

Post-Earthquake Human Trafficking in Indo-Nepal Terai Region and Cross-Border Integrated Response Mechanism

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Abstract

Disasters generally cause enduring, catastrophic damage and trauma to people and their families, homes, and communities. After disasters like earthquakes, already existing vulnerabilities increase manifold as people lose their lives and livelihoods, displaced from their native places, their support network is disrupted and they become more susceptible to human trafficking. In addition, limited resources divert the attention of law enforcement agencies toward instantaneous needs to save and rescue the people, making people more vulnerable to human trafficking with limited or no protection, women who have lost their family members, livelihoods, and homes, children who lost their parents or parted from their families, and immigrants are at risk for post-disaster human trafficking. These wobbly situations may encourage rapacious behavior as those impacted by disasters may be involved in risky work for their survival, which can increase the potential of human trafficking victims. Despite the gravity of this issue, the linkages between disasters and human trafficking have not received pragmatic attention. In this context, this study mainly explores the linkages between disasters and human trafficking with special reference to the post-earthquake situation of the Indo-Nepal Terai region. This study mainly focuses on the post-earthquake circumstances resulting in human trafficking which continued later on for several months and years after the disaster in the Indo-Nepal Terai region. The study also focuses on concerns and responses taken by the country of origin and destination and underscores the urgent need for cross-border collaborative mechanisms to combat this illicit practice. This study relies entirely on secondary data sources and content analysis, supplemented by the creation of an earthquake



Article History

Received: 17 October 2024

Accepted: 27 December 2024


Keywords

Cross Border;
Disaster;
Human Trafficking;
Integrated Mechanism.

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Doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.12944/CWE.19.3.36>

vulnerability map for the Indo-Nepal Terai region. By shedding light on the intricate link between disasters and human trafficking, it highlights the critical need for pragmatic solutions and coordinated efforts to tackle this multifaceted issue. The findings emphasize the importance of proactive measures to safeguard vulnerable populations, ensuring that those already grappling with the aftermath of disaster are protected from further exploitation.

Introduction

Globally, human trafficking has been increasing and taking a commercial shape. According to a UNFPA report, published in 2000, every year there are estimated to be between seventy thousand to four million new victims¹ and the estimated profit in this emerging commercial activity is \$7 billion per year. Over 150,000 people are trafficked every year for human trafficking, bondage labor, forced marriage, and many more within South Asian countries.² Trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation is the most prevalent form of trafficking in the South Asian region. In South Asian countries the Indo-Nepal border is very susceptible to human trafficking. According to the Home Ministry data of Nepal, after the 2015 earthquake, there was a three-fold jump in cases of human trafficking³ and according to Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), these cases of illegally brought women and girls in India increased by 500% since 2013.⁴ According to the Sashastra Seema Bal at the Indo-Nepal border, 50 young boys and girls were found apprehended just after the earthquake on 24 April 2015.⁵ In 2015 two continuous major earthquakes took the lives of thousands of people in Nepal and the post-earthquake situation made approximately 28,000 women vulnerable and prone to trafficking.⁶ Indo - Nepal Terai region is the least developed area, acute poverty, social disadvantages, and frequent disasters make people more vulnerable. The vulnerability of the population provides a suitable ground for human trafficking. Not only the geographical (natural calamity due to the specific location of a country) and economic factors (poverty, low income, demands for jobs)⁷ but also the social practices such as child marriage, dowry system, etc. also provide favorable conditions for human traffickers to spread their arms.⁸

Various theories provide valuable insights into the factors contributing to human trafficking, offering perspectives from both natural disasters and the environment in which human trafficking could

occur. These theoretical frameworks shed light on vulnerabilities that may arise directly or indirectly from disasters or other socio-economic and structural conditions. For instance, the Opportunity Theory of Crime underscores the rational choices made by perpetrators in targeting victims, emphasizing their efforts to minimize the risk of exposure while maximizing the benefits of their actions.⁹ Research indicates that in the aftermath of disasters, traffickers often disguise themselves as aid workers to lure vulnerable individuals into exploitation. The Demand Theory examines the relationship between the demand for sex work in urban centers and the corresponding trafficking for sexual exploitation. In the India-Nepal context, studies highlight the significant demand for Nepali women in India's commercial sex market, further fueling trafficking activities.¹⁰ Also, particularly in the contemporary world, globalization, while facilitating the free movement of people across borders, has indirectly exacerbated human trafficking by increasing opportunities for exploitation. At the same time, the Neo-Classical Migration Theory, articulated by Lee¹¹ examines migration through push and pull factors, which is a major cause of human trafficking in the world and also relevant to the India-Nepal context. Nepalese citizens often migrate to India for better education, improved living standards, and enhanced economic opportunities. These factors serve as pull factors for India and push factors for Nepal. However, this migration pathway heightens susceptibility to trafficking, as exploiters frequently use deceptive means to prey on migrants seeking a better future.

