Title: Rethinking the victim–offender binary: victimhood, consent, and complicity in human trafficking in Bangladesh

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Abastact: This research investigates human trafficking in Bangladesh through a critical interrogation of the victim–offender dichotomy, with a specific focus on how roles within trafficking networks are shaped, constrained, and transformed over time. Semi-structured interviews with 46 key stakeholders, including victims, academics, law enforcers, and service providers, were conducted. Thematic analysis of interview data explores recruitment dynamics, structural factors sustaining trafficking, and the fluidity of victimhood and perpetration. The results demonstrate that recruitment frequently operates through close social and familial ties, where trust and obligation are mobilised to legitimise deceptive migration opportunities. Economic precarity, manifested through poverty, unemployment, and debt, significantly constrains agency, rendering high-risk migration a rational survival strategy rather than an informed choice. Significantly, the article shows how some victims later assume intermediary or recruitment roles, often under coercion or misinformation, which often blurs conventional distinctions between exploitation and complicity. Employing the concepts of constrained agency and role reversibility, the study challenges binary legal and policy frameworks that treat victimhood and perpetration as fixed categories. The insight contributes to trafficking scholarship by demonstrating how structural inequality reshapes moral, legal, and institutional responsibility. Finally, the article informs policy by advocating survivor-protective legal frameworks, accountability-focused recruitment governance, and gender-responsive protections that strengthen access to justice and reduce re-victimisation.

Keywords: Human trafficking Structural factors Traffickers Exploitation Victims

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