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## **NEED FOR RELIEF AGAINST OBJECTIFYING WOMEN WITH REFERENCE TO PATRICIA MCCORMICK'S SOLD**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Child sex trafficking is a horrific instance of human fiendishness. Each year thousands of young children are sold off by their near and dear ones for sexual labour. This research paper aims to highlight the plight of prostitutes and how this perturbs the author and the readers. It also focuses on how the author critiqued the practice of child sex- trafficking and its everlasting devastating impact on the victims. It also discusses the economic and socio-cultural factors that influence child sex trafficking, especially in Nepal and India. 'Sold' novel is the primary data source. In addition, potentially relevant articles and research papers are referred for a systematic review and community-based study. The paper also discusses the societal and family status of sex workers and the legal aspects as portrayed in the novel. Trafficking is particularly prevalent in the downtrodden regions, and women and children are the most vulnerable to this crime. We can protect the rights of children and women and provide them with the dignified life they deserve by spreading awareness to awaken people's minds about the gravity of the situation.

**Keywords:** Sex-trafficking, Prostitution, sex-workers, trauma, societal acceptance, identity

## **Introduction**

Child sex trafficking is the act of recruiting, transporting or patronizing children, especially girls, for commercial sexual activities. Siddharth Kara (author and activist) considers "prostitution equivalent to sex trafficking." The interpretation of sex trafficking varies widely, creating perplexity about what constitutes trafficking.

This human rights violation has affected millions of children across the globe. It has taken a heavy toll on the world and acts as either a place of origin or the destination for the victims. The advancement in technology has resulted in increasing instances of trafficking. The trafficker uses social media platforms to bait these young girls. Also, the dark web provides a platform for worldwide marketing, and it is now a convenient method of communication between the traffickers. Trafficking occurs underground in a clandestine manner; hence it often goes unidentified.

Girls mainly belonging to tribal, Dalit or other economically weaker sections of the society are targeted. The offenders, often called traffickers, lure these young girls into providing jobs in cities or other perks. They build trust-based relationships or friendships with the girls and recruit the victims. As the saying goes, 'There ain't no such thing as free lunch,' they succumb to sexual slavery. The trafficker traps them behind economic, emotional, and psychological pressure bars. They are brutally tormented and are conditioned not to approach law enforcement. Furthermore, once they are proven useless, they are left hopeless in the streets. The social stigmatization further rubs salt in the wound.

The victims are migrated from neighbouring countries like Nepal into the red-light districts of India. They generally belong to poverty-driven families who are either coerced or sold off by their families for money. It is a common notion in society to think girls are merely an economic burden, and they would at least be of some help by selling their dignity with their bodies. At one moment, she sits by her mother drinking tea, while in the next, she is seen lying amidst the heap of drugged girls. It is such a sorry state of affairs when she can no longer be sure if she will wake up in her bed or a brothel.

The occurrence of commercial sex trafficking is influenced by family instability, conflicts, oppression, civil strife, war, and other socio-economic circumstances. Mitigating these factors would result in plummeting the cases of sex trafficking. Demeaning and belittling the female sex and lack of education make them vulnerable to a greater extent. The lack of proper scrutiny

in and around the borders, improper enforcement of border officials and their inadequacy often facilitates trafficking.

The victims undergo extreme brutality and experience physical violence and sexual abuse. This adversely impacts the victim's physical and mental well-being and is at the mercy of every malefactor. They also become more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases like HIV, malnutrition, drug addiction and mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorders, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety disorders and worse of all, suicidal tendencies. However, the knowledge about the mental health needs of the victims is relatively less and even lesser about the severe impacts of these serious mental health disorders. The health professionals should perform a full-body physical check-up on the victims, and mental health professionals particularly need to be aware of the potential trafficking risks. Any suspicion must be thoroughly examined to safeguard these vulnerable groups.

"Remember that every person on the streets, in a club, on the internet, in a hotel room, WHEREVER they may be, have families and loved ones and hearts just as you do, and that they are worthy and enough. When you see us, could you just offer a small smile? Extend a small bit of compassion even though you may not personally understand? Small, simple actions have the potential to make a large impact, and now is the time more than ever before." — [Melissa Diehl](#), a survivor of human trafficking.

## Literature Review

- *Child Sex Trafficking*- A descriptive article on child sex trafficking by The United States Department of Justice. It covers aspects of International Sex Trafficking of minors, Domestic Sex Trafficking, and victims of Prostitution.
- *What We Know About How Child Sex Trafficking Happens*- This blog provides an overview of migrating victims and how traffickers tend to prey on people.
- *Sex-trafficking, Violence, Negotiating Skill, and HIV Infection in Brothel-based Sex Workers of Eastern India, Adjoining Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh* (Sarkar, 2008 )- This research paper is a community-based study conducted in the brothels of West Bengal to analyse the sex trafficking, sexually transmitted diseases and brutality endured by sex workers.
- *Rescued, Rehabilitated, Returned: Institutional Approaches To The Rehabilitation Of Survivors Of Sex Trafficking In India And Nepal* (Locke, 2010)- A thesis focuses on the

challenges faced by victims of sex trafficking in India and Nepal and also analyses the rehabilitation mechanism in place.