Disasters do not care about physical or political boundaries. The Indo-Nepal Terai region is not only seismically fragile but socio-economically vulnerable, and being a border region provides a fertile ground for human trafficking. Whenever a disaster occurs around the international border, it is generally difficult to manage the countries that share their border with other countries. The border areas

become more vulnerable because each country has different policies, laws, and regulations.¹²

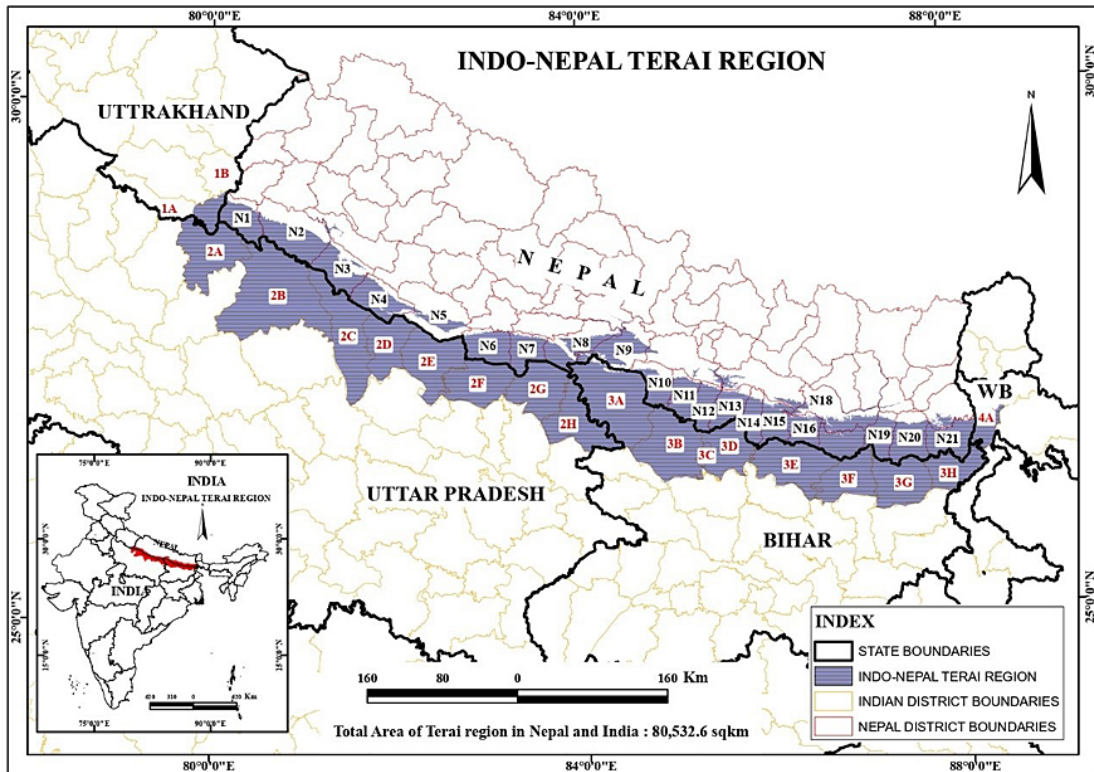
In this background, the present study has two main objectives

- Identifying the factors that increase vulnerability for human trafficking in earthquake-impacted areas.
- To analyze the integrated cross-border response to control human trafficking.

Material and Methods

Based on secondary data sources and content analysis the linkage between earthquakes and human trafficking is analyzed. The earthquake map is prepared by using a base map sourced from

the National Information Centre on Earthquake Engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, which has been georeferenced and digitized for both India and Nepal. The map is categorized into Very High, High, and Moderate risk zones. The different studies indicated that after the 2011 and 2015 earthquakes environmental, economic, social, and health vulnerabilities increased in the areas marked as high-risk zones. The data on trafficking cases suggested that the high-risk zone had more trafficking than other areas. Being a border region crime control needs an integrated strategy. The study also briefly describes the existing integrated cross-border mechanisms and their limitations and presents some suggestions.



Source: Source: District Census Handbook, Census of India, 2011 (The Census Organization, Govt. of India) and National Population Census, 2011 (Nepal Central Bureau of Statistics, Govt. of Nepal), Prepared by Authors, 2024

Map 1. Study Area: Indo-Nepal Terai Region

Study Area

The Indo-Nepal Terai region is a significant geographical and cultural area. The Terai or Tarai region is a lowland area lying at the foothills of the Himalayas.

The expansion of the Terai region is from the southern plains of Nepal and the northern part of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, extending into Uttarakhand, Bihar, and West Bengal. The Indo-

Nepal Terai region is a vital part of the subcontinent, known for its natural beauty, cultural diversity, and economic significance, especially in agriculture and trade between Nepal and India. The Terai region is distributed in 21 districts of Nepal and 19 districts of India (Map 1). These districts are.

Kanchanpur, Banke, Bardiya, Dang, Rupandehi, Kapilbastu, Nawalparasi, Kailal, Chitawan, Parsa, Bara, Dhanusa, Rautahat, Sarlahi, Mahottari, Sirha, Saptari, Sunsari, Udayapur, Morang, Jhapa are part of Nepal.

Uttarakhand (State) - Udham Singh Nagar, UP (State)- Pilibhit, Kheri, Behraich, Shrawasti, Balrampur, Siddharth Nagar, Maharajganj, Kushinagar, BIHAR (State)- W-Champaran, E-Champaran, Sheohar, Sitamarhi, Madhubani, Supaul, Araria, Kishanganj, WB (State) - Darjeeling are part of Indian terai region.

