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A Media Analysis of Changes in International Human Trafficking Routes from Nepal

Arjun Kharel, Sadikshya Bhattarai, Prajesh Aryal, Sudhir Shrestha, Pauline Oosterhoff and Karen Snyder

May 2022

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Summary

This study examined the media portrayal of different actors involved in human trafficking from Nepal to understand the reported changes in international routes of human trafficking from Nepal after 2015. The findings of the study are based on content analysis of 480 news articles published in six national newspapers in Nepal in a five-year period from 2016 to 2020, along with existing literature and interviews with newspaper reporters and editors.

Most of the alleged perpetrators reported in the media were male while females dominated reportage on 'victims'. An overwhelming majority of the reported victims of sex trafficking were females while the reported victims of labour trafficking were evenly split between males and females. This is in contrast to the actual distribution of male and female migrants from Nepal, where male workers lead female workers on labour permits for overseas employment by a margin of over 80 per cent. Analysis of the news articles showed that India still remains, as it has historically been, the top trafficking destination and transit country. Countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), North America, Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia have emerged as new destinations while Myanmar along with some countries in Europe, Africa, and Latin America have emerged as new transits for human trafficking from Nepal. The study recommends the allocation of resources for investigative journalism and training of reporters on robust reporting including critical gender analysis in order to improve the reporting of human trafficking in Nepali media. Coordination between government agencies and revision of counterproductive policies can contribute to curb human trafficking and encourage safe migration for employment.

Keywords

Nepal; human trafficking; media analysis; trafficking routes; gender; labour migration; labour trafficking; sex trafficking; trafficking in persons.

Authors

Arjun Kharel (PhD) is an assistant professor of sociology at Tribhuvan University and a research fellow at the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility at Social Science Baha, Kathmandu, Nepal. His research focuses on migration, labour, social change, and development.

Sadikshya Bhattarai (MSc) has been a research officer at the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility at Social Science Baha, Kathmandu, Nepal since 2019. Her professional background comprises work on diverse issues relating to migration and mobility, including internal and transnational migration, and livelihoods.

Prajesh Aryal (MA) is a researcher at the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility at Social Science Baha, Kathmandu, Nepal. He has research interests in different aspects of regional and international migration and its governance.

Sudhir Shrestha (MA) is a researcher at the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility at Social Science Baha, Kathmandu, Nepal. His research interests lie in labour, migration, and informal employment.

Pauline Oosterhoff (PhD, MA, MPH) has been a research fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK since 2014. Her research at IDS has focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights, modern-day slavery and labour migration, epidemics and humanitarian responses examining gaps between policies, plans, and local realities.

Karen Snyder (PhD, MPH) is an evaluator and researcher based in Vancouver, Canada with more than 25 years' experience improving policies and practices in anti-trafficking, human rights, health, and the environment.

Executive summary

Background

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS), in partnership with the Hamro Samman Project, has been conducting multiple multidisciplinary and action-research projects related to human trafficking in Nepal. The main objectives of this programme are: (a) to map trends in priority sectors, including trafficking of Nepali workers in the foreign labour migration process and trafficking in the adult entertainment sector within Nepal; (b) to improve the knowledge base on trafficking in persons (TIP); and (c) to identify what works in reducing human trafficking and improving service delivery to trafficking survivors and people at risk of being trafficked. IDS contracted with the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility at Social Science Baha to conduct this study.

The main objectives of the study were to understand the reported changes in international routes of human trafficking from Nepal for labour migration in the previous five years and examine the media portrayal of different actors involved in human trafficking, such as suspected victims, alleged perpetrators and actors involved in the identification process. Mixed methods were used to conduct the study, consisting of a review of existing data and publications on human trafficking, content analysis of news archives from six sampled national newspapers, and interviews with newspaper reporters and editors on issues surrounding human trafficking reporting.

The study used written news coverage as the primary source of data as media play an integral role in disseminating information on human trafficking. The media's portrayal and framing of news related to human trafficking play a vital role in shaping public perception and opinions. The media also have key roles in steering discussions in the political sphere and policy formulations.

Main findings of the study

Analysis of the media reports showed that most trafficking incidents were based on fraud or deception, wherein the traffickers lured or misled victims using false promises and aspirations. Labour trafficking and sex trafficking were the most reported examples of human trafficking. A high rate of reportage of labour trafficking in newspaper reports was consistent with the findings from the existing literature that incidents of trafficking in Nepal are increasingly linked with labour migration and foreign employment.

Most alleged perpetrators in the news reports were male, while females dominated reportage on 'victims'. The extremely high number of female 'victims' in news reports could have resulted from the focus of police and anti-human

trafficking organisations in Nepal on preventing independent women workers without a male 'guardian' from crossing the border into India while allowing free movement of male workers. Most reported victims originated from Morang, Jhapa, Dang, Sindhupalchowk, and Makwanpur districts. Among the top ten districts of origin for reported victims, six bordered India. Most of the top-ranked districts were also major female labour migrant-sending districts in Nepal, thus signalling a relationship between labour migration and human trafficking.

Similarly, media reports that disclosed information about interceptors mentioned security agencies such as the Nepal Police and Armed Police Force most often, closely followed by anti-trafficking non-governmental organisations. Apart from that, both the Nepal Police and anti-trafficking organisations coordinated with other welfare organisations and government authorities in other countries to facilitate the rescue and rehabilitation of victims, and prosecution of perpetrators.

The literature on the destinations and routes of human trafficking from Nepal shows that India, the Tibet Autonomous Region and Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region of China), South Korea and countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) were the major destinations of trafficked victims prior to 2016. The literature also notes the persistent use of land routes (i.e. across the Nepal–India open border) by traffickers in transporting victims to India as well as other countries. While analysing the trafficking destinations and transit areas reported in the news media for the years 2016 to 2020, it was observed that the list of destination and transit countries contained some usual and some new names every year. This suggested that the traffickers often explored new routes every year to take victims to their destination. The countries in the GCC, India, United States (US), European countries, and Australia were most often reported as destinations in the studied articles, while India, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Mexico were mentioned the most as transit countries in the five-year period covered by the study.

Most news articles simply reported incidents without exploring why and how they involved components of trafficking, and thus did not use a particular lens when reporting. Reporters in both the government and private media used failure of state, human rights, and poverty and economic deprivation as lenses of reporting. However, government media were less likely to use the frames of failure of state and human rights and more likely to use the lens of poverty and economic deprivation when reporting compared to private media.

Key recommendations

- Provide support for and emphasise the value of investigative news reporting for Nepal. This could be done by identifying barriers to investigative journalism and providing necessary incentives, including financial resources, to address these barriers.
- Train reporters on investigative and news reporting on migration, labour rights, and human trafficking issues to strengthen professional performance of reporters and quality of reporting. Training should be provided for robust research, fact checking, and effective communication of relevant human-trafficking news stories.
- Train reporters about analysis of changing pattern and form of human trafficking including critical gender analysis.
- Reform counterproductive policies such as restrictions on the mobility of female labour migrants that have made female migrant workers more vulnerable to forced labour and exploitation.
- Strengthen coordination between the Department of Foreign Employment and the Anti-Human Trafficking Bureau for managing and implementing counter-trafficking and -smuggling laws and policies. Reform and amend existing human trafficking and labour migration laws to incorporate changing forms of trafficking in persons in Nepal.

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Definition of terms and concepts used in the study

Forced labour: according to the International Labour Organization Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), forced or compulsory labour is 'all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily' (ILO 2021a).

Human trafficking: the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (commonly called the Palermo Protocol) defines 'trafficking in persons' as:

> *the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.*
> (UN 2000)

Labour migration: labour migration is defined as the movement of persons from their home state to another state for the purpose of employment (IOM n.d.).

Labour trafficking: as per the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, labour trafficking is 'the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery' (US Government 2000).

Sex trafficking: as per the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, sex trafficking is 'the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act' (US Government 2000). The Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act, 2007 of Nepal considers any of the following four activities, including voluntary sex work, as a form of human trafficking: the sale or purchase of a person for any purpose; engaging someone in prostitution, with or without any benefit; extracting human organs, except where otherwise determined by law; and participating in prostitution (GoN 2007).

Acronyms

AHTB	Anti-Human Trafficking Bureau
APF	Armed Police Force, Nepal
CESLAM	Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility
Covid-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	civil society organisation
DoFE	Department of Foreign Employment
FEA	Foreign Employment Act
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GoN	Government of Nepal
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
ILO	International Labour Organization
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NHRC	National Human Rights Commission
NOC	no-objection certificate
NPR	Nepali rupee
PCN	Press Council Nepal
SOP	standard operating procedure
SSB	Sashastra Seema Bal
TIP	trafficking in persons
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the research project

The Hamro Samman Project is a five-year programme generously supported by the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the British people through the United Kingdom's UK Aid and implemented by Winrock International. Its goal is to reduce the prevalence of trafficking in persons (TIP) in ten strategically selected districts of Nepal. Using the '4Ps' framework – prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership – the Hamro Samman project will bring together various stakeholders and implementing partners to reduce the prevalence of TIP. The Hamro Samman Project has engaged the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) as its international research partner to conduct multiple multidisciplinary, action-research projects using mixed-methods techniques to map trends in priority sectors including trafficking of Nepali workers in the foreign labour migration process and trafficking in the adult entertainment sector within Nepal; to improve the knowledge base on TIP; and to identify what works in reducing human trafficking and improving service delivery to trafficking survivors and people at risk of being trafficked.

IDS contracted with the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM) at Social Science Baha to conduct this study. CESLAM is a research centre set up to contribute to the understanding of labour and mobility through interdisciplinary research.

1.2 Context of the study: human trafficking and labour migration from Nepal

1.2.1 Prevalence of human trafficking from Nepal

Human trafficking from Nepal takes place under the guise of labour migration, child adoption, foreign employment, education, tourism, cross-national marriage, and cultural exchange programmes, among others (NHRC 2019; FWLD 2020). Data from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on human trafficking complaints for 2013/14 to 2016/17 also indicate fake marriage, employment, and foreign travel as important conduits of human trafficking from Nepal. An earlier NHRC study reports that Nepali men and women are trafficked overseas mainly for labour exploitation, but also increasingly for sexual exploitation in adult entertainment sectors (NHRC 2018).

A reliable estimate of the prevalence of TIP is always challenging due to the very nature of it operating covertly, and this also holds true in the case of Nepal where there is no nationally representative household survey with questions on trafficking. Some studies have used innovative approaches to measure the prevalence of TIP for bonded labour in major hotspots in Nepal, but they are limited in scope and do not offer nationally representative data on international human trafficking (Oosterhoff, Sharma and Burns 2017, 2020). According to the data made available by the Anti-Human Trafficking Bureau (AHTB) of the Nepal Police, between 100 and 300 TIP-related complaints were registered at the bureau each year in the previous five years, with the lowest number, 134 complaints, in 2020/21 (AHTB 2021) and the highest of 305 in 2017/18 (Hamal 2019). Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), an Indian border guard force, reported that the number of girls and women from Nepal trafficked into India for the purpose of sexual exploitation substantially increased from 72 in 2012 to 607 in 2017 (NHRC 2018).

However, the number of registered cases or identified victims or perpetrators based on cases registered is an inaccurate measure of the incidence of TIP. This could be because many victims may fall under the category of missing people (although their whereabouts cannot be directly attributed to trafficking). An additional possibility is that people are increasingly trafficked under the guise of foreign employment, but there are different laws and government bodies authorised to handle cases related to human trafficking and foreign employment in Nepal, and cases related to foreign employment are likely to be excluded from human trafficking data. A reliable estimate is also affected by problems in complaint registration (Thapa *et al*., forthcoming). Some victims may choose not to file complaints due to the stigma associated with trafficking, lack of awareness about what constitutes trafficking, and the power dynamics between trafficked people and traffickers (Murray *et al.* 2019; NHRC 2018; Thapa *et al*., forthcoming).

1.2.2 Potential changes in the pattern of human trafficking from Nepal

India has historically been the most common destination as well as transit country for international trafficking from Nepal, and this has been facilitated by the 1,700km open border between the two countries (Banerjee 2021; Mandal 2019a). Often, migrant workers make use of unauthorised channels to travel to different countries around the world via India, and in this way, they cross the border pretending to be patients travelling for medical check-ups in Delhi and other bigger urban centres (Gurung 2013), or to be visiting relatives on the other side of the border (Kharel 2016). The open border also results in the exchange of people for religious purposes, and traffickers smuggle victims by pretending to be part of pilgrimage tours (Maiti Nepal 2018). It is a challenging job for the border security agencies of both countries to regulate movements of people

along the hundreds of kilometres of open border. Identification of victims of trafficking among large groups of pilgrims is probably particularly challenging for officials, perhaps not only because of the large group sizes but also for fear of being accused of interfering with freedom of religion.

Anecdotal evidence and reports suggest that the pattern of trafficking has changed, particularly since 2015, with traffickers using different transit points and travel means to transport Nepali men and women to different countries around the world. One factor contributing to the change in trafficking patterns could have been the devastating earthquake of 2015, which aggravated the vulnerability of Nepali women and children to human trafficking, with the earthquake rendering thousands homeless and lacking adequate economic opportunities (Pragya n.d.; NHRC 2017). There is also some evidence of human trafficking in the transnational marriage of Nepali women in recent years. According to a 2018 NHRC report, more than 1,200 Nepali women have migrated to South Korea under the guise of marriage to Korean men, with many of them deceptively married to men in remote areas or to those with a disability and of an older age, among others (NHRC 2018). In one incident, the Nepal Police arrested ten people in August 2019, suspecting them of being involved in the practice of 'bride buying', where Nepali women were 'sold' to Chinese men in the name of marriage. Chinese men were reported to have paid around NPR1.5m (c. US$13,000) for a Nepali bride and many Nepali women were reported to have been the victims of gender-based violence, sex slavery, or unpaid labour after reaching China (Dhungana 2019).

Trafficking of Nepali men and women is also associated with foreign labour migration. The foreign employment sector has been contributing significantly to Nepal's macro- and microeconomics for a long time, with workers' remittances being the most reliable source of foreign currency in the country, which has a tremendous trade deficit. Many Nepali households also rely on remittances from migrant workers to meet their basic needs. The destination countries and routes of trafficking are reported to have undergone changes with time (Maharjan and Thapa 2017). While it was mainly to India, and through India to different destination countries, that Nepalis used to be transported, more recently traffickers have been transporting Nepali migrant workers to different labour destinations through Sri Lanka and Myanmar (US Department of State 2020), although still using the previous land route of India (Sapkota 2021).