- *Psychological consequences of child trafficking: an historical cohort study of trafficked children in contact with secondary mental health services* (Ottisova, 2018)- A qualitative research paper that aims to highlight the aspects of mental health of a victim of sex trafficking.
- *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery* by Siddharth Kara (Burkhalter, 2008)- An account of the economic aspects of trading a woman and child's bodies.
- *Trafficking in Humans: The Slavery of Our Age* (Vlachová, 2005)- This essay deals with the scope of human trafficking, the factors responsible, and the risks to which the victims are exposed.
- *"We all like to think we've saved somebody:" Sex Trafficking in Literature*, by Donna M. Bickford (Bickford, 2012)- This essay analyses sex trafficking as portrayed in literature and news media. It critiques society's perception and the much-needed changes concerning sex trafficking and its impacts.
- *The Identity Of The Trafficked Child In Young Adult Literature: Patricia McCormick's Sold* (Alobeytha, Mohamed, & Rahman, 2018)- A comparative analysis on the impact of sex trafficking on the victim and their life prior to it with reference to the novel 'Sold.'
- *McCormick, Patricia (2006). Sold.* (Greta Nelson, 2007)- A complete analysis and review of the novel 'Sold'

## Research methodology

This research is based on Qualitative research methodology. In this paper, the ramifications of child sex trafficking are studied with reference to Patricia McCormick's novel Sold.

## Research questions

1. What is the plight of child sex workers?
2. What is the social status of prostitutes?

## Research objectives

1. To develop and suggest rehabilitation and better coping mechanism for the victims
2. To examine the societal impression of prostitutes
3. To study the legal aspects to favour the sex workers

## Analysis

Child sex trafficking has grown into a vast appalling business globally. This paper examines this heinous crime with reference to Patricia McCormick's novel *Sold*.

### About the book:

Lakshmi, the protagonist, is a 13-year-old girl living with her hardworking mother, incompetent step-father, her baby brother and her goat named Tali. Though they were a poor family living in the mountains of Nepal, yet she was an exuberant girl, who found happiness in little things. The torrential rain was an economic catastrophe for her family. The crops were washed away and were left impoverished. Lakshmi then happens to cross paths with 'Auntie Bimla' - a disguised trafficker who offers her a job in the city. Her step-father sold Lakshmi for merely 800 rupees and was sent away with Bimla. She introduces Lakshmi to her Uncle Husband who under the pretext of being her saviour crosses the border and bring her to a place called 'Happiness House'. Mumtaz who takes charge of this place sent Lakshmi to a small room, where a man tries to sexually abuse her. She then learns about the "work" she was brought here for. She refused to sell her body, but soon realised she was living at the mercy of Mumtaz. She was drugged and sent for sexual labour. After multiple such instances, she gives in to her fate and struggles to cope in the Happiness House. She eventually learns about the other ladies, and how they ended up there. She soon befriends Harish, son of prostitute Pushpa, who offers to teach her Hindi. The tentative joy that Lakshmi has built eventually shatters as her newfound friends leave the brothel. One fine day, Lakshmi meets an American social worker disguised as a customer. He gives her hope to finally break the clutches of prostitution. After waiting in the little gleam of hope, the American comes with a non-corrupt policeman. Walking towards them, she tells him her name and age.

### The plight of sex-workers

"[t]he woman looks me over head to toe, then addresses my stepfather. 'How much do you want for her?' she asks her veil to her lips" (McCormick, 2006, p. 56). Her stepfather thought of her solely as a commodity who'd provided him money to gamble away. Auntie Bimla and

her stepfather bargained the price. Lakshmi was in the dark, while Auntie Bimla made a remark on her hips and body. 'She has no hips ... And she's plain as porridge. I'll give you five hundred.' (McCormick, Sold, 2006, p. 56). The final price of 800 rupees was put on her. Her entire worth and value were reduced to the shape and size of her body. Is she worth only 800 rupees? - a question to be pondered upon. The young girls who are trafficked are traded as commodities having no self-value and self-esteem.

This is just the beginning of the end. The sex workers are subjected to extreme brutality and mistreatment. They are exposed to various kinds of physical and mental abuse. Lakshmi is brought to the 'Happiness House'- which is anything but happy. At first, she thinks Mumtaz is her mistress and she will have to work hard for her family to have the shiniest tin roof in the mountains. She had been dilatory in understanding what lay in store for her. When Lakshmi refused to sleep with the customer, Mumtaz grabs her by the hair and drags her across the room. When Lakshmi rebels against Mumtaz she cuts her hair off, then threatens her by placing the scissor at her neck. She is locked in her room and each morning Mumtaz beats her with a leather strap. Lakshmi's persistence against being sexually exploited led a hand in battling violence and hunger. She was aware that only her resistance would deter her from prostitution. This incited Mumtaz and she made Lakshmi drink drugged lassi on the pretext of forgiving her. She then let her get raped by Mr Habib. 'My head throbs. My mouth is parched. I stand on shaky legs. Then collapse on the bare floor, the pain between my legs like a searing coal.' (McCormick, Sold, 2006, p. 124). She uttered a yelp as she was burning, bleeding and aching but her agony dried up unheard. She lost her identity somewhere in between the long-standing sexual abuse.