Human Trafficking

In the category of transnational crime human trafficking is considered one of the most heinous and challenging.¹³ It is the third largest crime after drugs and arms supply. It is considered an illicit business of human trade. There is a recorded increase in the number of men, women, and children caught by traffickers every year. Human trafficking is always done secretly. It is complex and has multiple dimensions. According to the United Nations Protocol, Trafficking in Persons mainly contains three elements to prevent, suppress, and punish human trafficking that are; An Act that encompasses the recruitment, transport, transfer, sheltering, or receipt of individuals. A Means that employs force to intimidate, various forms of coercion, kidnapping, fraud and deceit, exploitation of power, or manipulation of a vulnerable position to dominate a victim. A purpose that solely focuses on exploitation, not only limited to sexual exploitation but also forced labor, slavery, and the removal of organs.¹⁴ Traditionally, trafficking is associated with exploitative practices of women and girls into sexual exploitation. Worldwide almost 20 percent of all trafficking is associated with child exploitation.

Human trafficking is very clandestine so one cannot find out that a woman or children are being trafficked because in most cases traffickers are close relatives or family members. Fake marriages offers to get a

job in high-profile cities, and intriguing options to go abroad are some of the examples of ways traffickers lure victims. Human trafficking has four phases that are described in the following lines.

Initial Phase

In most of the cases of trafficking a strong involvement of close relatives has been found. Recruiters belong to the same place as the victims which is why they are well-versed and very familiar with the conditions of the victim's family as a friend, relatives, or neighbors. In this process victims are either sold by poor families or forced into fake marriages, sometimes they are promised employment in big cities, to get a proper education or lavish life but they end up being trafficked. In countries like Nepal people do not have choices for livelihood, especially in the post-earthquake situation when they lost everything at the time of disaster. Poor families are compelled to send their children abroad for better economic opportunities. Traffickers seem very active in post-earthquake situations.

Recruiting and Transportation

The victims depart from the source location with traffickers who play a significant role in the primary phase of trafficking. The transportation of victims occurs in two ways: first, within the national boundary, and second, across international borders. Traffickers take their victims to that safe place from where they can easily harbor them. The shocking part of this phase is that in most cases victims are not aware that they are being trafficked, sometimes they are even lured or exploited in the environment of social and economic circumstances.

Harboring and Transfer

The recruiters work in networks and this process needs a strong network connection between traffickers and transporters. Traffickers are well set in terms of cooperation with officials and police as well as in terms of legal documentation for overseas travel and the procedures of legal documentation are finalized by fraudulent agencies. Key trafficking agents range from individuals to agencies. Traffickers often show themselves as a guardian or spouse of the victims, it's a very easy and reliable method to escape from border checkpoints without getting acknowledged. At the borders, government officials are bribed to escape the capture.

Destination

Once the victims cross the nation they are fully in control of traffickers. At the destination stage victims are often kept enslaved, coerced, and routinely abused. They are forced into sex work or other forms of slavery

Earthquakes in the Indo-Nepal Terai Region

An earthquake is one of the most formidable natural disasters, and the entire Indo-Nepal Terai region falls within the seismic activity zone. An earthquake is defined as the trembling of the Earth triggered by a sudden shock. An earthquake, commonly referred to as a quake, tremor, or temblor, occurs due to the sudden release of energy within the Earth's crust, resulting in the generation of seismic waves. At the surface, this phenomenon manifests as ground shaking and, in some cases, ground displacement.

The impact of a significant earthquake, especially when its epicenter is located offshore, can lead to seabed displacement, potentially triggering a tsunami. Moreover, earthquakes can initiate landslides and, in rare instances, even volcanic eruptions. In a broader context, the term 'earthquake' encompasses any seismic event that produces seismic waves, whether it is a natural occurrence or induced by human activities. While geological faults are the primary causes of earthquakes, other factors such as volcanic activity, landslides, mine explosions, and nuclear tests can also generate seismic activity. The initial rupture point of an earthquake is referred to as its focus or hypocenter, while the epicenter is the location directly above the hypocenter on the Earth's surface. To analyze the earthquake impacts in the Indo-Nepal Terai region an earthquake map is prepared.

For the preparation of the earthquake map, Basemap is taken from the National Information Centre on Earthquake Engineering Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, and has been georeferenced and digitized for India and Nepal. Earthquakes that occurred in the past have been projected using coordinates obtained from the past events of earthquakes. Through the Kriging process under the Spatial Analyst tool tab raster density map is used for the earthquake. The raster density map will be converted into a vector map and classified into 3 zones.

Zone V

Very High-Risk Zone where the Rector Scale value is greater or equal to 7.

Zone IV

High-Risk Zone where earthquake on Rector Scale runs from 6.5 to 7.0.

Zone III

Moderate Risk Zone, where Earthquake on Rector Scale is from 6.0 to 6.5.

After the Zone Classification, the delaminated Terai region has been superimposed, and hence earthquake map is prepared.