The new systems of human trafficking in the past few years, in terms of the routes and destinations used by traffickers, may also be attributed partly to restrictive policies designed to control human trafficking in the guise of labour migration itself. For instance, the Government of Nepal in March 2017 placed a ban on Nepali workers' travel for domestic work, based on the recommendation of a parliamentary committee, the International Relations and Labour Committee.

However, such travel bans have become counterproductive (McCarthy 2021: 93). Existing literature shows that restrictive policies are likely to lead to other forms of human trafficking (ILO 2015; McCarthy 2021: 93). An International Labour Organization (ILO) report notes that it is fallacious to assume that:

> *issues of trafficking and informal migration can be addressed through migration restrictions. This fallacious approach fails to recognize that migration bans have likely served as a principal reason behind why migration channels through India and corruption amongst airport and immigration officials were allowed to flourish in the first place.*
> (ILO 2015)

1.2.3 Media analysis for the study of human trafficking from Nepal

Media are an important source of information and knowledge on human trafficking. For example, more than 55 per cent of non-experts interviewed for a study in the US showed that their source of information on human trafficking was the media, the second being personal knowledge (Logan 2007). A study conducted using systematic random sampling from three high schools in Sindhupalchowk district in central Nepal showed that more than 90 per cent of sampled adolescent female students who were aware of sex trafficking indicated media (radio or TV) as the primary source of their knowledge on sex trafficking (Shrestha *et al.* 2015). Studies have highlighted the integral role of newspapers and other news media as the central and often most trusted sources of information about policies and social issues for the public (Sanford, Martínez and Weitzer 2016).

This public trust in the media is related to the existence of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Freedom of the press is important because it plays a vital role in informing citizens about public affairs and monitoring the actions of government at all levels. Hence the media's portrayal and framing of the news coverage on human trafficking including the portrayal of victims reflect media governance and can have important implications for the perceptions of the public as well as policymakers (Vance 2012; Sanford *et al.* 2016). This is important because public opinions can influence the political climate and policy formulation environment of a country (Denton 2010).

A cursory review of news reports of transnational trafficking from Nepal indicates potential biases in reporting and donor funding. While 90 per cent of labour permits for 'legalised entry'[1] in 2019/20 were issued to men, trafficking of men

[1] Labour permits for 'legalised entry' are issued to those workers who are on a home holiday in Nepal and are returning to work for the same employer, but who had previously travelled abroad through unauthorised channels without obtaining a labour permit from the DoFE.

rarely receives any attention (DoFE 2020). Gender-balanced reporting on trafficking of men and women is still rare. It has contributed to establishing a dominant perception that transnational human trafficking is concerned only with women, which potentially motivates donor agencies to allocate less or no funding in preventing the trafficking of men. Gender biases in news reporting were also highlighted in a study that involved content analysis of US news articles regarding framing of human trafficking: 'news stories seldom reference males, and, when they do, males are mentioned much more frequently alongside female victims than on their own' (Sanford *et al.* 2016). An analysis of gender biases in media reporting of human trafficking can contribute to highlighting the risk of trafficking for both Nepali men and women, and thereby developing strategies to address this problem. In addition, there is a scarcity of research on the role of labour intermediaries or those involved in labour trajectories (Oosterhoff *et al.* 2018). Looking at media coverage of alleged perpetrators helps with understanding public and media professionals' perceptions, which can contribute to the development of relevant and useful interventions.

An analysis of media reports over a longer period can also reveal new patterns and routes being used for the trafficking of Nepali men and women. This can be instrumental in addressing the issue of transnational trafficking from Nepal for employment and other purposes. A systematic study of news reports on human trafficking can contribute to a good understanding of the process of human trafficking in Nepal – the people, activities and locations involved – which is required for the designing of effective interventions that respect people's rights to work and freedom of movement.

Print newspapers in Nepal have the longest history among Nepali news media outlets, followed by radio stations and television channels (Acharya 2018). Online media have a short history of two decades in Nepal and still need greater recognition as mainstream media (*ibid.*). Despite reports that only about 40 per cent of the Nepali population read newspapers, some newspapers are believed to have considerable potential in agenda-setting, and many of them are the sources of trusted news (Acharya 2021). Print media carry out reporting on a wide range of political and social issues, including human trafficking. The coverage of news on human trafficking from Nepal has received greater attention in Nepali print media in recent years.[2]

Against this background, this study was thus conducted to investigate media reporting on international human trafficking from Nepal with the following objectives:

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[2] Interview with an editor of a national daily, 22 October 2021.

- To understand reported changes in international routes of human trafficking from Nepal for labour migration in the previous five years and identify factors that may have contributed to them.
- To identify and understand, as well as critically examine, the media's portrayal of various actors involved in human trafficking, such as suspected victims, alleged perpetrators and actors involved in the identification process.
- To examine differences between reported victims and alleged perpetrators in the media and national reporting on human trafficking in Nepal and discuss reasons for these differences.
- To inform interventions to prevent human trafficking from Nepal for labour migration.

2. Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods approach consisting of: (a) a literature review; (b) content analysis of news archives; and (c) formative interviews with editors and reporters. The detailed methodology is described below.

2.1 Literature review

An extensive review of literature published in the past two decades, including academic publications, grey literature, and legal and policy documents, was conducted mainly in the first half of the study period to understand and identify gaps in the existing legal framework and practices in the prevention of human trafficking and regulation of labour migration from Nepal. The study also included a review of media policies to contextualise the political-economic context in which Nepali media work, as well as to look at other topics, such as the labour migration process in Nepal, labour exploitation and trafficking for forced labour, the media environment and the significance of media in Nepal, routes of trafficking from Nepal, and the portrayal of human trafficking to contextualise the findings.

The literature review focused on two key areas: the media environment in Nepal and reporting on human trafficking-related news in Nepali media; and the nature and routes of international human trafficking from Nepal prior to 2016. The review was helpful to get insights into how Nepali media functioned and how they have traditionally reported on human trafficking incidents. The review was also instrumental to understanding the nature and routes of human trafficking from Nepal until 2015. The study used 2015 as a baseline to map changes in trafficking routes since then (over a period of five years). The main reason for selecting 2015 as the baseline was the reported increase in human trafficking incidents from Nepal in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake of April that year (Pragya n.d.). As a part of the literature review, the human trafficking reports published annually in Nepal by the NHRC were extensively reviewed and analysed for the period 2011–16. The NHRC's national reports for the years 2016–20 were also reviewed to compare the results of the present study with the findings of the reports.

The information from the literature review was also useful for identifying the codes to be used in data analysis, especially at the initial stage and triangulating data while presenting the findings.

2.2 Content analysis of news archives

A time-bound content analysis of news articles published in six traditional sources of print and online news media was carried out, looking at: reported trafficking routes; identification of victims and other actors involved, including authorities and (alleged) perpetrators; possible recruitment agencies; informal agents; and international trafficking networks. Media content analysis is a specialised subset of content analysis, which is 'a technique for gathering and analysing the content of text, the "content" refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated' (Macnamara 2005). In the present study, the published news reports on human trafficking from Nepal served as the content for further analysis. This study is solely focused on cross-border TIP in Nepal, although TIP in Nepal is diverse and not limited to cross-border trafficking.

The six news outlets sampled covered news in both English and Nepali language and included both print newspapers and online news portals. The following print newspapers were selected:

- *Kantipur*
- *Gorkhapatra*
- *The Kathmandu Post*
- *The Rising Nepal*

The two online news portals were:

- *Onlinekhabar*
- *Setopati*

These news outlets were selected to maximise the coverage of human trafficking-related news while minimising repetition as much as possible. *Gorkhapatra*[3] and its English counterpart *The Rising Nepal*[4] are the oldest daily newspapers in Nepal, run by *Gorkhapatra Sansthan*, which is a government entity. Conversely, *Kantipur*[5] and its English counterpart *The Kathmandu Post*[6] are the most widely circulated – and arguably the most reputed – private newspapers in Nepal.

3 ***Gorkhapatra***.
4 ***The Rising Nepal***.
5 ***Kantipur***.
6 ***The Kathmandu Post***.

Table 2.1 Media analysis for the study of human trafficking from Nepal

Publication	Format	Language	Ownership	Ownership details
Kantipur	Print and online	Nepali	Private	*Kantipur Media Group*
The Kathmandu Post	Print and online	English	Private	*Kantipur Media Group*
Gorkhapatra	Print and online	Nepali	Government	*Gorkhapatra Sansthan*
The Rising Nepal	Print and online	English	Government	*Gorkhapatra Sansthan*
Onlinekhabar	Online	Nepali and English	Private	*Online Khabar Nepal Pvt. Ltd*
Setopati	Online	Nepali and English	Private	*Setopati Sanchar Pvt. Ltd*

Source: Authors' own.

Although there is a lack of data on newspaper circulation in Nepal, a media survey in 2017 found that 40 per cent of Nepalis read newspapers (Acharya 2021). Among them, *Kantipur* readership accounted for more than half of readers, while *Gorkhapatra* ranked as the third most popular newspaper. Similarly, the online news portals *Onlinekhabar*[7] and *Setopati*[8] are two of the most popular sources for Nepal-related news on the internet. A ranking of websites in Nepal by US web traffic analysis company Alexa Internet finds *Onlinekhabar* to be the most popular news portal in Nepal; *Setopati* is ranked fourth (Amazon 2021). These six outlets were picked as the primary sources for our data to ensure coverage of the maximal number of news articles, both from private as well as state-run news agencies, while avoiding too many repetitions. Although there are various regional print and online news media in Nepal, they could not be included in the study due to time and budget constraints. The study focused on news articles and excluded editorial, op-ed and feature articles from analysis.

The news articles from the selected media sources were accessed as follows:

– For the newspapers circulated in print – *Kantipur*, *The Kathmandu Post*, *Gorkhapatra* and *The Rising Nepal* – copies of their publications for the selected years (2016–20) were accessed from the library of Social Science Baha (physical copy), online depositories of the media houses (e-paper)[9] and

7 ***Onlinekhabar***.
8 ***Setopati***.
9 For example, e-paper *Kantipur* dated 20 April 2021 can be accessed via the following link: **eKantipur**.

the libraries of media houses (physical copy). The relevant news articles were identified using the keywords presented in Table 2.2.

– The selected four national dailies also had their online news portals besides the e-papers, which allowed for media updates of occurrences after the paper had gone into print. Due to time constraints, as well as technical issues,[10] the study only focused on printed news articles from these sources.

– All TIP-related news articles in the two exclusively online news portals – *Onlinekhabar* and *Setopati* – were identified using the search function in their websites. The keywords presented in Table 2.2 were used to search through their archives. Relevant articles were then copied and pasted into a Word file.

A set of keywords, both in English and Nepali, that are commonly used in the news in the context of human trafficking were identified and prepared by the researchers. The keywords were identified using researchers' pre-existing knowledge owing to years of experience in the field and by going through the news articles related to human trafficking in national dailies and online media until it was felt that the list was exhaustive. The researchers noted terms that are commonly used to describe and report the human trafficking phenomenon in both Nepali and English. The keywords were later used to search the news archive. All alternative spellings were searched where there was more than one accepted spelling of a word (e.g. labour/labor). These keywords were used as the basis to search news articles from the above sources during the previous five years (2016–20). Once the list of articles that had these keywords in their title was finalised, researchers skim-read the contents of the articles to make sure that the news reports were related to human trafficking.

Finally, all articles that met the following three criteria were selected:

– They were published in any of the six sources mentioned above between 2016 and 2020.

– They included one or more of the keywords listed in Table 2.2 in their titles.

– They had been vetted by the researchers skimming through the articles.

[10] Online news can be changed more easily, raising practical and technical questions about the potential existence of various versions.

Table 2.2 List of keywords used during search of news articles

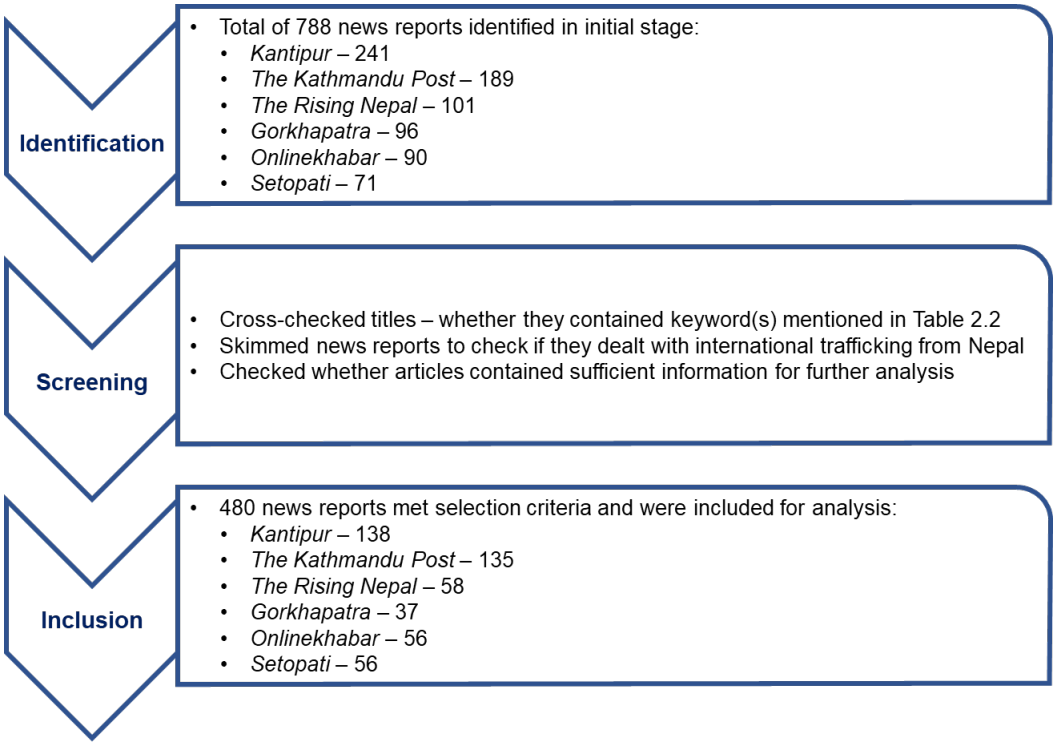
English terms		Nepali terms	
Human trafficking	Visit visa	Naka [Entry/exit points]	Visit visa [Visit visa]
Trafficking	Transit	Manav osarpasar [Human transportation]	Marriage visa [Marriage visa]
Marriage	Rescue	Manav bechbikhan [Human trafficking]	Uddar [Rescue]
India	Forced labour	Chelibeti [Girls]	Nepal Bharat seema [Nepal-India border]
Border	Foreign migration	Bharat [India]	Transit [Transit]
Nepal-India border	Sex-trafficking	Kothi [Brothel]	Yuwati/mahila taskari [Girl/women smuggling]
Maiti Nepal	Exploitation	Manav taskar [Human trafficker]	Manpower [Manpower Company]
Prostitution	Brothel	Dalal [Broker]	Bichauliya [Middleman]
Bonded labour	Recruitment	Vaideshik rojgar [Foreign employment]	Dance bar [Dance bar]
Broker	Manpower	Yaun vyabasaya [Prostitution]	Tesro muluk [Third country]
Foreign employment	Dance bar	Baal shram [Child labour]	Balbalika [Children]
Human smuggling	Arrest	Tesro Muluk [Third countries]	Yaun shoshan [Sexual exploitation]
Child labour	Children	Shram shoshan [Labour exploitation]	Badha majdur [Bonded labourer]

Source: Authors' own.