It is increasing onerous for the women who have children. Once a woman bears a child, they are bound not to leave by the shackles of debts made to nurture their child. If not, they would mercilessly be thrown out on the streets. The relentless dwelling at the brothel compelled the prostitutes to keep an eye out for the rich clients who would tip them big. They accumulated this money to pay off their debt to Mumtaz. It is the bitter truth that they had to pay the debt to free their own body. Mumtaz had hired men who would track down people who tried to escape and beat them to death. If the prostitutes are infected by sexually transmitted diseases they were thrown out and would be battered if they tried to enter again. Double-crossing Mumtaz meant she would put hot chilli inside them. They would be left to wail and writhe in agony all night.

Living in 'Happiness House' was nothing less than a torment for them. At the end of the day, they simply shut their eyes in anguish. The trauma of living in a brothel was unforgettable as it was etched on their mind and body.

### **Social Status of a prostitute**

The identity of the victims of trafficking is destroyed and are identified merely as prostitutes. They are disregarded by society and are treated as untouchables who do the filthy work. Society rules out the wretched conditions of sex workers and tyrannizes them. Even the own family abandons and disowns these sex workers despite being aware that they were trafficked.

Monica repays her debt to Mumtaz and leaves the brothel to return back home. Just within a few days, she returns to the brothel. "She shrugs her shawl, revealing arms and shoulders covered in angry purple bruises" (McCormick, Sold, 2006, p. 197). She says that her father did this with his cane. "When they heard I was coming they met me outside the village and begged me not to come back home and disgrace them" (McCormick, Sold, 2006, p. 198). Her family did not even allow her to meet her daughter and told her that her mother was dead. They are even disowned by their own families. Society fails to understand that women don't enter this business by choice but destitution forces them into prostitution. They are just exploited to earn and are subjected to extreme stigma, betrayal and dehumanisation that they end up numbing their feelings. Prostitution is a dead end to women and they cannot choose to leave the cage. Even if they do, they have either lost their identity or it has been tarnished to such an extent that they are forced to forget themselves. The author addresses the issue of identity by making Lakshmi repeat and reiterate her name and her roots every now and then.

Despite being the victim, they feel guilty and embarrassed about the abuse that befell them. Furthermore, in cases where the girl is very young, they are not even aware of being abused or even what is abuse. They have no scope for socio-emotional well-being and become desensitized to survive in the treacherous environment. Society's responsibility is to stop victim-blaming and accept and respect the victims of this heinous crime. Rehabilitation centres should provide an environment for holistic development, including family acceptance, safety and the much-needed care and affection to free them from irreparable psychological damages.

The true face of prostitution should penetrate under the thick-skinned society. Only then will society accept and empathise not sympathise with the agency of prostitution.

### **Legal Aspects**

‘Policemen are supposed to stop people like Mumtaz from selling girls... But she gives this one money each week and he looks the other way.’ (McCormick, Sold, 2006, p. 162) It is both infuriating and disappointing when the one whose job is to protect the law, lends a helping hand in exploiting it. Corruption in law enforcement agencies is one of the factors in increasing cases of child sex trafficking. When the protector becomes the adversary, social injustice will soar.

If the business of prostitution is illegalised then it will adversely impact the sex workers since they have nowhere to turn for help. The sex workers are abused and enslaved in the brothels. They are threatened against approaching the law for recourse and in some instances, the guilt of being a wrongdoer restricts them. The victims are masked by the pretence that they are the offenders of the law. In addition, if they escape their servitude, they fear that the traffickers might harm them or their families. In cases when the victim is trafficked across countries, they are often fearful of being deported or jailed. Consequently, they express their distrust of law enforcement officials. Therefore, they are hesitant to approach law enforcement agencies to protect and safeguard their rights.

### **Conclusion**

The novel *Sold* displays the unfortunate, neglected, and the bitter realities and vulnerabilities faced by the sex workers. It also portrays and elucidates the plight of the sex workers. Inequality is so firmly etched in the heart of the society, that unacceptance of the underprivileged is normalised. This book by highlighting the instances of exploitation of the sex workers requires the people to open their hearts and empathise with them. Like, Lakshmi, there are thousands of children who are victims of sex trafficking who alienate their bodies from themselves. They lose their identity, ergo lose their whim to survive. A sex worker is a human being too, having a heart, soul and feelings but they are treated as nothing more than objects for pleasure. It is high time that the objectification of a woman’s body needs to stop. It is the people who can question the injustice and unfairness and put an end to it. Society should realise that disowning



and dehumanising this community translates to their malformed minds. Prostitution should be humanised not romanticised.

A smile leads a long way, even if one cannot support the victims financially or otherwise, moral support is all they need to overcome the trauma. To them, love and care are the gleams of hope towards a better tomorrow.

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