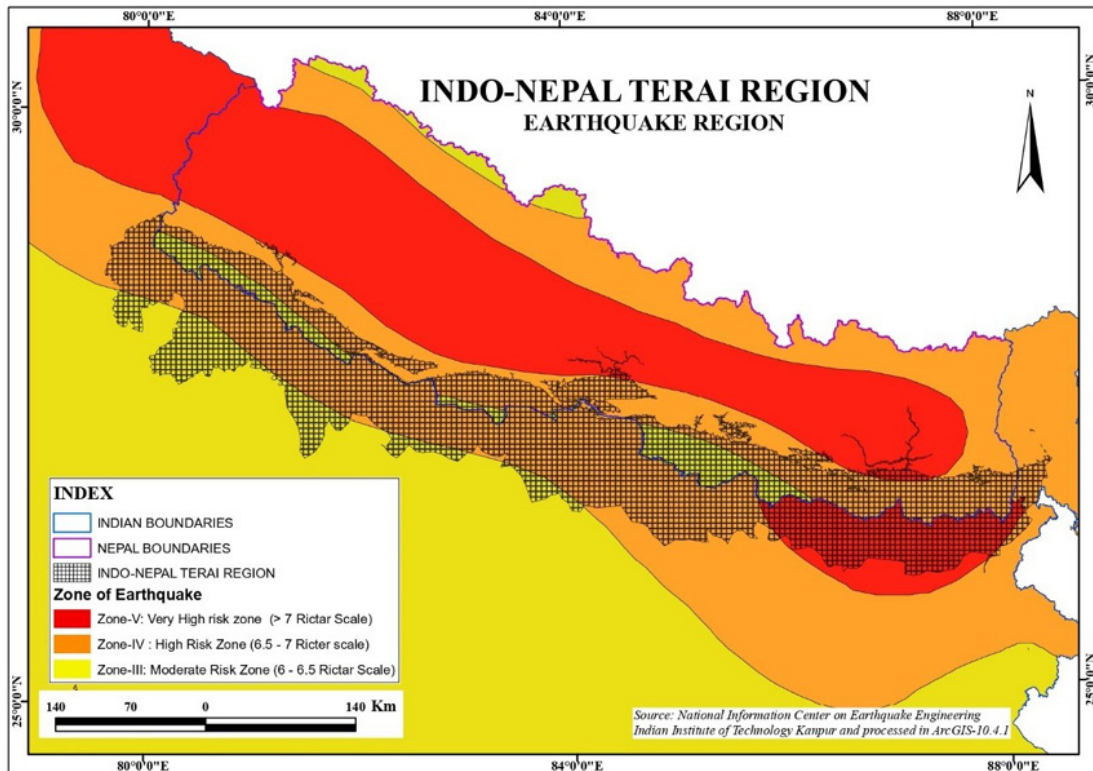
Upon scrutinizing the below-prepared map (Map 2), it becomes evident that the region shaded in red indicates Zone V, signifying a very high-risk zone for earthquakes. This visual representation unequivocally underscores the high vulnerability of the eastern Terai region, encircled by Zone IV, falling within the high-risk category. Furthermore, the central region of Nepal emerges as particularly susceptible to seismic activity, accentuating the need for heightened awareness and robust earthquake preparedness measures in these areas. The delineation of these risk zones serves as a critical tool for this particular study.

Pre and Post Earthquake Vulnerabilities

Vulnerability is a multi-dimensional and multilayered concept¹⁵ that encompasses various factors affecting individuals, communities, and systems. It is a crucial lens through which to understand the susceptibility of multiple entities to harm and their inability to cope with adverse impacts. This concept is often defined in terms of exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity.¹⁶ Exposure refers to the degree to which a system is exposed to significant hazards, while sensitivity denotes the system's propensity to be affected by these hazards. Adaptive capacity is the ability to adjust to potential damage, take advantage of opportunities, or respond to consequences. Hence, the extent of vulnerability varies by location, and different social groups experience exposure differently, resulting in varying levels of overall vulnerability.¹⁷ Vulnerability is typically characterized in negative terms, highlighting the susceptibility to harm. According to the frequently referenced IPCC

2007 definition,¹⁸ vulnerability is defined as the extent to which a system is prone to and incapable of coping with the adverse effects of climate change. Wisner (2016) also believes that people's vulnerability

should be defined by their lack of 'capacity' and their inability to anticipate dangers and take preventive measures.¹⁹



Source: National Information Centre on Earthquake Engineering Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, Prepared by Authors, 2024

Map 2. Earthquake Map of Indo-Nepal Terai Region

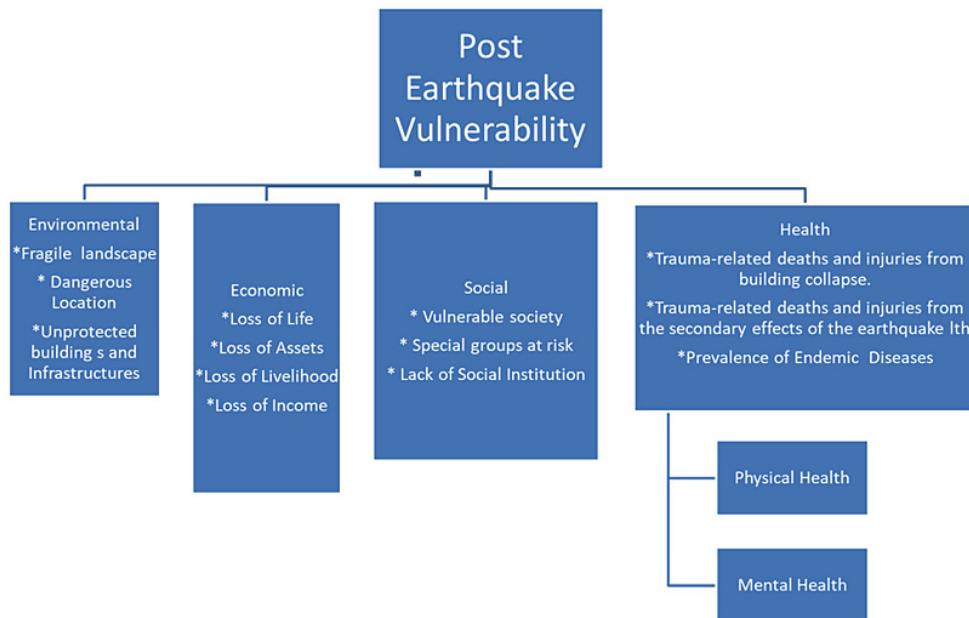
Recognizing and addressing the intersection between disaster vulnerability and human trafficking is crucial for protecting at-risk populations and preventing exploitation in the aftermath of natural disasters. Akee *et al* laid the foundational groundwork for research linking vulnerability and trafficking. Their comprehensive study, which included data from 187 countries, explored the correlation between vulnerability and cross-border trafficking. This research aimed to identify the vulnerability of potential trafficking victims by assessing economic, political, and international legislative variables.²⁰ Same way while looking at the Indo-Nepal Terai region it was found that India and Nepal share similar geographical and climatic conditions, making them