In the next step, news articles were selected for inclusion based on the quality of the article. This included assessing the article based on pre-defined indicators presented in Annexe 3 and excluding those that did not meet the criteria. The remaining articles then formed the primary sources of our data for this project.

A total of 788 articles were identified in the first round of sampling of the articles. In the second round of the sampling process, articles that did not match the criteria specified in Annexe 3 and failed the quality assessment were screened out. Finally, a sample of 480 articles was prepared for further analysis (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 Search and screening results



Source: Authors' own.

2.3 Formative interviews with reporters and editors

Semi-structured formative interviews were carried out with field- and desk-based reporters and editors from the sampled news media. The interviews were conducted after completion of content analysis and the main objective of these interviews was to contextualise and to some extent validate the findings from the content analysis. As such, the interview data were used to supplement gaps and answer questions that arose during the media analysis. Interviews were conducted with five reporters covering human trafficking stories: two each from private and government print media, one reporter from an online news portal, and two editors, one each from a privately-owned newspaper and an online news portal. Editors from government news media were approached and invited but they declined to participate in the study, as they said that the field/desk reporters were better suited to provide necessary information on trafficking than the editors.

2.4 Data extraction

The news articles meeting the criteria specified in section 2.2 were exported in a single Word file in chronological order for further analysis. The articles were identified by title, publication date and news source. Two researchers went through the articles and extracted the data in an Excel file using a data extraction form. The data extraction form was developed based on the study objectives and using information from the literature review.

To check for consistency in coding, two researchers separately coded about 5 per cent of the articles randomly selected from a pool of all the articles selected for the study. There was no major difference in the coding; hence, the codes and coding process were continued after a discussion between coders and the research team.

2.5 Analysis and synthesis

A content analysis approach was used in the analysis of data. The focus was on both manifest and latent contents within the data as discussed by Denton (2010). A mixed-methods approach was used for the content analysis (i.e. quantitative and qualitative content analysis). Quantitative content analysis is concerned with measuring and analysing manifest content (the surface-level content of the articles, the coding of which does not require interpretation on the part of the coder such that it can be recorded relatively objectively), while qualitative content analysis is concerned with latent content (the underlying meanings of the text, as interpreted by coders in an inherently subjective process) (Patterson *et al.* 2016).

The analysis of data began with the coding of the news articles included in the study. The process of extracting standardised data using the data extraction form served as first-stage coding. This information contributed to the analysis of mostly manifest content in the news articles. The themes/codes used in the first stage of coding included bibliometric information of news articles followed by the nature of trafficking, destination and transit countries, exit points, characteristic of purported victims (gender, surname, origin), gender and ethnicity of purported perpetrators, and information on intercepting individuals and organisations as reported in the news article.

In the second stage of the coding process, attention was paid to identifying the frames/lenses used in the reporting of human trafficking, which led to the identification of three lenses: ‘failure of state’, ‘outcome of poverty and economic deprivation’, and ‘human rights perspective’. At this stage, codes were also refined and new codes were included; for example, means of trafficking was added. Similarly, exit places were recoded into exit districts, and surnames of

reported victims and perpetrators were added to the list and later used to create caste/ethnicity groups.

The codes identified in the second-stage coding were added in the spreadsheet and then the data from all the new articles were extracted for the newly added codes. The quantitative component of the data (i.e. variables that can be expressed quantitatively, such as the frequencies of purported victims identified in the news articles, foreign nationals involved in the trafficking of Nepali people, etc.) were analysed using SPSS Statistics data analysis software, also allowing visualisation of univariate and multivariate frequencies in frequency tables. Informative maps were created using ArcGIS software.

The extracts from the news reports were a major component of the qualitative data and were mainly used to explain the quantitative data with concrete examples. Another important source of qualitative data was the formative interviews with editors and reporters of the news media selected for the study. For the analysis of the interview data, interview transcripts were prepared in English (but interviews were conducted in Nepali) and the data was coded and organised primarily using the manifest themes/sub-themes on the interview checklist (see Annexe 2 for the interview checklist). Additional themes/sub-themes were also identified while going through interview transcripts. They were also used in coding and organising the interview data. The data from formative interviews was mainly used to validate the findings from the media analysis where necessary, and to get the reporters' and editors' insights into the process of TIP reporting in Nepal.

2.6 Data quality assurance

News reports that met the criteria outlined in section 2.2 were selected for the study. The process for carrying out a comprehensive analysis of the media data is presented above in section 2.2. To minimise errors in data coding, a process of double coding was employed, where a researcher independently assigns codes to the same sample coded by a second researcher. For this purpose, the second researcher coded 5 per cent of the randomly selected news articles. No major disagreements were observed; hence, similar codes and coding processes were continued after a discussion between the coders and the research team.

A quality assessment tool (see Annexe 3) was used to assess the news articles and include or exclude them based on quality. Articles that made only passing remarks on human trafficking were not included in the analysis. A total of 480 articles made it to the final list of articles.

2.7 Limitations

The present study has certain limitations. The study focused on international human trafficking; hence, it did not study and analyse news reports and other publications on human trafficking within Nepal, although internal trafficking is also a major issue in Nepal.

The research intended to understand the changes in international routes of human trafficking from Nepal in the previous five years, from 2016 to 2020. The study did not aim to look at the routes of trafficking within Nepal. The study only identified general shifts in the routes of trafficking from 2016 to 2020 compared to the preceding years and did not focus on transit locations that were reported on only once.

Due to the scope of the study, only four national daily newspapers and two online news sources were included. The study thus excluded many other national and regional print and online news media. Hence, there was a possibility of missing out some news reports on human trafficking from Nepal. However, the selected news media were the most-read print and online news sources in Nepal; and since most of them have reporters based all around the country and – in the case of some newspapers – abroad, it was expected to be a representative sample of the written news available to the public.[11] There is a small possibility that the study may have missed some keywords and related articles despite the best efforts of the research team to use every relevant keyword to search for articles.

Narrative analysis helps to understand how research participants construct a story and meaning about a phenomenon based on their own experience. However, narrative analysis was not employed during the study to get a first-hand account of victims, perpetrators, and interceptors who were reported in news articles because of time limitation and accessibility constraints. Likewise, discourse analysis to find out the political or ideological inclinations of sampled newspapers was also not carried out.

As explained above, the study was carried out under the framework of content analysis, and hence, did not collect primary data from the actors involved including reported victims/survivors of human trafficking, alleged perpetrators and reported authorities or agents involved in identification/interception of possible victims of human trafficking and suspected traffickers. The study sought to gain information about them purely through the analysis of the sampled media reports.

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[11] Kantipur Media Group; Gorkhapatra Corporation.

As with all studies that employ qualitative content analysis, this study also involved some level of subjectivity while coding the news reports and interpreting data. Data analysis and interpretation, like any reality, are socially constructed. It is possible that the coding and interpretation of data were influenced by researchers' social locations and biases despite the research team's efforts at maintaining neutrality. The articles published in the news media also have their own limitations as the media organisations and news reporters work within a certain socio-political environment. The general restrictions and limitations on the media in Nepal are discussed in detail in section 3.1.

There is some possibility of overlap in the reporting of certain incidents related to trafficking as often stories are covered by multiple news outlets, especially those with a major scoop. The study did not take into account the overlap in coverage across different media outlets, although duplication in reporting by the same news media publication was avoided. The possible appearance of some cases more frequently than really occurred may have affected the identification and presentation of trafficking patterns to some extent. However, this did not have any effect on the analysis of the reporting lens/frames used in the news articles, as the same incidents can be reported using different lenses.

The Covid-19 pandemic may have had an impact on trafficking routes and destinations. Although the study included news reports published after the onslaught of Covid-19 in Nepal, the analysis did not focus on identifying post-Covid-19 patterns of human trafficking from Nepal mainly because: (a) there was not sufficient data; and (b) it was beyond the scope of the study. Covid-19 may have affected the reporting, limiting movement of people, including field reporters, thereby limiting the coverage of human trafficking-related incidents in 2020. Travel bans in several months of 2020 may have also impacted outmigration and human trafficking-related incidents along with media coverage, thus not reflecting the normal occurrence of international human trafficking reportage.

2.8 Ethical considerations

Although media content analysis generally involves unobtrusive analysis of information that is publicly available (Neuendorf 2017), published literature emphasises the need for 'ethically aware yet flexible decision-making', especially when the study includes personal narratives (Burles and Bally 2018). The present study involved analysis of newspaper articles that were available publicly; hence, it was not necessary, and not possible, to obtain informed consent from the individuals reported in the articles. However, confidentiality and privacy of the person was maintained as far as possible whenever personal accounts from the news articles were used in the qualitative analysis. Similarly, individual authors/reporters were not picked out and presented in the report, to maintain their confidentiality. Identifying details of the authors or personal narratives were

deleted and quotes and personal accounts were paraphrased to avoid traceability. Furthermore, in situations where the media reported individuals as perpetrators or accused somebody of fraud and deception, it was ensured that the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty' was adhered to in reporting information in the study.

For all interviews, to mitigate any risks, the research participants were allowed to choose the level of anonymity and were encouraged to choose a place that was comfortable and maintained aural privacy for them. Covid-19 precautions were respected and discussed in advance. The participants were informed about the study and their consent was obtained verbally prior to starting the interviews. A sample of verbal consent is presented in Annexe 1. The participants were informed that their participation in this research was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw their consent at any point.

All the data were stored in a password-protected private file in researchers' personal and office computers, which were also protected by private login passwords. The interview data were only accessible to the interviewers, translators, and main researchers. The audio files of the interviews were deleted after they were transcribed.

There is no institutional body to review any social science research in Nepal that is not directly related to health.[12] However, to ensure ethical research practices, all the researchers from Social Science Baha/CESLAM involved in this study completed Macquarie University's social science ethics training online. They also received support from an IDS Ethics Review Board (ERB) member to implement research ethics in practice in line with IDS ERB guidelines. As the research was led by Social Science Baha, per IDS policy, the ERB was not involved in reviewing the research project.

[12] The Nepal Health Research Council needs to approve health-related research to be conducted in Nepal.

3. Media coverage of human trafficking

3.1 Media environment in Nepal

Field reporters have the ability and skills, by virtue of their ground-level engagement, to offer insights on various topics to inform citizens, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government, researchers, and law enforcement agencies. The portrayal of issues related to trafficking in the media is therefore important in and of itself. Media professionals, just like researchers, law enforcement, health staff, and many other professions have rights and duties. As it stands, it can be said that journalists can write relatively freely on trafficking, within a challenging environment. This study looked at the portrayal of human trafficking in Nepali news media and examined changes in the patterns of human trafficking from Nepal.

Freedom of speech and the right to communication are guaranteed by the Constitution of Nepal; but there are also some restrictions in place to curtail people's capacity to write and speak. The Constitution guarantees that:

> *There shall be no prior censorship of publications and broadcasting, or information dissemination, or printing of any news item, editorial, article, feature, or other reading material, or the use of audio-visual material by any medium, including electronic publication, broadcasting and printing.*
> (GoN 2015)

However, the Constitution also allows the government to put restrictions on:

> *any act which may undermine the nationality, sovereignty, and indivisibility of Nepal, or the good relations between federal units, or jeopardizes the harmonious relations subsisting among different caste groups and tribes, or communities, or an act of treason, or defamation of social dignity of individuals through the publication and dissemination of false material, or contempt of court, or material that incites criminal offence, or an act that is contrary to decent public behaviour and morality, or disrespects labour, or incites untouchability or gender discriminations.*
> (*ibid*.).

Articles 17 and 27 of the Constitution guarantee every citizen the right to expression and right to information, respectively.

Media houses and editorial authorities are responsible for publication of certain news. However, political pressure, the need to increase readership and editorial/ownership biases may influence the decision of an editor or media house on whether to publish a news article. The ownership and controlling authority of media houses and their goal can curtail editorial independence and affect the media's role in fulfilling their socio-political role (Alger 1998; Bagdikian 1997). Nepali news media are reported to have been affected by the partisan interests and political parallelism of the media and its editors (Acharya 2018). Likewise, news media in Nepal have also been reported to prioritise business interests over independent journalism (*The Himalayan Times* 2021).

According to the annual report of Press Council Nepal (PCN), 7,869 print media publications have been registered at PCN, and of them, only 3,966 news media publications (689 daily, 30 bi-weeklies, 2,847 weeklies, and 400 fortnightly) were in operation in 2019/20 (PCN 2021). Similarly, of those 3,966, only 733 newspapers (185 daily, 3 bi-weeklies, 528 weeklies, and 17 fortnightly) were published regularly in 2019/20. In recent years, online news media have also become important for news because of 'accessibility, interactivity, transparency (hyperlinks), immediacy and inexpensiveness' (Acharya 2018). In February 2021, data from the Department of Information and Broadcasting showed that 2,325 online media publications had been registered in the country, of which 2,174 were currently active (Rastriya Samachar Samiti 2021).

The press and media in Nepal are governed by a number of laws, mainly the Press and Publication Act 1991, the National Broadcasting Act 1992, the Press Council Act 1992, the Working Journalists Act 2007, the Right to Information Act 2008, the National Information and Communication Technology Policy 2015, and the National Mass Communication Policy 2019. In 2016, PCN issued a 13-clause Code of Journalistic Ethics, with some amendments in 2019 (PCN 2016, 2019). The code states that journalists should be objective when reporting and should disseminate factual news and balanced opinions via both online and offline media. It also has a directive to hold the media accountable while creating content from social media or sharing content through social media: journalists and media are to reproduce the information and opinions or comments posted or shared by other social network users only after checking their truth and considering their fairness (PCN 2019). Further, journalists are not allowed to publish materials that adversely affect survivors or victims of sexual crimes, social discrimination, or crimes against humanity. In such cases, the name, address, and identity of victims/survivors should not be disclosed directly or indirectly without their conscious consent and without evaluating the possible effects of such disclosure (*ibid.*).

