues to pose challenges.³⁴

6. Relevance for UNICEF

Nepal's history offers a valuable lesson in how political instability, poverty, and cultural practices can intersect to create a high-risk environment for child trafficking. Its experience underscores the importance of integrating anti-trafficking measures with broader development and disaster response efforts. By understanding Nepal's context, the committee can draw insights into the importance of cross-border cooperation, community-based prevention, and post-crisis child protection strategies.

Recommendations for Future Action

³⁰ "From Civil War to the Pandemic: Explore Nepal's Struggle to Fight Sex Trafficking." *Destiny Rescue*, 22 Feb. 2021, www.destinyrescue.org/blog/from-civil-war-to-the-pandemic-explore-nepals-struggle-to-fight-sex-trafficking/.

³¹ "Nepal Earthquake 2015." *Internet Geography*, www.internetgeography.net/topics/nepal-earthquake-2015/.

³² Gyawali, Bishal, et al. *Human Trafficking in Nepal: Post-Earthquake Risk and Response*, Sept. 2016, www.researchgate.net/publication/308172267_Human_Trafficking_in_Nepal_Post-Earthquake_Risk_and_Response.

³³ "Analysis of Legal Gaps in the Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act, 2007." *Forum for Women, Law and Development*, 2021, fwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Legal-gap-analysis-trafficking.pdf.

³⁴ "2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Nepal." *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/nepal/.

To combat child trafficking more effectively, strengthening legal frameworks to align with international standards and enhancing enforcement mechanisms through better resources and training are critical. However, simply making trafficking illegal is not enough. On-ground actions are necessary. National services need to be expanded to provide support and rehabilitation for victims, including shelters, healthcare, and psychological services. Increased international cooperation is essential for cross-border tracking and prosecution, as well as the sharing of best practices. Community-based approaches play a vital role, with local stakeholders empowered to participate in prevention efforts and raise awareness through education to reduce vulnerability.

Successful initiatives such as the U.S Homeland Security's Blue Campaign and the UK's Joint Slavery and Trafficking Analysis Centre (JSTAC³⁵) highlight the value of coordinated efforts across agencies. Public-private partnerships, like the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism, demonstrate the power of collaboration between sectors. Broader frameworks like the Bali Process³⁶ and INTERPOL's³⁷ Project Turquesa³⁸ underscore the importance of international cooperation in tackling trafficking on a global scale.

Conclusion

Combating child trafficking and exploitation is a complex and urgent challenge that demands a comprehensive, multifaceted response. Despite global efforts and significant strides, such as the establishment of key legal frameworks like the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Palermo Protocol, these crimes persist, highlighting the need for sustained commitment and innovative strategies. International cooperation remains essential, with coordinated actions among nations being crucial for disrupting trafficking networks and protecting vulnerable children, as evidenced by successful initiatives like the Bali Process and INTERPOL's programs.

³⁵ "Law Enforcement Steps up Response to Modern Slavery." *National Crime Agency*, www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=114&catid=83&Itemid=514.

³⁶ "The Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime." *The Bali Process*, www.baliprocess.net/.

³⁷ "Crimes against Children." *INTERPOL*, www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Crimes-against-children.

³⁸ "Americas: New Joint Initiative against Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling." *INTERPOL*, 5 July 2023, www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2023/Americas-New-joint-initiative-against-human-trafficking-and-migrant-smuggling.

Nationally, governments must strengthen legal frameworks, enhance law enforcement capacities through specialized task forces, and address systemic issues like corruption and resource limitations to break the cycle of exploitation. The battle against child trafficking and exploitation is far from over. Still, by learning from past successes and failures, refining our approaches, and maintaining a sustained and unified commitment, we can create a world where every child is free from the threat of trafficking and exploitation. The eradication of these crimes requires not only the continuation of existing efforts but also a renewed focus on innovation, collaboration, and justice, with policymakers, international organizations, governments, NGOs, the private sector, and communities all playing their part to ensure that all children can grow up in safety, dignity, and freedom.

Questions to Consider

1. What is the current prevalence of child trafficking and exploitation in your country?
2. What measures has your country implemented to combat child trafficking and exploitation?
3. How does your country cooperate with international efforts to combat child trafficking?
4. What specific challenges does your country face in enforcing laws against child trafficking?
5. What successful policies or initiatives from other countries could be adapted to improve your country's approach to combating child trafficking?

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