highly susceptible to a range of natural disasters due to their strategically critical location. Positioned within a tectonically active region and influenced by diverse climatic zones, both countries frequently experience earthquakes, floods, landslides, and other calamities. Due to recurring disasters, the Indo-Nepal Terai region has low social and economic status. Half of Nepal comes under the seismic zone as a result earthquakes are a very frequent disaster in Nepal. Sudden changes brought by earthquakes only exacerbate the problems that people face in their daily lives. Disaster snatches away people's land, homes, close ones, and livelihood options near the home and forces them to move out to unknown places. Two major, destructive earthquakes occurred

in 2015 rendering thousands of people homeless and millions died. During and after the earthquake, homeless people, particularly women and children below the age of 15 and dependent women became more vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation.²² The area affected by disaster faces extreme poverty, livelihood loss, and human rights violations which enhance the vulnerabilities and chances of trafficking. Earthquake-impacted areas generally observed economic vulnerabilities such as loss of livelihood and livelihood options, poverty, homelessness, etc., Social vulnerabilities like caste, religion, minority-based exclusion, disrupted families, disintegrated community life, orphan children, etc. and Psychological vulnerabilities such as deteriorating physical and mental health, scarcity of medical and counseling facilities, etc. Various reports show that trafficking is becoming more frequent in countries facing natural disasters, political instability, a lack of coordination between adjacent countries, or an insatiable administration.²³

Nepal is a country where a patriarchal social system is present and so is in terai areas of India. Male dominating society controls the lifestyle of women and gender bias only enhances this ill practice. In the Indo-Nepal Terai region, most of the women and

children do not have proper education, the condition became worse in 2015 due to the earthquake in the region as regular education was disrupted for a few years. They also do not possess legal rights in property which makes them dependent on their spouse or earning male members in families, hence in crisis females become vulnerable to exploitation. People are generally living in acute poverty and a large population is unemployed though geographical terrain, dependency on agriculture, improper facility of basic infrastructure, and prevalence of natural disasters are some of the reasons for existing poverty.²⁴ In Nepal, selling a girl child is a common practice in poor families to get the desired money and India serves as a prominent market for this.²⁵ Political unrest is another important component that influences sex trafficking in Nepa.²⁶ A politically unstable government can provide no assurance. Human rights and facilities for the backward classes can only be ensured by a responsible and stable government which has generally been missing in Indo -the Nepal Terai region for a long time. Identification of vulnerability factors present during and after the earthquake may help to better understand the ground situation so that the government could take precautionary initiatives to reduce human trafficking.



Source:Based on Birkmann (2006); Birkmann & Wisner (2006) and Adger (2006),

Fig. 1: Earthquake-related Vulnerabilities

Various studies²⁷ have identified multiple vulnerabilities²⁸ arising in the aftermath of disasters in specific regions around the world. Drawing upon these studies as references, this research has identified various dimensions of vulnerabilities and classified them into four major categories. The accompanying flowchart (Figure 1) illustrates the various types of vulnerabilities that emerged in the Indo-Nepal Terai region as a consequence of the 2015 earthquake.

These Vulnerabilities are

Environmental Vulnerability

In 2015 the post-earthquake conditions of fragile landscapes made life tough for the people. Unprotected buildings and infrastructure collapsed badly after hitting by the earthquake. The lack of safe residences and civic amenities caused the spread of various diseases. Problems like communication and transportation were the prime concern in post-earthquake situations. The government also faced problems in providing relief materials and rescuing victims.

Economic Vulnerability

loss of occupation and income sources left people hopeless. Poor people tend to sell their children for

a living or somehow, they are trapped by traffickers in false marriages of their daughters.

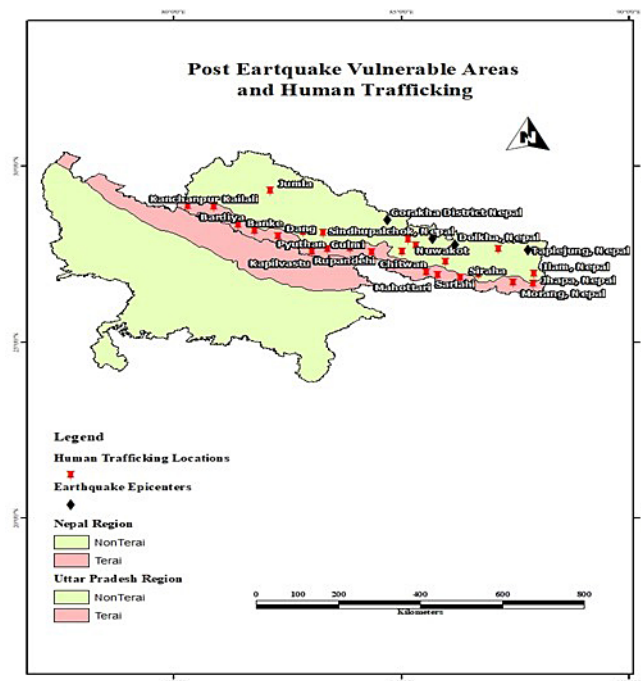
Social Vulnerability

At the time of the earthquake, it was seen that lower strata of society were at high risk. Women and children belonging to the excluded communities were at higher risk of trafficking because disaster converted social vulnerability into social chaos.