The government issued the Online Media Operation Directive in 2016 to regulate online news portals (GoN 2016). The directive was severely criticised owing to a

provision that granted the Department of Information and Broadcasting the right to close down news portals if they failed to 'register or renew the website annually, publish materials deemed to be illegal or immoral, or spread misinformation or [their] reports lack[ed] authoritative sources' (Acharya 2016, cited in Acharya 2018).

Nepal's National Civil (Code) Act and National Penal (Code) Act, which came into effect in 2018, have further curtailed media freedom (HRW 2019). The acts prohibit anyone, including journalists, from disclosing private information and taking and releasing photographs without prior consent. Cases against online news media and journalists are handled as per the Electronic Transaction Act, 2008, which further limits the right to freedom of expression (Acharya 2018; HRW 2019). The act prohibits publication and display of:

> *Any media in electronic media including computer, internet which are prohibited to publish or display by the prevailing law or which may be contrary to the public morality or decent behaviour or any types of materials which may spread hate or jealousy against anyone, or which may jeopardize the harmonious relations subsisting among the peoples of various castes, tribes and communities.*
> (GoN 2006)

According to the World Press Freedom Index, Nepal ranks 106th out of 180 countries (Reporters Without Borders 2021).

In 2020, Freedom Forum, a non-governmental civil society organisation (CSO) in Nepal, recorded a total of 96 press freedom violations in Nepal, which is only slightly fewer than the previous year (111 in 2019) (Freedom Forum 2020). Of the incidents of press freedom violations recorded in 2020, the majority of the journalists facing violations belonged to print media (70) followed by those from online media (39) (*ibid.*). Similarly, the Government of Nepal (GoN) in 2019 drafted the 'Bill related to the Amendment and Integration of Laws related to Nepal Media Council', which would replace the existing Press Council Act 1992. The bill was highly controversial since it proposed a new Media Council whose formation criteria compromised on its free and independent nature and made it similar to a body under the GoN (Maharjan, B. 2020). In addition, the bill had provisions that allowed the Media Council to impose hefty fines on media companies that had violated professional ethics (*ibid*.). Although these provisions were revised after the government came under heavy criticism for drafting the bill, it showed that the intention of the state lay in curbing press freedom in Nepal.

Nepali journalists have an umbrella organisation, the Nepal Journalists' Association, currently known as the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ). It was established in 1956 by private media professionals with the aim of

'professional growth, press freedom and increased cooperation from government mechanisms' (Acharya 2018).

3.2 Construction of knowledge by media and its influence on the audience

The reality of everyday life is already objectified before it comes to our notice. However, reality does not happen in a vacuum but is socially constructed through our interaction with others (Berger and Luckmann 1991). Languages are used to provide the necessary objectification and determine the order in which they are presented. But objects in themselves cannot fix meaning in language. According to the constructivist approach, it is 'social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about the world meaningfully to others' (Hall 1997: 11). In other words, it is the people or social actors who create meaning because meaning is not inherent in objects. Those people or actors who provide meaning to the objects are termed 'claim-makers', a claim being any verbal, visual, or behavioural statement aimed at persuading audience members to define a condition – such as TIP, in our case – as a social problem (Loseke 2003). Primary claim-makers are individuals such as victims and witnesses who have exclusive or intimate knowledge about a subject or problem, while secondary claim-makers are those who translate and transform the claims made by primary claim-makers (Schildkraut and Muschert 2019).

One of the important claim-makers in society is the mass media, which provide the largest possible audience. People working in the mass media can be primary claim-makers, in which case they investigate and write stories of their own; but they are most commonly secondary claim-makers, translating and packaging claims provided by other actors such as politicians, activists, or academic researchers (Loseke 2003). The objectivity of claims made in the mass media can, however, be undermined when the claims are based on the subjective values or specific objective interests or emotions of the reporters or journalists (Tuchman 1972).

Although audience members may not necessarily believe the claims made in the media as they may judge the claims based on their own experience, personal values or knowledge, the mass media does bring to light issues which audience members should decide whether to consider as social problems or not (Loseke 2003). In other words, the media are believed to accumulate 'facts', build narratives or stories out of those facts, and persuade audience members to believe those stories. The audience members decide on the credibility of the stories based on their own knowledge, experience, and values (*ibid.*). The media

also construct images of people (victims deserving sympathy versus villains deserving condemnation) and motivational frames (why audience members should care), appealing to emotion (*ibid.*). The media is an important element that sets the agenda for discussion, builds stories out of facts and makes attempts to persuade audience members to form opinions. Considering the crucial role of media in everyday life, it is of importance that media are critically studied for their contents, news-making process, and governance or bureaucratic structures, among their many other aspects.

3.3 Media analysis of coverage of human trafficking

There have been no studies in Nepal that examine the portrayal of victims and perpetrators of TIP and framing of human trafficking issues in Nepal by news media. Hence, this study looked into similar studies carried out in other countries. Most studies regarding content analysis of coverage of the problem of human trafficking in the media come from the US. Therefore, this study analysed the literature on media analysis of coverage of human trafficking in the US considering that news media are important claim-makers in constructing knowledge about, and a primary source of information on, TIP in both Nepal and the US.

Gulati conducted a content analysis of the coverage of human trafficking in six newspapers in the US, United Kingdom, and Canada – *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* – between 2000 and 2005 (Gulati 2010). He found that human trafficking was conceptualised mostly in terms of sex trafficking, ignoring various forms of forced labour and labour trafficking. Further, news articles relied on official sources and sources from establishments such as foreign policy elites and anti-human trafficking activists without questioning their position and statements. Also, these news articles attributed trafficking to criminal activities and organised crime, and built on current policy – more law enforcement, protection programmes for victims and prevention campaigns – as the main solution to the problem.

Similarly, Sanford *et al.* (2016) conducted a content analysis of newspaper articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* published 1 January – 31 December 2013 to examine newspaper coverage and the framing of human trafficking. It was found that 64 per cent of the 128 articles that substantially discussed human trafficking mentioned sex trafficking, while only 11 per cent referred to labour trafficking and 12 per cent mentioned both sex and labour trafficking (*ibid.*). The disproportionate mention of sex trafficking is particularly striking given that this study found that United Nations (UN) statistics showed

that more than 50 per cent of trafficking victims in North America were being exploited in forced labour. Meanwhile, 39 per cent of the articles referenced child victims of trafficking and only 2 per cent referenced males exclusively, while a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report incorporated in the article indicated that the majority of all identified victims were adults (67 per cent) and 30 per cent of all identified victims were male (*ibid.*). Likewise, the same study found that although reports from international agencies indicated that the majority of labour-trafficking victims were male, there was a predominance of articles referring to female victims when reporting on labour trafficking; females were mentioned in ten of the 14 articles that focused on the issue (*ibid.*).

In another study, Virkus collected data from three regional newspapers – *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Florida Times-Union* – for the period 2005–12 and conducted a content analysis of human trafficking-related news articles. It was found that sex trafficking was covered in 82 per cent of the articles, while labour trafficking was covered only in 14 per cent of cases (4 per cent discussed both sex and labour trafficking) (Virkus 2014). Similarly, there was a predominance of female representation in the news articles: 89 per cent were female victims and 11 per cent were male victims of the 955 victims presented in the articles (*ibid.*). The tendency to represent the dichotomy of portraying mainly men as perpetrators and mostly women as victims is also confirmed by Denton (2010). Denton analysed the media coverage of 191 unique incidents of human trafficking in the period January–June 2007 and found that 44 per cent of incidents reported only women as trafficked persons, while 63 per cent of the reported cases involved only men as perpetrators (*ibid.*).

3.4 Media portrayal of human trafficking

Reporting on stories on forced labour and trafficking can take different forms. Some of them include human stories, which report people, mostly survivors telling their own stories; stories about workplaces that expose recruitment conditions and abuses in the workplace; stories about economic incentives behind unfair recruitment practices and trafficking; stories on migration; stories on discrimination in the labour market; stories about justice that reflect on existing provisions of laws and their implementation status; and stories on awareness and advocacy (ILO 2021b).

Although the concept of TIP involves a broad paradigm involving several forms of acts (recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring) and means (threat or use of force or other forms of coercion; abduction; fraud; deception; abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability; use of manipulation to achieve consent) (UN 2000), it is found, in the study of articles published in selected newspapers from the US between 2005 and 2012, that the media conflate TIP and sex trafficking to mean the same thing (Virkus 2014).

Albright and D'Adamo (2017) observe five elements in the dominant narrative presented by US media about human trafficking: (1) insufficient coverage of all forms of human trafficking, with the major focus on sex trade and sex slavery; (2) the narrow profile of individuals – young, white, female sex trafficking victims – who have been trafficked; (3) the use of sensationalism to attract readers regardless of how representative the facts may be; (4) failure to delve into the complexity of the issue with little regard for factors such as poverty, globalisation, race, sexual orientation and gender identity, which form the root causes of trafficking; and (5) the singular use of a criminal justice framing, which de-contextualises trafficking from the life of the trafficked person before and after, and implies criminal justice intervention as the natural solution to human trafficking (Albright and D'Adamo 2017).

3.5 Portrayal of human trafficking in Nepali media

Media research conducted in Nepal can be categorised tentatively into five types: reports prepared by media commissions often formed by governments; feasibility studies prior to establishing a new media house; audience surveys to find out about audience preferences over media content and programmes; studies about media representation and media impact, which include content analysis to know how media have represented certain groups such as Dalit, Janajati, women or certain issues such as development, health, and violence; and sociological and anthropological studies (Maharjan, H.M. 2020).

Several content analyses of media have been done on issues such as aid transparency, media headlines in the news, health, and violence against women (Tuladhar *et al.* 2013; Freedom Forum 2012; Adhikari *et al.* 2011; National Women Commission 2017). For example, a study conducted with an objective of finding out how news on the issue of violence against women was circulated among the public via print media found that print media carried out superficial reporting of women-related issues – such as a large number of news articles focused on celebrating International Women's Day or on the activities conducted during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence – rather than doing an in-depth analysis of the issue (National Women Commission 2017). However, studies specifically based on content analysis of media reporting on the issue of TIP in Nepal are very rare.

The private and public spheres have merged with the increased use of smartphones and social media, and emotion is increasingly being used in media reporting as a valuable component to get consumers' attention and prolong their engagement in the face of stiff competition among different media sources (Beckett and Deuze 2016). However, traditionally, the media were thought to present facts and emotion was taken as something interfering with media objectivity (Tuchman 1972). There are cases of reporting in Nepali media where

emotions are used to portray even perpetrators as victims of circumstance. For example, *Himal Khabarpatrika* in 2003 covered the story of a freedom fighter who lost a leg during the 1990 People's Movement and was suffering severe financial hardship (G.C. 2003). In the article, he accepted that he had sold his son to an Indian citizen for NPR30,000 to alleviate his situation (*ibid*.). The media portrayed him as someone in dire need of help, instead of presenting him as a perpetrator of TIP.

In addition to the problem of framing of news, questions are also raised regarding the financial sustainability of Nepali media houses and their human resource management. The existence of a large number of Nepali media beyond the sustaining capacity of advertisements raises the possibility of Nepali media being co-opted by political parties, and of cases of 'brown envelope journalism' resulting in self-censorship (Bhandari, Bhattarai and Deane 2016). Problems in human resource management in Nepali media include lack of professional capacity, lack of resources, inadequate training, and low salaries paid to journalists (Department of Information and Broadcasting 2018; Bhandari *et al.* 2016). Journalists have to frequently stage sit-in protests demanding media houses pay their salaries (*The Record* 2020). This raises questions about the media environment in general and the capability of and incentives for journalists to engage in fact-based ethical reporting that could make a difference in addressing social problems such as human trafficking.

4. Coverage of human trafficking in the studied media reports

This section mainly discusses the findings from the analysis of news articles about international human trafficking from Nepal, including changes in trafficking routes, while also occasionally referring to relevant literature on human trafficking. The news articles were collected from six national news media sources from 2016 to 2020. The analysis is based on a total of 480 articles that met the inclusion criteria specified for the study.

4.1 Characteristics of news articles

The study analysed whether the articles included used: audio-visual elements such as video, audio recordings, or photos along with the written text; data or statistics on human trafficking; and quotes from relevant people including victims, perpetrators, government officials, police, and interceptors.

Only 31.7 per cent of the articles (152 out of 480) were accompanied by some form of visual or audio materials along with written texts. Such articles contained images/photos of either the victims, perpetrators, intercepting agency, police, or victims' families. The articles on incident reports in private broadsheet dailies (e.g. *The Kathmandu Post* and *Kantipur*) were accompanied by photos, while articles in online portals generally came with audio and video recordings. The media, such as photos, infographics, and videos could have been used in the news articles to grab the reader's attention and present often complex information in a way that is attractive and comprehensible to the diverse readership.

Table 4.1 Use of media and data in news articles

Year	Articles using media (%)	Articles using secondary data (%)	Total studied articles (n)
2016	20.0	66.3	80
2017	27.5	45.1	91
2018	21.7	39.1	115
2019	48.2	38.7	137
2020	35.1	35.1	57
Total	**31.7**	**44.2**	**480**

Source: Authors' own.

Less than half (44.2 per cent) of the news articles included in the study used secondary data and statistics. Most of the data and statistics were related to the incidents of human trafficking in a given amount of time such as a year. Some data and statistics were also related to the number of times human trafficking occurred through a given route or border crossing in a specific period. The data and statistics cited in the articles were from sources such as police reports, publications of NGOs working in the anti-human trafficking sector in Nepal and reports published by the government.

The tendency to use data from different sources indicates reporters' emphasis on triangulating information and presenting more detailed news reporting. However, the reporters seem to have become growingly reluctant to do so. Variation is observed in terms of the use of data and statistics from secondary sources in news articles on human trafficking over the five-year period covered in the study: while 66.3 per cent of articles used secondary data in 2016, only 35.1 per cent of articles did the same in 2020. There was, however, an overall positive trend in terms of the use of media such as pictures and infographics in the news articles: while only 20 per cent of articles used graphic media in 2016, nearly half of the articles (48.2 per cent) in 2019 and 35.1 per cent in 2020 did the same.

Quotes were commonly used in news articles. Over two-thirds (67.3 per cent) of articles included in the study used one or more quotes. Most of them quoted police officials stationed at border crossings, police officials from the district police office, staff of intercepting organisations and their branches, victims of human trafficking, and other government officials. Most articles contained quotes from multiple sources. Officials from Maiti Nepal, KIN Nepal, the Nepal Police and Armed Police Force (APF) were frequently quoted in the reports. Most reporters and editors interviewed for the study stated that most news reports on human trafficking in Nepal are based on press releases issued by the police or on information supplied by anti-human trafficking organisations to journalists. This could explain why the police and anti-trafficking organisations are frequently quoted in news reports.