Health Vulnerability

Many people were injured due to the earthquake. The people who lost their close ones got traumatized. Trauma-related deaths and injuries from building collapses during and post-earthquake made a large population vulnerable. Low economic status made it nearly impossible to get the proper treatment of the injured. The shocking conditions of shattered life made people mentally and physically weak. These vulnerabilities directly impacted the increased number of human trafficking in the area.

The accompanying map (Map 3) depicts the region that has observed the increased human trafficking cases in the aftermath of earthquakes.



Source: Women and Children Service Directorate, Nepal Police, NHRC 2018, Prepared by Authors

Map 3: Post Earthquake Vulnerable Areas and Human Trafficking

Linkages Between Human Trafficking and Earthquake

Though it's a fact that human trafficking is prevalent in those countries or regions where poverty and unemployment exist it has also been seen that a region that is affected by any kind of disaster faces human trafficking more.

It can easily be seen in the Indo-Nepal Terai region that disasters provide a fertile ground for human trafficking to take place. Since the 2015 earthquake hit Nepal, national and international media have followed the trend of human trafficking, revealing the increased number of human trafficking in disaster-affected regions. It also revealed that earthquake-affected districts have a higher percentage of trafficked victims in the country. The Nepal Human Rights Commission noticed a 15 percent hike in the numbers of trafficking in post-earthquake months. Existing literary work and reports from official government sites and news have brought to light the fact that in the aftermath of major earthquakes especially after the 2015 earthquake, human traffickers are actively engaged in the devastated regions of Nepal. Earlier in 2011 the Sikkim earthquake

was felt across Nepal. During that 111 people died in Nepal, it also caused damage to buildings roads, schools, hospitals, basic infrastructure, loss of livelihood, and a reported increase in human trafficking.²⁹ In 2015 when the Gorkha earthquake and aftershocks hit Nepal, it not only displaced 2.6 million people, killed 9000 people, injured 22000 people, nearly 3.5 million people became homeless, and destroyed the livelihood of people.³⁰ It also increased the intensity of human trafficking in devastated regions.

The Gorkha earthquake was followed by the Kathmandu earthquake occurred on 12th May 2015. In this aftershock, 200 people died, 2500 were injured and 100 people became homeless increasing human trafficking.³¹ The following table (Table 1) illustrates a significant rise in reported cases of human trafficking at the Indo-Nepal border following the 2015 earthquake. The number of trafficking cases surged to 73 in 2015, compared to just 8 cases reported in 2014. This sharp increase underscores the heightened vulnerability of populations in the aftermath of natural disasters, as traffickers exploit the socio-economic disruptions and weakened protective measures that often follow such events.

Table 1: Trafficking Cases, Arrested Traffickers, and Rescued Victims along the Nepal-India Border, 2012-2017

Year	Trafficking Cases	Arrested Traffickers	Rescued Victims
2012	8	7	72
2013	14	19	108
2014	8	8	133
2015	73	102	336
2016	76	148	501
2017	147	152	607
2018 (Till February)	28	40	94

Source: Times of India, March 31, 2018.³²

Trafficking at Indo-Nepal Border

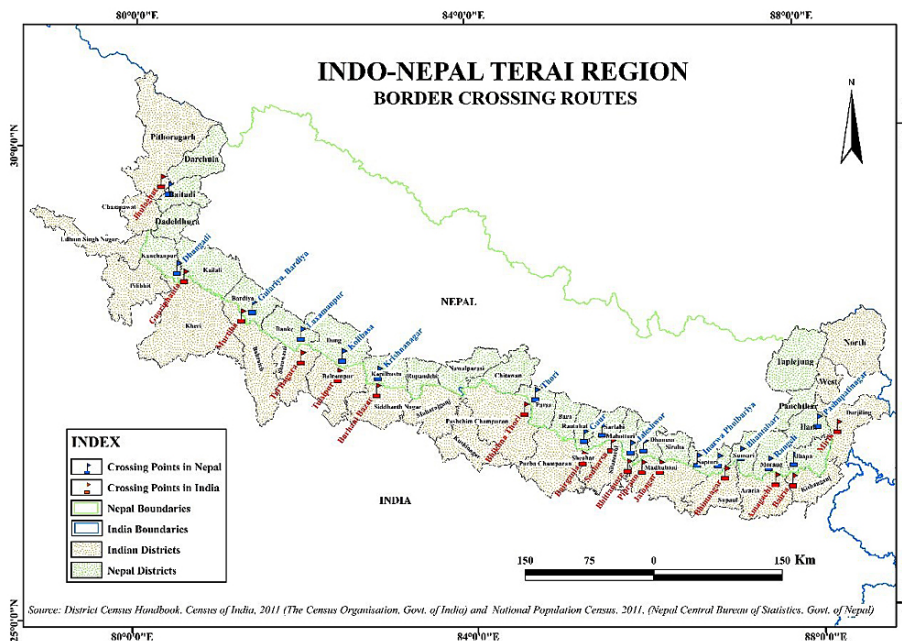
The Indo-Nepal Terai region is recognized as a physically and socio-economically vulnerable area, primarily due to its susceptibility to frequent natural disasters. The devastating earthquake in Nepal further accentuated these vulnerabilities, leading to a significant surge in human trafficking cases, as reported and documented by various organizations

and agencies. Beyond the challenges posed by its geographical fragility and socio-economic constraints, this region's unique status as a border area exacerbates its risks. A substantial portion of the border remains unguarded, creating fertile ground for clandestine activities such as human trafficking to thrive. India and Nepal share a 1751-kilometer-long open boundary, which mostly falls in the Indo-