4.2 Characteristics of reported victims

Studies on content analysis of news articles on reportage of human trafficking highlight that news articles prominently reference female victims (Sanford *et al.* 2016). A content analysis of newspaper articles published in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in 2012 and 2013 found most articles on sex trafficking primarily mentioned female victims, while most articles focusing on both sex and labour trafficking referenced both male and female victims (*ibid.*).

An analysis of the reportage of the victims in the news articles included in this study found that two-thirds of articles (331 articles, or 69 per cent) disclosed the

gender of the purported[13] victims of human trafficking from Nepal. Among the articles that disclosed the reported victims' gender, the reportage of female victims (68.3 per cent) was more than three times higher than that of male victims (20.8 per cent).

Table 4.2 Gender of reported victims

Gender	Frequency	%
Female	226	68.3
Male	69	20.8
Both genders	36	10.9
Total articles reporting gender of purported victims	**331**	**100.0**

Source: Authors' own.

The findings from the study are comparable to Nepal Police records from 2018/19–2020/21, which show the majority of trafficking victims as females, with males making up only 12.6 per cent of the trafficking victims (AHTB 2021).

However, it must be noted that the gaps and limitations in the existing legal framework in Nepal may have affected the identification, documentation, and investigation of various cases of human trafficking related to labour migration, which are likely to be dominated by male workers. The Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act (HTTCA) 2007[14] and Foreign Employment Act (FEA) 2007, unlike the mandates of the Palermo Protocol,[15] do not link labour exploitation with human trafficking: HTTCA 2007 does not include labour exploitation as a purpose of human trafficking (NHRC 2019) and FEA 2007 considers labour exploitation, deception, and non-payment of wages only as

[13] Since neither the 'perpetrators' nor the 'victims' were identified as such by the criminal justice system of Nepal, the terms 'alleged', 'purported', or 'reported' are used to refer to both the perpetrators and victims in this study, although they were described without such qualifiers in the news articles.

[14] As per the Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act 2007: 'If anyone commits any of the following acts, that shall be deemed to have committed human trafficking: (a) to sell or purchase a person for any purpose, (b) to use someone into prostitution, with or without any benefit, (c) to extract human organ except otherwise determined by law, (d) to go for in prostitution. If anyone commits any of the following acts, that shall be deemed to have committed human transportation: (a) to take a person out of the country for the purpose of buying and selling, (b) to take anyone from his/her home, place of residence or from a person by any means such as enticement, inducement, misinformation, forgery, tricks, coercion, abduction, hostage, allurement, influence, threat, abuse of power and by means of inducement, fear, threat or coercion to the guardian or custodian and keep him/her into ones custody or take to any place within Nepal or abroad or handover him/her to somebody else for the purpose of prostitution and exploitation'.

[15] Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, UN Doc. A/53/383 (2000).

violation of labour standards and breach of employment contract, rather than an act of human trafficking.

Most cases of labour-related fraud, which often intersect with labour trafficking, are processed under FEA 2007. Cases of trafficking under the guise of foreign employment are not referred to the AHTB, which was established under the Nepal Police in 2019 to investigate and combat human trafficking-related cases, or are ignored owing to the jurisdiction of the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) for handling foreign employment-related cases. Thus, there is a high chance of under-representation of male victims in human trafficking-related cases. Human trafficking in the guise of labour migration is predominantly male, with male migrant workers accounting for about 95 per cent of the total labour permits issued for overseas employment between 2008/09 and 2018/19 (MoLESS 2020). Cases are referred to the DoFE and treated as foreign employment-related fraud (Thapa *et al.*, forthcoming).

Bias towards female 'victims' could have also resulted from the focus of the police and anti-human trafficking organisations in Nepal in preventing independent women workers, without a male 'guardian', from crossing the border to India while allowing free movement of male workers. Any stoppage at the border would then be presented by the organisations and subsequently reported in the newspapers as a successful prevention of human trafficking from Nepal, although there are several instances where the 'victims' considered such stoppage as the violation of their right to participate in labour migration (Kharel 2016).

During the analysis of the news articles, the caste/ethnicity category was coded based on the surnames of the purported victims and perpetrators mentioned in the news reports.[16] Only about one fifth of the articles (93 articles) reviewed for the study mentioned the caste and ethnicity of the trafficking victims. The low rate of reporting of the purported victims' caste and ethnicity might have been due to various legal instruments governing media in Nepal, barring news media from disclosing the identity of the victims (see section 3.1 for more on the media environment in Nepal). Among the reported victims, the Hill Janajati group ranked top followed by the Hill caste group and Hill Dalit group (Table 4.3).[17] A similar trafficking trend was identified in the NHRC report for the period 2013–15, with Hill Janajatis (56 per cent) and Dalits (21 per cent) showing higher rates among the reported victims (NHRC 2016).

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16 Due to surnames being common to more than one caste/ethnic group, there is the possibility that some surnames may have been erroneously assigned. Such surnames, however, account only for a small fraction of the total. Such potential for error is not possible to avoid unless the research team could verify each ambiguous-sounding surname with the person concerned, an impossible proposition for a study of this kind.

17 See Annexe 10 for more detailed information on the caste and ethnicity classification used in the study.

Table 4.3 Caste/ethnicity of reported victims

Caste/ethnicity	Frequency	Percentage of mentions in news articles (%)	Percentage of total population (%) (CBS 2014)
Hill Janajati	58	62.4	27.3
Hill caste	34	36.6	31.2
Hill Dalit	23	24.7	8.1
Tarai caste	9	9.7	15.3
Tarai Janajati	9	9.7	7.7
Tarai Dalit	3	3.2	4.5
Muslim	1	1.1	4.4
Foreigners	2	2.2	>0.1
Multiple responses; n=93			

Source: Authors' own, based on project data and CBS (2014).

Hill Janajatis and Hill Dalits had disproportionately higher rates among the reported victims; their shares in the total population of the country are, respectively, 27.3 per cent and 8.1 per cent (CBS 2014).[18]

It is also to be noted that Dalits and Janajatis are some of the most socially marginalised groups in Nepal (ADB 2020). Hill and Tarai Dalits rank the lowest on the Human Development Index among the caste and ethnic groups of Nepal (GoN and UNDP 2014),[19] and the proportion of the population living below the national poverty line is significantly higher among Hill Dalits and Tarai Dalits compared to other caste and ethnic groups (GoN and UNDP 2014; CBS 2011).

Furthermore, as discussed in section 4.6, labour trafficking constitutes a major share of trafficking cases in Nepal. Hill castes, along with Hill Janajatis and Hill Dalits, also dominate international labour migration from Nepal.[20] However, Hill Dalits and Tarai Dalits migrate to India more than to any other countries for work due to limited socioeconomic resources (Sharma *et al.* 2014).

Over one third of the articles (37.7 per cent) mentioned the purported victims' district of origin in Nepal. Among articles that mentioned the districts, Morang, Jhapa, Dang, and Sindhupalchowk were the top four, although the victims

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18 See Annexe 10 for more detailed information on the caste and ethnicity classification used in this study.

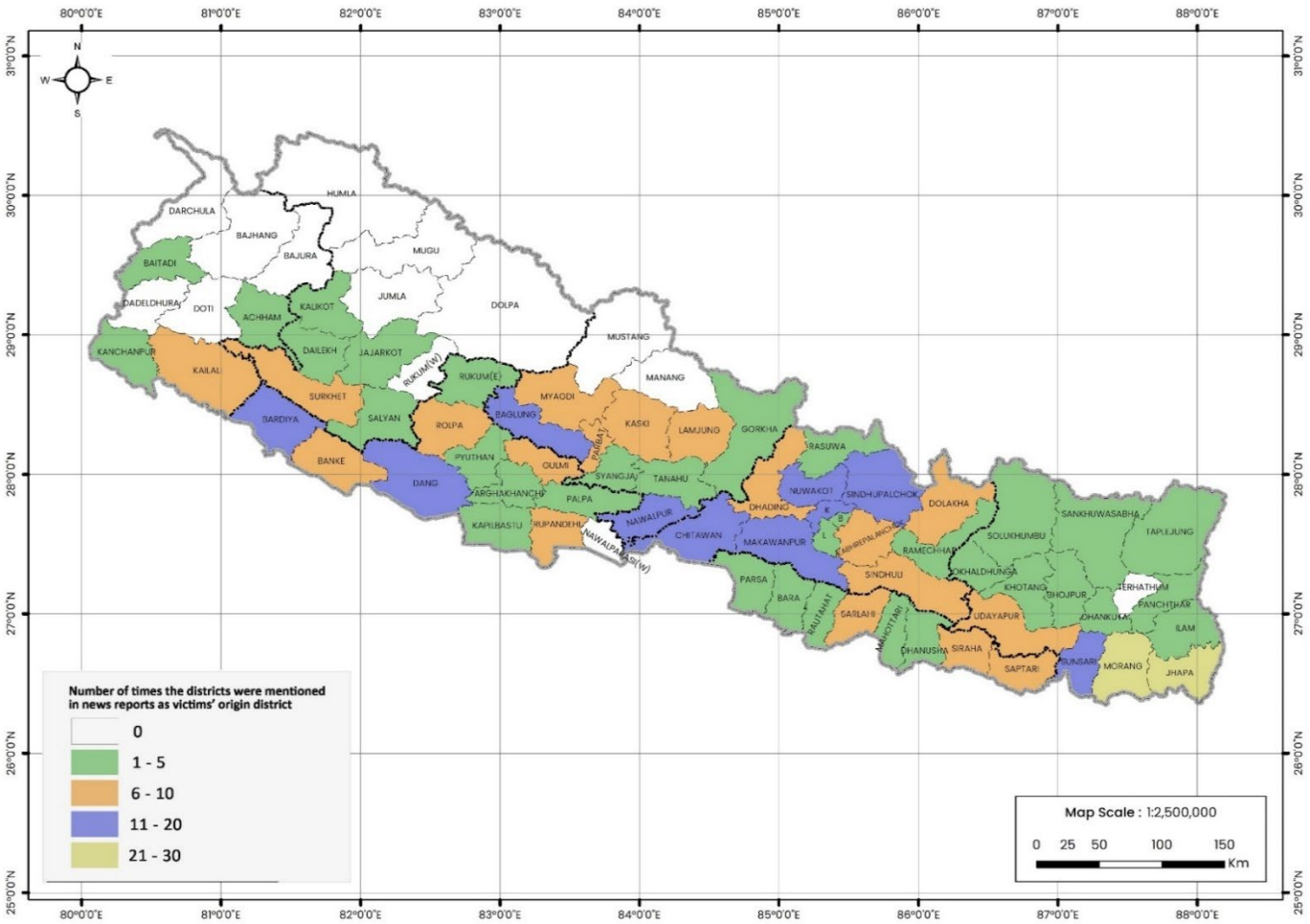
19 The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite index measuring average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living.

20 Based on calculation of raw data set from Nepal Labour Force Survey 2017/18 for international migrants whose reason for migration was service/job or seeking employment. As per the analysis, 33.8 per cent of labour migrants from Nepal belong to Hill caste followed by Hill Janajati (25.4 per cent) and Hill Dalit (12.2 per cent).

originated from all over Nepal (Figure 4.1). Among the top ten districts of origin, six border India. Most of the top-ranked districts are also major female labour migrant-sending districts in Nepal, thus signalling a relationship between labour migration and human trafficking. According to the number of labour permits issued to women workers for overseas employment, Jhapa, Sindhupalchowk, Makawanpur, Morang, Kathmandu, Kavrepalanchowk, Ilam, Nuwakot, Sunsari, and Chitwan ranked top (MoLESS 2020).

These findings about districts of origin from the articles analysed follow a similar track to the data in various annual reports. According to the annual report from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) more than 55 per cent of the cases registered against TIP in 2018/19 were from ten districts: Kathmandu, Kailali, Rupandehi, Jhapa, Kanchanpur, Sunsari, Morang, West Nawalparasi, Ilam, and Parsa (Hamal 2019). The NHRC study reported that most cases of trafficking between 2013 and 2015 involved individuals originating from the districts of Jhapa, Morang, Kaski, Banke, and Sindhupalchowk (NHRC 2016).

Figure 4.1 Districts of origin of reported victims



Note: See Annexe 9 for yearly trend in districts of origin of purported victims from 2016 to 2020.

Source: © Cartography by NAXA for Social Science Baha, Nepal. Reproduced with permission.

4.3 Characteristics of reported perpetrators

More than half of the articles (54.4 per cent; n=261) mentioned the alleged perpetrators. Among the articles that mentioned the alleged perpetrators, 69.3 per cent of them disclosed their names, while 78.9 per cent identified their gender.

Most of the reported perpetrators (69.9 per cent) were male. Alleged female perpetrators were reported in only 24 articles, while both males and females were reported in another 38 articles.

Table 4.4 Gender of reported perpetrators

Gender	Number	Percentage (%)
Male	144	69.9
Female	24	11.7
Both genders	38	18.4
Total	**206**	**100.0**

Source: Authors' own.

Most incidents of trafficking in Nepal are usually linked with male perpetrators approaching women and girls with marriage proposals or promises of better living conditions in cities with the intention to eventually sell those women and girls to Mumbai brothels (NHRC 2018). In comparison to the published articles, Nepal Police records show a slightly higher rate of female offenders in human trafficking cases: women made up 27.5 per cent of the total purported perpetrators in trafficking cases filed by the Nepal Police between 2018/19 and 2020/21 (AHTB 2021).

Just over one third of articles (37.1 per cent) disclosed the caste/ethnicity of the alleged perpetrators. The caste/ethnicity category was coded from the articles based on the surnames of the victims and perpetrators mentioned in the news reports. Nearly two-thirds of the articles (62.9 per cent) did not mention the names or surnames of alleged perpetrators. In some reports, despite their names being mentioned, the alleged perpetrators were either anonymised or only their first name was mentioned to hide their identity. Hence, the caste/ethnicity of perpetrators could not be identified in such news reports. Among the news reports that mentioned the caste/ethnicity of the alleged perpetrators, Hill Janajatis ranked top followed by Hill castes and Hill Dalits (Table 4.5).

Table 4.5 Caste/ethnicity of reported 'alleged' perpetrators

Caste/ethnicity	Number	Percentage of mentions in news articles (%)	Percentage of total population (%) (CBS 2014)
Hill Janajati	84	47.2	27.3
Hill caste	67	37.6	31.2
Hill Dalit	32	18.0	8.1
Muslim	11	6.2	4.4
Tarai Janajati	8	4.5	7.7
Tarai caste	7	3.9	15.3
Tarai Dalit	1	0.6	4.5
Foreigners	12	6.7	>0.1
Multiple responses; n=178.			