Nepal Terai region, here people can freely travel across the border. India and Nepal both have long historical and cultural ties. At the adjacent region of the border, Nepali and Indian people share nearly the same way of life. During the disasters as a neighboring country, India and Nepal cooperated and helped each other. The Terai region of Nepal shared borders with 4 Indian states Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal west, south and east respectively. Nepal is a landlocked country and for the transportation of various goods, it is dependent on Indian ports. It comes under the category of least developing country which is somewhere the result of autocratic kingdom rule and ten years long Moist people’s war. Due to the bad governance, Nepal is still crawling into poverty. Free migration across borders and existing poverty have made human trafficking a dangerous misconduct for both countries.³³ The open border between India and Nepal facilitates the human trafficking of Nepali women, children, and men through this route. Frequent disasters are also a major reason for human trafficking. Particularly the region that was devastated by the 2015 earthquake emerged as a major source region for human trafficking. People

from both countries are free to enter and exit from anywhere from the border. There is no need for a visa to travel across the country. In such a long border only 22 checkpoints are patrolled by guards and police.³⁴ The absence of heavy patrolling along the borders provides easy access to the racketeers through remote areas. The seed of open borders was sowed in the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which provided equal access to the people of both countries.

Notably, perpetrators exploit these border routes for human trafficking, taking advantage of the ease of cross-border movement. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)^{35,36} has identified specific trafficking routes, as illustrated in the accompanying map (Map 4). This vast and porous boundary has given rise to several unofficial routes that are frequently exploited by traffickers to evade detection. Notable among these infamous trafficking routes are Jhuleghat-Mahakali, Tulsipur-Koilabas, Barahni-Krishnanagar, Bikhna-Thori, Bhimanagar-Bhantabari, Baria-Gauriganj, Jainagar-Inarwa, Mirik, and Pashupatinagar.



Source: District Census Handbook, Census of India, 2011 (The Census Organization, Govt. of India) and National Population Census, 2011 (Nepal Central Bureau of Statistics, Govt. of Nepal), Prepared by Authors, 2024

Map 4: Border Crossing Routes For Human Trafficking in Indo-Nepal Terai Region

These routes, often inadequately monitored due to resource constraints, provide traffickers with opportunities to carry out illicit activities, further complicating the efforts to combat trafficking in the region because securing 1,750 kilometers, long border by border police from both nations, poses significant challenges for effective monitoring.

Nepal is considered a source country for human trafficking in the South Asian region. Various studies demonstrate that this heinous crime is a severe problem for both countries, whether within the country or from Nepal to India. India is an intermittent country for this illicit business as well as a destination country for the people who are trafficked from Nepal. Each year around 12000 people are trafficked from Nepal to the Middle East, Europe, and other parts of Asia along with India. There are 19 Indian and 21 Nepalese districts attached along the border. Kathmandu is a source hub for trafficking victims gathered from all bordered towns and transported to the big cities of India i.e. Delhi, Mumbai, and

Kolkata.²⁸ These cities act as destination points and at the same time, they are transit zones as well. Victims were trafficked to the Middle East, North Pacific, and European regions, for transportation of victim traffickers used train, bus, or flight routes via border districts. Maximum cases of trafficking which is one-fourth of the total are registered in 10 districts of Nepal i.e. Kathmandu, Rupandehi, Banke, Kanchanpur, Sunsari, Jhapa, Chitwan, Makawanpur, Bardiya, and Parsa.³⁹ These 10 districts are traditionally regarded as high-risk areas for trafficking in Nepal. In a study, Shastra Seema Bal (SSB) of India has identified 9 significant routes for trafficking at the Indo-Nepal border (as shown in Map 3): Mahendranagar – Banbasa, Dhangarhi- Palia, Nepalganj – Rupandehi, Krishnanagar- Barhri, Bhairhawa – Sonauli, Maheshpur – Thoothibari, Birganj – Raxaul, Biratnagar – Jogbani, and Kakerbhitia – Panitanki. The SSB report indicates a significant rise over the years in trafficking cases, arrests of traffickers, and rescues of victims.⁴⁰

Table 2: Rescued Trafficking Survivors and Registered Trafficking Cases by Nepal Police, 2017-18

Province	Districts	Trafficking Cases	Trafficking Survivors				
			Females	Males	Children	Adult	Total
Province 1	Jhapa, Illam, Morang, Udayapur, Sankhuwasava	21	34	3	15	22	37
Province 2	Parsa, Sarlahi, Mahottari, Siraha	8	21	0	6	15	21
Province 3	Chitwan, Makwanpur, Nuwalkot, Sindhuli	6	13	0	1	12	13
Province 4	Nawalparasi-East	1	1	0	1	0	1
Province 5	Nawalparasi-West, Rupandehi, Kapilbastu, Gulami, Dang, Pyuthan, Banke, Bardiya	56	125	5	29	101	130
Province 6	Jumla	2	14	39	53	0	53
Province 7	Kailali, Kanchanpur	9	13	0	6	7	13
Valley	Kathmandu	1	2	0	0	2	2
	Total	104	223	47	111	159	270

Source: Women and Children Service Directorate, Nepal Police, NHRC 2018

NHRC Nepal Report 2018 shows that Province 1 and Province 5 of Nepal have a greater number

of trafficking cases (Table 2) Province 5 which represents the Terai region of Nepal. If we relate

it to the Gorkha earthquake, we can understand the phenomena that cause trafficking. In the post-earthquake period particularly after 2015, there is a hike in the number of trafficking in persons. Below the data collected from the Women and Children Service Directorate of Nepal shows the maximum number of trafficking 56 is in province 5.

Integrated Cross-Border Mechanism

The Indo-Nepal Terai region, marked by its vulnerability to frequent natural disasters, remains fragile in multiple dimensions, including its socio-economic structure and governance mechanisms. The study underscores a critical gap in the bilateral efforts of India and Nepal, particularly the absence of a formal mechanism to address post-disaster challenges and combat human trafficking, which often intensifies in the aftermath of such crises. Despite India's commendable role as a first responder in providing humanitarian assistance as acknowledged by the Embassy of India in Kathmandu, the broader bilateral response falls short in curbing the systemic issue of trafficking.

Both India and Nepal are signatories to the SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters, which aims to enhance regional cooperation in disaster preparedness and response. However, the effectiveness of this agreement has been limited, as studies indicate that political challenges and strained relations among SAARC member states have significantly impeded its implementation. These challenges have hindered the development of cohesive strategies and collaborative mechanisms, undermining the potential of the agreement to address the region's vulnerability to natural disasters effectively. Consequently, despite the agreement's framework, practical execution and cross-border cooperation remain weak, highlighting the need for renewed political will and commitment to overcome these obstacles and strengthen regional disaster response systems.

In the context of combating human trafficking, both India and Nepal have demonstrated their commitment to international frameworks by ratifying the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which encompasses fundamental human rights, including protections against

human trafficking. Both nations have also aligned with international standards by adopting the definition of human trafficking outlined in the UNODC Palermo Protocol, demonstrating their commitment to combating this crime. Furthermore, India has ratified the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution, highlighting its efforts to strengthen regional cooperation on this issue. Acknowledging the open border between India and Nepal and content analysis both countries need a policy against human trafficking to develop a healthy cross-border integrated response mechanism including systematic disaster response. Human trafficking is a sensitive matter according to human rights so this serious crime needs a well-established mechanism to deal with the intensity of this crime. Many examples are there that define that there is a lack of assistance between India and Nepal in the rescue process of victims. Like India and Bangladesh have a memorandum of understanding to fight against cross-border trafficking, India and Nepal also need a formal anti-trafficking agreement. A formal mechanism to address the socio-economic and human rights problem with trafficking is highly required. Therefore, it is the need of the hour to recognize trafficking as a legal, social, and economic human rights problem in both the Indian and Nepalese governments. With the help of bilateral legal agreements, countries can provide help to those organizations who are actively working in this sector like civil society and non-governmental organizations. Establishing such a framework is crucial for fostering coordinated action and enhancing cross-border collaboration to effectively tackle this critical challenge.

Conclusion

Given the shared geo-climatic conditions and susceptibility to natural disasters, India and Nepal must establish a bilateral mechanism for disaster risk reduction. Such disasters not only amplify physical and social vulnerabilities but also create a cyclical pattern of hardship for populations residing in disaster-prone areas, making it exceedingly difficult for them to recover without substantial government intervention. Without coordinated efforts, these regions risk falling further behind in terms of development and resilience.

Additionally, the socio-economic disruptions caused by disasters significantly heighten the risk of human trafficking, as vulnerable populations become easy targets for exploiters. Therefore, it is essential to formulate bilateral policies that address human trafficking comprehensively, transcending political boundaries. These policies must integrate disaster risk reduction strategies with targeted anti-trafficking measures to ensure the safety and well-being of affected communities, fostering sustainable development and cross-border cooperation. Apart from it India and Nepal both have registered similar tendencies of trafficking. Another major reason for trafficking in persons is the political instability of a nation and internal conflicts and also borrowing money from traffickers and being forced to work to pay their debts. In response to human trafficking, it is a matter of precise consideration that an integrated framework is a core demand to prevent, prosecute suspects, and protect victims of trafficking. From the perspective of global human rights, it is much needed to protect humanity.

More academic research on human trafficking and its linkages with disaster is needed to spread awareness about the clandestine nature of this crime. Information sharing and collaboration between Governments and NGOs are also urgent. Similarly, a mechanism to prevent cross-border trafficking is suggested.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the University of Delhi for granting the Ph.D. research work and providing the collaborative environment to pursue this research.

Funding Sources

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) do not have any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

This statement does not apply to this article.

Ethics Statement

This research is focused on human trafficking. Although the study is based on secondary sources, ethical standards are followed for using and analyzing all information related to human trafficking.

Informed Consent Statement

This study is mainly based on secondary sources and did not involve human participants as the primary source of information, therefore, informed consent was not required.

Author Contributions

- **Smrity Upadhyay and Dr. Kavita Arora** : Writing
- **Shubham Kumar Sanu**: Formatting

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