Source: Authors' own, based on project data and CBS (2014).

These three caste and ethnic groups also rank top in an identical order among the purported victims reported in the news articles (Table 4.3). Hill caste, Hill Janajati and Hill Dalit groups also rank top among workers migrating out of Nepal for work.[21]

As in the case of the caste/ethnicity of the purported victims, Hill Janajatis and Hill Dalits had disproportionately higher shares among the alleged perpetrators in the news articles, while the rate for Hill castes was identical to their proportion of Nepali population.

A report by NHRC mentions that for the period 2013–15 the alleged perpetrators of human trafficking were predominantly male, young, illiterate or with a few years of schooling, and involved in low-earning economic activities. The same report also finds the highest rate of alleged perpetrators from the following caste/ethnic groups: Janajati (Hill), Brahmin/Chhetri (Hill caste), Dalit (Hill) and Madhesi (Tarai caste and Janajati) (NHRC 2016).

When asked about their experience of identifying alleged perpetrators, most of the reporters interviewed for the study shared that identifying the alleged perpetrators and writing about them in newspaper reports is challenging for several reasons. They shared that since most alleged perpetrators are already on the run, they cannot be identified easily. The reporters further shared that alleged perpetrators who are undergoing investigation or judicial trial cannot be

[21] Based on calculation of raw data from Nepal Labour Force Survey 2017/18 for international migrants whose reason for migration was service/job or seeking employment. As per the analysis, 33.8 per cent of labour migrants from Nepal belong to Hill caste followed by Hill Janajati (25.4 per cent) and Hill Dalit (12.2 per cent).

easily contacted; communication with them can only be established if a reliable source is present. They also noted that it was quite difficult for them to explicitly write the names of perpetrators in news reports until they were proven guilty. A reporter (R3) [22] noted:

> *We find survivors everywhere around us. And we, the people from the media, rely on easy information. We do not have access to finding who the perpetrators are. The police do not cooperate, either. And, sometimes when the alleged perpetrators are reported, it is hard for us to quote them until proven guilty.*[23]

Some reporters emphasised that it would take a considerable amount of time and energy in identifying perpetrators to write about them in newspaper reports. They further explained that it was not practically possible for them to consistently focus on the same story and carry out investigations for the same case for an extended period. They were required to focus their attention on newer stories every other day.

4.4 Reportage of interceptors

There are various individuals and organisations, such as government bodies, police forces, NGOs, and activists working to monitor and prevent trafficking from Nepal. They themselves or their representatives are primarily based at borders and exit places and thus intercept human trafficking on many occasions (Thapa *et al.*, forthcoming). These interceptors are also usually cited as the sources of information and statistics on TIP in press releases, media reports, and national reports. As discussed in section 4.1, media articles use secondary data provided by interceptors, particularly the Nepal Police and anti-human trafficking organisations.

The porous border between Nepal and India, as discussed in the introductory chapter, is a major exit point for traffickers and victims. Various interceptors have been helping to intercept, identify, and detain traffickers and victims at checkpoints along the border. They include NGOs such as Maiti Nepal, Shakti Samuha and KIN Nepal, as well as the border police; for example, the APF in Nepal and the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) in India are 'often the first responders in human trafficking interception' (Betteridge-Moes 2020; Thapa *et al.*, forthcoming).

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[22] Reporters and editors from sampled newspapers interviewed for the study are identified with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

[23] Interview with reporter, 21 October 2021.

The present study also analysed the various interceptors as reported in the articles sampled for the study. Most articles (273 out of 480) identified the interceptors in their reporting. The Nepal Police were the most common interceptors, followed by NGOs and international NGOs from Nepal, particularly Maiti Nepal.

Table 4.6 Interceptors as reported in the sampled news articles

Interceptor	Number	
Nepal Police/APF	97	35.5
NGO/INGO[24]	96	35.2
Government	58	21.2
Transit/destination country police	47	17.2
Transit/destination country government	27	9.9
Civil society/community	11	4.0
Intergovernmental organisation	3	1.1
Transit/destination country NGO	4	1.5
Multiple responses; n=273.		

Note: INGO = international NGO.
Source: Authors' own, based on project data and CBS (2014).

Various government authorities including Nepali embassies as well as CSOs, such as Non-Resident Nepali Association country chapters, were also cited as interceptors in many articles. The other interceptors included the police and government authorities of transit and destination countries.

The Nepal Police and APF have dedicated border checkpoints to carry out surveillance and inspection of all suspected travellers, including potential traffickers and trafficking victims. This could possibly explain why they are frequently reported as interceptors in trafficking incidents occurring through the border points.

Maiti Nepal was mentioned the most among the anti-human trafficking organisations mentioned as interceptors. Maiti Nepal has built 11 'transit homes' at Nepal–India border points in Kanchanpur, Kailali, Bardiya, Banke, Rupandehi, Nawalparasi, Chitwan, Parsa, Morang, Jhapa, and Illam districts, and one transit home in Rasuwa district, which shares a border with China (Maiti Nepal 2020). The organisation says that such transit homes mobilise their own surveillance teams, who work with border police to assist the interceptions of potential victims

[24] There were three news articles related to INGOs and in all three cases the International Organization for Migration (IOM) was reported to have been involved in rescue of Nepali migrant workers.

and their immediate rehabilitation (*ibid.*). Likewise, another organisation frequently reported as an interceptor was Shakti Samuha. The organisation has five shelter homes and one transit home in various districts; and a Women's Rehabilitation Centre in Sindhupalchowk district.[25] Similarly, another frequently cited organisation, KIN Nepal, has a central office in Kathmandu and branch offices in Jhapa, Morang, Chitwan, Nawalparasi, Rupandehi, Kapilvastu, Banke, and Kanchanpur districts in Nepal and, in Siliguri and New Delhi in India (KIN Nepal 2021).

The fact that such organisations have a good presence of staff to inspect suspicious movements along the border in districts that are used to transport people from Nepal could possibly explain why they are frequently cited in media reports. Furthermore, since most media reports about trafficking are either based on police reports or on information provided by anti-trafficking organisations,[26] they are more likely to be reported as interceptors in the news reports.

4.5 Process of identifying victims and perpetrators by interceptors

As discussed in the preceding section, the NGOs working in the anti-human trafficking sector, government authorities such as diplomatic missions, and law enforcement agencies were identified in the news articles as the major actors involved in intercepting trafficking incidents in, from and beyond Nepal. The human trafficking incidents were reported to have been intercepted in one of the following ways:

1. Prior to transportation of the purported victims – based on discreet or confidential information received through an undisclosed source (or 'tip-off').
2. En route – potential victims and suspected perpetrators are screened and identified during the process of transportation.
3. After transportation of the purported victims has been completed – rescue from the country of destination and subsequent rehabilitation at home, followed by prosecution of the alleged perpetrator(s).

The review of the articles showed that, in most cases, both purported victims and alleged perpetrators of human trafficking were intercepted during the course of transportation (i.e. interception en route) by different organisations and government authorities stationed at border points along the Nepal–India border. NGOs such as Maiti Nepal, Sana Haat and KIN Nepal, among others, and government authorities/law enforcement agencies such as the Nepal Police,

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25 **Shakti Samuha**.

26 Interview with Reporter (R2), 23 October 2021.

APF, and SSB intercepted trafficking activities along the various border points, the major international trafficking route from Nepal. For such interceptions, the NGOs and law enforcement agencies were reported to have worked either independently or concertedly – depending on the nature of trafficking – to screen, observe, identify and rehabilitate victims, and to initiate legal proceedings against the perpetrator(s). During such interceptions, NGOs and law enforcement agencies were reported to have identified the purported victims through strict vigilance of suspicious/unnatural travellers and through their interrogation.

It was revealed during the literature review process and conversations with the relevant authorities in Nepal that the country did not have a standard operating procedure (SOP) for victim identification and referral to services, although they were in the process of finalising one (Thapa *et al.*, forthcoming).[27] Although an SOP was prepared in 2017 by the UNODC Regional Office for South Asia (UNODC ROSA) (UNODC 2017)[28] for the first responders to screen, approach, contact, and interview suspected victims and perpetrators at the India–Nepal and India–Bangladesh borders, there is no evidence to corroborate that this SOP is being used in Nepal. Women, Children and Senior Citizen Service Center (WCSC) (formerly known as Nepal Police's Women Cells) uses 'internal guidelines' on the identification and treatment of victims in the absence of SOPs for victim identification and referral in Nepal (Surtees *et al*. 2020).

The review of newspaper articles indicated that intercepting organisations and law enforcement agencies working in Nepal screened, approached, and interrogated suspected victims and perpetrators based on their body language, gestures, and the way in which they travelled. For example, a report published in *The Kathmandu Post* in June 2016 noted:

> *Security personnel stopped the girl and two persons as they were crossing the border into India three days ago. The girl told the security personnel that they were going to India 'with uncles' to meet their relatives. But when the police interrogated them separately, it emerged that she was being trafficked into India. 'I agreed to travel with them to India after being promised a good job there', said the girl.* (Yadav 2016)

Interceptions are also made by law enforcement agencies prior to the transportation of purported victims by alleged perpetrators to trafficking destinations based on tip-offs. In such cases, the study found that law

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[27] As per the research team's conversation with a representative of Human Trafficking and Transportation Control section of Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens, the ministry is at the stage of finalising victim identification guidelines.

[28] This was prepared under the project Strengthening Service Provision for Protection and Assistance to Victims of Cross-Border Trafficking between Bangladesh, India and Nepal (UNODC 2017).

enforcement agencies worked clandestinely, relying either on secret information received from private sources or based on reports of victims' family members. The agencies coordinated with NGOs and potential victims' family members, as well as relatives and neighbours, in the process. For example, an article published in *Kantipur* about a case of girl-trafficking to India for a presumed religious sacrifice in December 2019 reported:

> *When they started inquiring about menstruation, whether there was any injury, whether she had any operation, she* [the purported victim] *became suspicious and told her relatives. After hearing the strange thing, they informed the Metropolitan Police Circle in Kathmandu on January 19. The Circle mobilised a special police team and started investigation following the girl.*
> (*Kantipur* 2019) [Translated from the original Nepali]

The article further reported:

> *Police said that* [the alleged perpetrators] *were arrested from Dharamshala at 9.30pm after realising that they were preparing to take the girl to India by 10pm. Preliminary investigation has revealed that Umesh and Krishna had a conversation with a border priest. 'It is a mystery why they are trying to worship the girl,' said Hovindra Bogati, deputy superintendent of police at the Kathmandu Metropolitan Police. 'If she had been taken there, her life would have been in danger,' he said. Police also suspect that he tried to offer 'sacrifice' while preparing for the* pooja*. Bogati said the priests were also being investigated… Police recovered Rs. 1,09,500, seven mobile phones, cheques of Rs. 901,000 from various banks, black thread, ochre-coloured cloth, two silver* jantars *tied with black thread, seven ATM cards of Krishna Tamang and Tantric worship items.*

Apart from such interceptions, NGOs and law enforcement agencies also collaborated in rescuing, repatriating, and rehabilitating the victims once trafficking had occurred. NGOs working in the anti-trafficking sector in Nepal coordinated with organisations in India as well as the Indian police. Likewise, law enforcement agencies in Nepal also accepted support from law enforcement agencies of other countries to rescue and rehabilitate victims and bring perpetrators to justice. For instance, an article in *Onlinekhabar* about the rescue of Nepali girls from Kenya reported:

> *On December 20, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj tweeted, 'We have rescued three Indian women from Kenya, including seven Nepalis, who were caught in the trap of human trafficking.' Immediately, the officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

> [in Nepal] *started searching. It was learned the next day that two of the seven rescued were from Makwanpur and one each from Sindhupalchowk, Nawalparasi, Surkhet, Tanahu and Nuwakot.* (*Pokharel* 2018) [Translated from the original Nepali]

Similarly, the role of a foreign law enforcement agency in rescuing and repatriating trafficking victims to Nepal was evident in a news report published in *Kantipur* in November 2020 about a case of transnational trafficking of Nepali youths with a promise of sending them to the US. The youths were rescued and repatriated from Malawi with the help of Malawian police:

> *Last year, six Nepalis were taken hostage in Blantyre, a small town 300km from Lilongwe, the capital of the south-eastern African country of Malawi. Malawi police had rescued six Nepalis from a house, including four who were taken to Malawi from Kathmandu via New Delhi, Vietnam, Dubai, Ethiopia, and Azerbaijan by an Indian agent. Malawi police arrested Nazir Ahmed, the house owner, and the victims were given shelter by a welfare organisation and facilitated their return to Nepal.* (*Sapkota* 2020a) [Translated from the original Nepali]

4.6 Nature of/motives for human trafficking

As the motives behind human trafficking are associated with the exploitation of victims (UNICEF USA 2017), analysis of the motives for human trafficking is an important component of this media analysis. Two-fifths of the news articles (40.2 per cent; n=193) analysed in the study reported the motives for, or nature of exploitation (or probable exploitation). Prostitution and/or sexual exploitation and forced labour/labour trafficking were reported frequently. Among them, the motive of labour trafficking and forced labour ranked top, slightly ahead of sexual exploitation/sex trafficking (Table 4.7).

Table 4.7 Motives for human trafficking

Motive	Number	Percentage of articles (%)
Forced labour/labour trafficking	68	35.2
Sexual exploitation/sex trafficking	58	30.1
Sex and labour trafficking (both)	51	26.4
Organ removal/human sacrifice	16	8.3
Total articles that reported the motive	**193**	**100**

Source: Authors' own.

Most of the articles reporting the motives for trafficking also mentioned the gender of the purported victims. With the exception of a couple of cases where the reported victims were male and female, most of the reported victims of sexual exploitation/sex trafficking were female (96.2 per cent).

Table 4.8 Motives for human trafficking by reported victims' gender

Motive	Female (%)	Male (%)	Both sexes (%)	Total articles (n)
Sexual exploitation/sex trafficking	96.2	0.0	3.8	53
Force labour/labour trafficking	46.2	46.2	7.7	52
Sex and labour trafficking (both)	83.3	2.8	13.9	36
Organ removal/human sacrifice	88.9	0.0	11.1	9

Source: Authors' own.

Among the articles that cited labour trafficking as the motive, male and female victims had identical representation.

The analysis finds a prominence of female victims in sex trafficking-related news reports in Nepali media. Even in the case of labour trafficking, females made up half of the total cases. The findings are consistent with other research conducted in this domain, which concludes that victims of sex trafficking are mostly women and children (UNICEF 2011). Another study on media coverage of human trafficking also found that the articles on sex trafficking primarily reference female victims (Sanford *et al.* 2016).

The media's focus on female victims of trafficking could reflect the nature of current anti-trafficking laws or treaties, official constructions of ideal victims and/or the general perception in the media of what will attract the public's attention (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the prominence of female victims in labour trafficking-related news articles in Nepal could be because of the migration policy for female migrants in Nepal that bans them from migrating to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries – the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar – for domestic work, which forces them to look for unauthorised channels for their labour migration and places them at risk of trafficking (see section 4.2 for more discussion of gender differences in the reporting of purported victims; for more detailed analysis of policy impact, see section 4.9.3).

4.7 Means of human trafficking

The purposes and *modus operandi* of trafficking in Nepal have significantly changed over time. While trafficking for sexual exploitation mainly used to be

reported, trafficking is now reported to have been committed for a wide range of purposes including forced labour, paedophilia, forced marriage, circus activities, removal of organs, the sex trade in entertainment, hospitality, and brick kiln industries, and agricultural and domestic work (NHRC 2012, 2014, 2018). Further, human trafficking takes place under the pretext of foreign employment, study abroad and entertainment sector jobs. Visit visas are reported to have been misused for TIP overseas for labour exploitation. Meanwhile, trafficking for organ removal, especially kidneys, occurs widely according to news reports.

A lure or deception is the most-used method for trafficking in Nepal (Hamal 2019). As per the annual report of the AHTB, the *modus operandi* of trafficking in 70.51 per cent and 72.97 per cent of the trafficking cases in 2017/18 and 2018/19 respectively, involved lure and deception. Similarly, 'tour/travel' and 'employment' were the second and third most-used methods for trafficking in 2018/19, accounting for 13.51 per cent and 6.75 per cent of cases registered by the AHTB (*ibid.*).

The analysis of the news articles included for the study shows that the means of human trafficking reported in these articles can be broadly categorised into two types. First, it is by means of force or coercion that victims are made to flee with the perpetrators. In this process, the consent of the person being trafficked is violated and the process involves smuggling people to another place that has no trace of the identity of the victim. Some 19.2 per cent of articles reported force or coercion as the means of trafficking (Table 4.9).

Table 4.9 Means of trafficking as reported in news articles

Means of trafficking	Number	Percentage of articles (%)
Force/coercion	92	19.2
Fraud/deception	288	60.0
Both force and deception	47	9.8
Means not mentioned	53	11.0
Total news reports	**480**	**100**

Source: Authors' own.

The other means reported in the articles was fraud or deception, whereby the alleged perpetrators defrauded the purported victims, promising them a better life, independence, marriage, and much more. Despite the victims giving consent initially, this counts as a regressive means of trafficking as they are later exploited for labour, commercial sex, organ harvesting, and other purposes that were not initially known. Fraud or deception appeared as the means of human

trafficking in most of the news articles (60 per cent) included in this study. As mentioned in one of the articles:

> *Local agents often cajole girls from poor families and sell them dreams of earning lots of money through easy work in foreign destinations. Some women are easily lured by these false promises while others have no choice but to go abroad due to their financial conditions at home.*
> (Portel 2020)

4.8 Recruitment process for human trafficking

The trafficking recruitment process entails the set of activities and actions undertaken by the perpetrators (i.e. traffickers and their aides) to either coerce or entice victims into trafficking. Media reports and past studies show that most often perpetrators of trafficking are introduced to victims by friends, neighbours, family members, relatives, or acquaintances (Kiss *et al.* 2019). The articles reviewed for the study also revealed a similar pattern. Close family members and relatives of purported victims were reported as a major medium for establishing contact between the alleged perpetrators and the purported victims.

Only a small number of articles (15.4 per cent; n=74) of the total articles included in the study discussed how first contact was established between the alleged perpetrators and the purported victims. Among the articles that reported the medium of contact, local agents and family, friends, relatives, or acquaintances were reported most frequently as intermediaries, helping to establish contact between the alleged perpetrators and the purported victims. These two groups of purported intermediaries were reported in just over four-fifths of the 74 articles. Social media such as Facebook seems to have emerged as a means of establishing contact with purported victims in recent years, although it was identified as a medium of contact in only six articles (Table 4.10).

Similar types of labour intermediaries are also involved in regular labour migration from Nepal. Family, friends, and relatives act as informal intermediaries to help aspirant migrant workers establish contacts with agents or private recruitment agencies (Taylor-Nicholson *et al.* 2014). Also, local agents, identified here as one of the major means of facilitating contacts between traffickers and victims, are also regarded as one group of key intermediaries contacted by aspirant migrant workers during foreign labour migration (MoLE 2018).

Table 4.10 Reported medium of contact between purported victims and perpetrators

Medium of contact	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total	
	n	n	n	n	n	n	Percentage of articles
Local agents	4	4	6	10	6	30	40.5
Family/friends/relatives/ neighbours/acquaintances	4	3	9	8	6	30	40.5
Recruitment agency	1	1	4	1	0	7	9.5
Social media	0	0	0	4	2	6	8.1
Street festival/programmes	0	0	0	1	0	1	1.4
Total articles reporting the medium of contact (n)	**9**	**8**	**19**	**24**	**14**	**74**	**100.0**

Source: Authors' own.

4.9 International human trafficking routes

This section discusses the reported changes in international human trafficking routes from Nepal in the previous five years (2016–20), compared to the period prior to 2016. Since this study is limited to international human trafficking, articles and reports about human trafficking within Nepal were excluded from the analysis.

4.9.1 International trafficking routes prior to 2016

A brief review of human trafficking-related reports published in Nepal was carried out for the years prior to 2016 to understand the nature and volume of human trafficking, and to identify the routes used by traffickers in human trafficking before 2016. Annual reports published by the NHRC (e.g. *Trafficking in Persons National Report*) for each year from 2011 to 2015 were reviewed to understand the previously mentioned patterns of human trafficking, with a focus on routes and destinations.

Nepal was identified in the NHRC reports as a source country for trafficking across three main areas: cross-border trafficking beyond India; cross-border trafficking to India; and internal trafficking mainly in entertainment enterprises, brick kilns, the embroidery industry and streets (NHRC 2012). India, the Gulf region, and South Korea were identified as the main cross-border/transnational destinations for trafficking of women and children between 2011 and 2015 (NHRC 2012, 2014). Trafficking of women, men, and children to India mostly occurred for the organ trade (kidney transplants, in particular), forced labour and

child labour (exploitation especially in the entertainment sector, including circus performance). Similarly, trafficking of men and women to GCC countries occurred in relation to foreign employment and, especially in the case of women, for the purpose of domestic servitude. The reports highlighted Nepali labour migrants' experience of fraud, deception, irregularities at the hands of private recruiters and local agents, and compulsion to work in forced labour in foreign destinations such as the Gulf region and Malaysia.

Apart from these destinations, trafficking of women (especially girls) to South Korea and Hong Kong took place for the purpose of fraudulent and forced marriages. In this context, while in previous years South Korea emerged as a lucrative destination for traffickers to traffic Nepali women for fake marriages, during the period between 2013 and 2015 China became a similar trafficking destination. In such cases, 'marriage bureaus' operating in Nepal as matchmaking agencies played a significant role in sending Nepali girls/women to South Korea, targeting girls/women from poor backgrounds. Additionally, the Tibet Autonomous Region, an autonomous region of China, was identified in 2011 as a place hosting a significant number of trafficked girls from Nepal, particularly in the entertainment industry, including hotels and restaurants (NHRC 2012, 2014, 2016). Furthermore, trafficking of children for inter-country adoptions was reported in 2011, with Italy, the US, Spain, France, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Switzerland, and the UK serving as important destinations (NHRC 2012).

In 2015, there was a significant prevalence of post-disaster trafficking (i.e. trafficking of vulnerable women and children who had been severely affected by natural disasters). Post-disaster trafficking emerged as a new phenomenon in Nepal as the April 2015 earthquake and other seasonal disasters worsened pre-existing vulnerabilities such as poverty and unemployment (NHRC 2016). The number of interceptions of women and children from border crossings following the earthquake rose significantly in districts such as Parsa, Jhapa, Illam, and Kanchanpur.

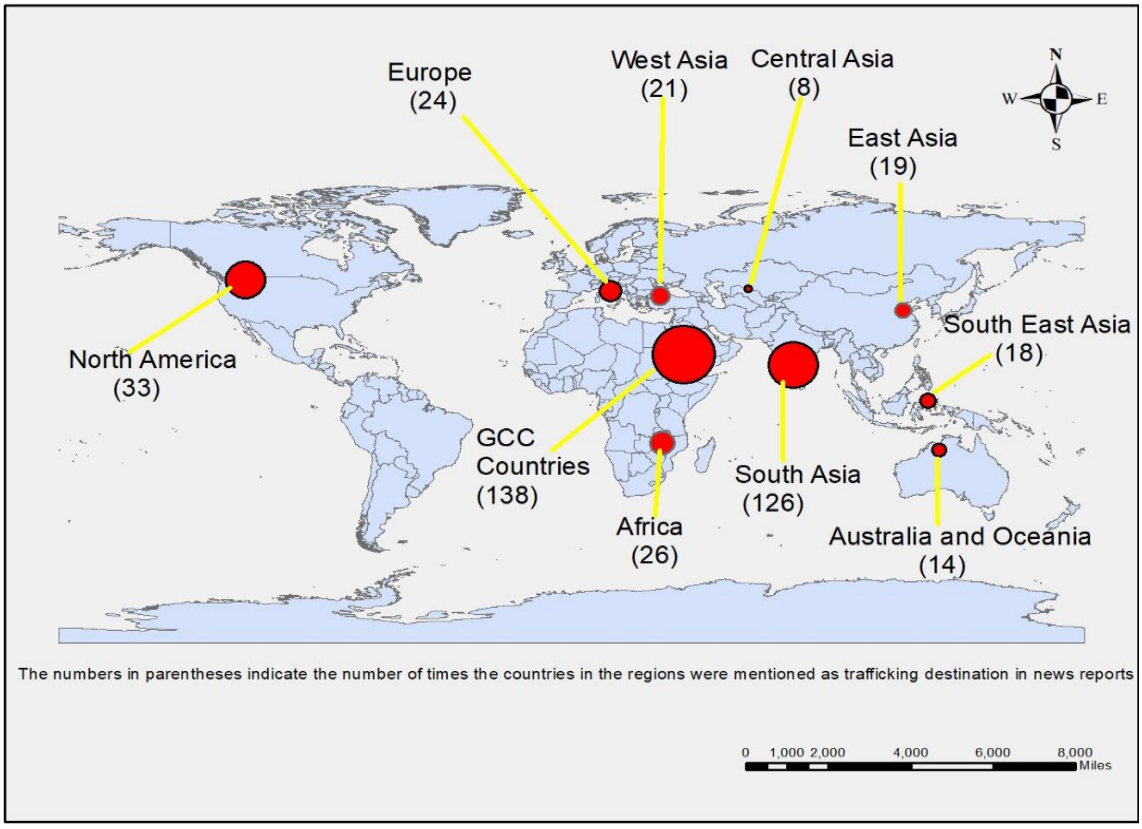
4.9.2 Routes of trafficking (2016–20)

The annual TIP reports published by NHRC for the period 2016–19 indicate the prevalence of human trafficking from Nepal to countries such as Macau, the GCC region, Portugal, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and India. Similarly, China, Afghanistan, the US, and South Korea have been mentioned as human trafficking destinations (NHRC 2017). The 2018 annual report specifically pointed to recent diversification in routes and destinations of trafficking. It highlighted that a larger number of cities and countries, such as Bangkok (Thailand) in Asia, cities in African countries, and several Latin American countries were being used by smugglers or traffickers for transporting victims to the US and European

countries than prior to 2016 (NHRC 2018). Furthermore, Australia and Eastern Europe were identified as important destinations, while Myanmar was identified as an important new route of human trafficking from Nepal (NHRC 2019).

About one fifth of the articles studied (22.3 per cent) did not report the countries that the purported victims were transported to. In the news reports that identified the destination countries of human trafficking from Nepal, India was the top single country across all years from 2016 to 2020. India was reported as the destination in 119 out of a total of 480 articles.

Figure 4.2 Destinations as reported in news articles

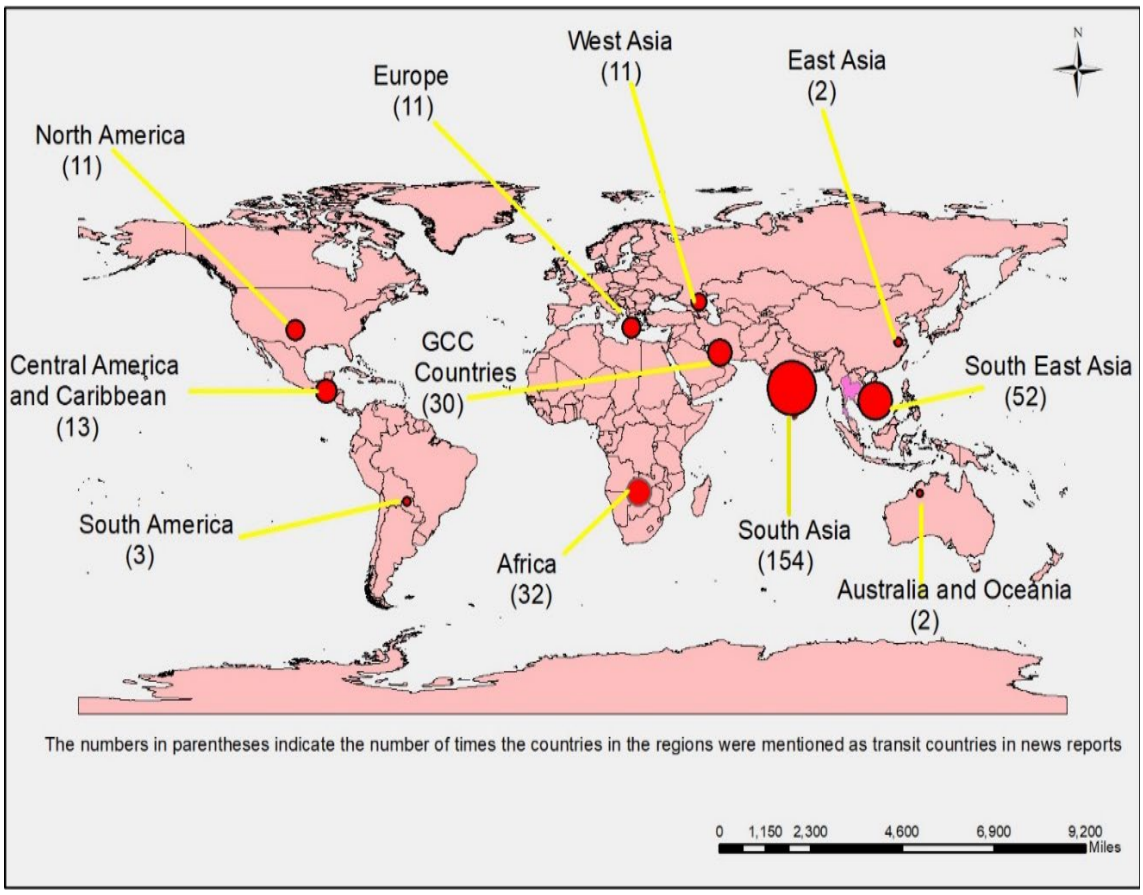


Source: © Opendatasoft, **World Administrative Boundaries – Countries and Territories**, reproduced with permission.
Note: The circles in the maps are only representative and not proportional to incidence; see Annexes 4 and 5 for yearly trend in reported destinations (2016–20).

The GCC countries jointly led in the years from 2016 to 2018 as the reported destination of purported victims of trafficking from Nepal, while also being reported in 28.9 per cent of the total articles selected in the study across five years. Kuwait, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia were the major countries within the GCC to which workers were trafficked. Although less frequently mentioned, the US, European countries, and various countries of Asia and Africa were also reported as the destinations of those trafficked from Nepal during 2016–20.

While most (63.3 per cent) articles did not report the transit countries, India consistently led the table among those that were reported as transit countries in the articles studied across all years. The news reports suggest the emergence of new transit countries and cities in recent years. For instance, consistent with published reports described earlier, this study found that Myanmar has emerged as an important transit country since 2019, while the UAE is also frequently used as a transit country for trafficking from Nepal. In one of the most talked about cases, migrant workers were taken to Myanmar via a transit in Aizawl in Manipur state in India.

Figure 4.3 Transit countries as reported in news articles



Source: © Opendatasoft, **World Administrative Boundaries – Countries and Territories**, reproduced with permission.
Note: circles in the maps are only representative and not proportional to incidence; see Annexes 6 and 7 for yearly trend in reporting of transits (2016–20).

While looking at the trafficking destinations reported for different years, it is observed that the list of destination and transit countries contains usual and new names every year. This suggests that the traffickers often explore new routes every year to take victims to their destination. As reported in an article in 2020:

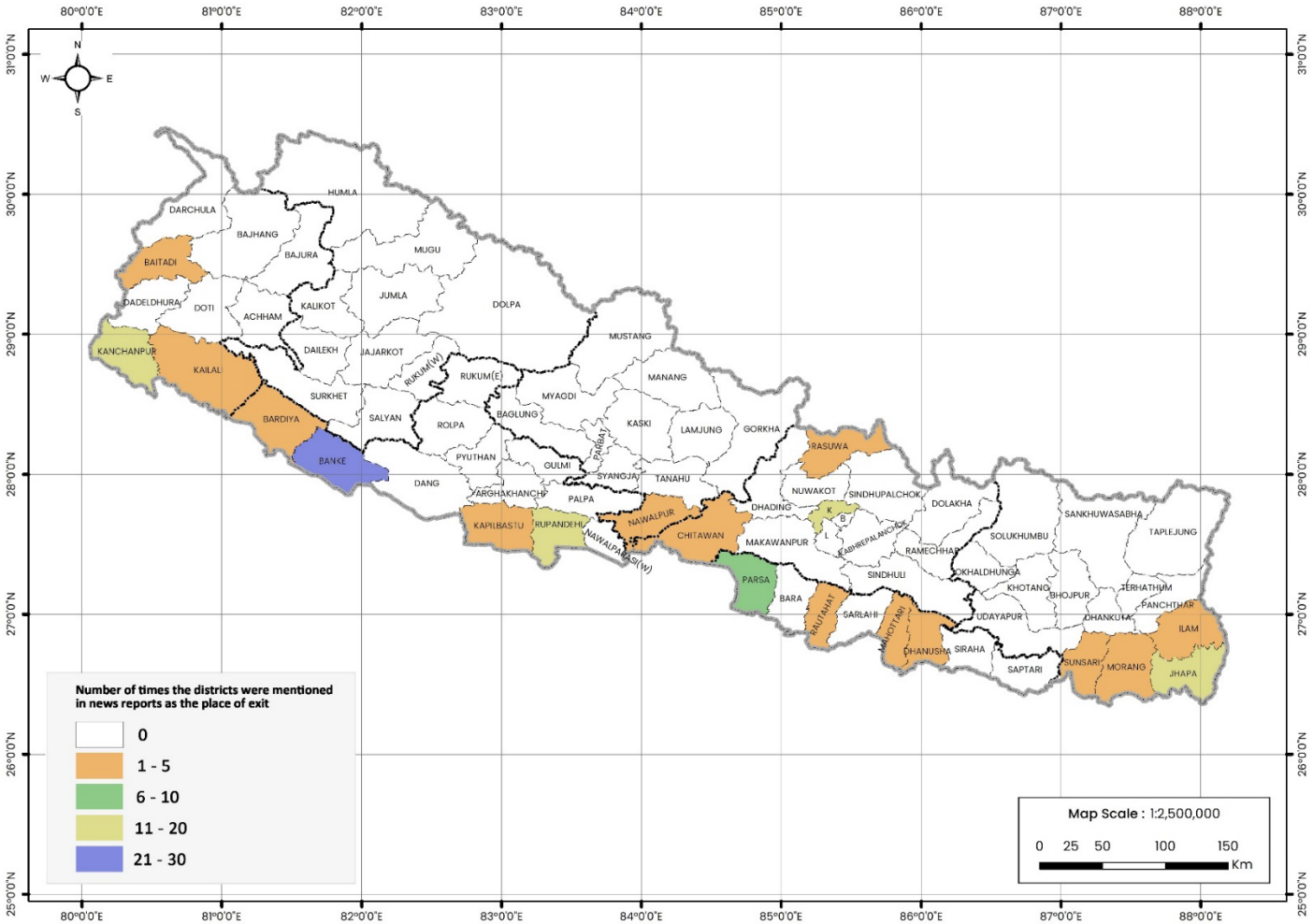
> *the forms and purposes of human trafficking have changed over the years. What used to be trafficking of women for sex to Indian cities has now evolved into various complicated forms. 'Previously, minor girls or women would be taken to Indian brothels. These days, trafficking has moved beyond India to third countries, and from sex trade to the entertainment industry in Africa and housemaid work in the Gulf… The open border makes it easy for traffickers.'*
> (Mandal 2020a)

Recent TIP reports show that the transit points used by traffickers are indeed very diversified and complicated. For example, a person being trafficked to the US was found to have followed the following route: Nepal to Delhi (India) by bus; Delhi to Russia, Russia to Madrid (Spain), and Spain to Bolivia by plane; Bolivia to Peru, Peru to Ecuador, and Ecuador to Colombia by bus; Colombia to Panama on foot and boat; Panama to Costa Rica by bus/taxi; Costa Rica to Nicaragua on foot; Nicaragua to Honduras by bus; Honduras to Guatemala, and Guatemala to Mexico by bus/taxi; and finally, on foot to cross the Mexico–US border (Hamal 2019).

Data on exit places from Nepal were provided in slightly over a quarter of the news reports (27.1 per cent). These exit places include points where the interception may have occurred or exit locations as reported by the victims or interceptors – for example, after the rescue of victims. Among the articles where the exit points were mentioned, Banke district ranked top with 6.3 per cent. The other important exit points were Kathmandu (to fly out of the country as this is the only district to have an international airport) and districts bordering India, such as Jhapa, Kanchanpur, and Rupandehi.

The districts in the Tarai region of Nepal that share a border with India are reported to have been overwhelmingly used as exit points by perpetrators to traffic purported victims to India, and from India to other countries. For instance, Jamunaha border crossing in Banke district, Kakarbhitta border crossing in Jhapa district, Gaddachauki border crossing in Kanchanpur district, and Bhairahawa border crossing in Rupandehi district were mentioned the most in newspaper articles. Jhapa district lies in the southeastern part of Nepal, and Kanchanpur district lies in the southwestern part, while Rupandehi district is located in the south-central part. The SSB similarly identified nine important India–Nepal routes for human trafficking: Mahandranagar–Banbasa, Dhanghadi–Palia, Nepalganj–Rupendia, Krishnanagar–Barhni, Bhairawa–Sonawli, Maheshpur–Thootibari, Birganj–Raxual, Biratnagar–Jogbani and Kakarvita–Panitanki (Pragya n.d.).

Figure 4.4 Exit districts as reported in news articles



Note: see Annexe 8 for yearly trend in reporting of exit districts (2016–20).
Source: © Cartography by NAXA for Social Science Baha, Nepal. Reproduced with permission.

4.9.3 Factors contributing to changes in human trafficking routes from Nepal

It was observed in the analysis of news reports that transnational human trafficking routes from Nepal have significantly changed in recent years. Changes in trafficking routes were also noted in NHRC reports on TIP over the years (see sections 4.9.1 and 4.9.2 for more information from the NHRC reports on human trafficking in Nepal). Traffickers now use a wider range of countries as transit points for trafficking of men and women from Nepal, with India still functioning as the first transit country on most occasions (unless the workers are flown from Kathmandu airport).

Many migrant workers reach destinations through illegal channels and through third countries, which further increases their vulnerabilities and also raises questions of the legality and criminality of victims' conduct (David, Bryant and Larsen 2019). In fact, the DoFE issued 8,514 labour permits for legalised entry in 2019/20 to those workers who were returning to employment abroad after home leave in Nepal, but whose preceding migration stint had been illegal (they had travelled without a labour permit from Nepal). The UAE, Qatar, Afghanistan, the US, and Oman were the top five countries for which labour permits for legalised entry were issued (DoFE 2020). Workers either fly through Kathmandu airport pretending to go abroad on a visit (with a visit visa) (Mandal 2020b) or travel through India to reach their final destinations (Kharel 2016). The workers are reported to be able to fly out of Kathmandu airport because of traffickers' 'arrangements'[29] with airport officials, even though the workers do not possess complete travel documentation as required by the DoFE (Mandal 2020c).

Changes in international human trafficking routes and final destinations may be associated with changes in factors such as the patterns of labour demands, migration policies in the countries of origin and destination, and types of (alleged) perpetrators involved in the illegal supply of workers. Some of the structural factors that may have contributed to the change in the patterns of human trafficking in Nepal are discussed below.

1. **Restrictive migration policy** – labour migration for women has been restrictive in Nepal, with the government time and again banning or restricting women from migrating for employment (Kharel 2016; McCarthy 2021). The GoN since 1990 has imposed various provisional bans on migration of women to protect them from risks such as economic, physical and sexual exploitation, violence and abuse (Pyakurel 2018; McCarthy 2021). Since 2017, Nepali women have been banned from migrating to GCC countries for

[29] In common parlance, the term used for this arrangement is 'setting'.

domestic work to 'protect' them from trafficking and exploitation. The frequent travel bans for domestic work could explain the higher rate of women going abroad through illegal means compared to legal means. For example, a news report on the trafficking of women to Gulf countries through India published in *The Kathmandu Post* in July 2020 reported the victim as saying:

> *'I had asked why we were not flying from Kathmandu. But the agent said they can't do so since there is a ban on women going for housemaid jobs,' said M. 'After a 13-hour drive, we reached New Delhi at 3am on March 15.'*
> (Mandal 2020a)

Another news article from 2019 reported:

> *In the years since the government banned women from entering the Gulf countries as domestic workers in Chait 2073, organised human traffickers have been sending women to the Gulf countries through various settings.*
> (Sapkota 2019) [Translated from the original Nepali]

Such restrictive and discriminatory migration policies have become counterproductive as they force women to use irregular routes and make them vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation (Kharel 2016; McCarthy 2021). For example, an article analysed the restrictive migration policy imposed by the government in the following manner:

> *The state's restrictive migration policies are not just forcing women into greater exploitation but are leading them to become ineligible to the Department of Foreign Employment's new policies and benefits. Take the case of Sabina Rai, for example. The 24-year-old woman died in Baghdad over a year-and-a-half ago, and her body remains unclaimed at a hospital in the Iraqi capital. She had entered Iraq to work as domestic help through many sub-agents and several stops across Nepal and India. Since 1998, Nepal government has, on and off, banned women from migrating to foreign countries for work in the informal sector, primarily as domestic help. So, like Rai, thousands of women continue to leave the country with the help of unscrupulous agents.*
> (Rai 2019)

Travel bans have also been criticised for violating people's right to freedom of movement, as guaranteed in the Constitution of Nepal. In the context of lack of employment opportunities in the country, labour migration will remain an important livelihood source for many households in the foreseeable future.

Hence, controlling migration cannot be a policy option for preventing human trafficking associated with international labour migration.

2. **No-objection certificate (NOC) for travelling to third countries via India** – in 2018, Nepal mandated the requirement of a NOC for Nepalis to fly to third countries via India (Neupane 2019b). The implementation of such a regulation has forced traffickers to use other means to transport victims to their destination. For example, traffickers are using smaller cities bordering Myanmar to take Nepalis to GCC and other countries.

   A news report that detailed the implications of such a mandatory NOC requirement cited a minister as indicating that the mandatory imposition of an NOC had forced traffickers to find new routes other than the airport in New Delhi. The report noted:

   > *Nepalis choose to fly from India either due to cheap airfare or for trafficking reasons. 'In most cases, genuine visitors use the Kathmandu airport. Some may have work or business in India and use Indian airports to fly to third country while others choose India for cheap airfare. But most choosing to fly from India are under the trafficking net,' the Nepali officials said. Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali also believes that the mandatory imposition of the certificate has helped reduce trafficking through Indian airports. However, Gyawali said that the regulation has forced traffickers to use other means, including taking Nepalis to Gulf countries on land routes via Manipur to Myanmar to avoid Indian airports.*
   > (Giri 2019)

   This point was also emphasised by one of the news articles from 2020:

   > *After the Government of Nepal made No Objection Letter (NOC) mandatory to go to third countries via India, human traffickers have recently started using fake NOCs and using small Indian cities to send them abroad illegally.*
   > (Neupane 2019a) [Translated from the original Nepali]

3. **Policy of destination country** – visit visas have often been (mis)used to send Nepalis to destination countries for work. For some destination countries, particularly the UAE, it is easy to obtain a visit visa. The UAE also allows for converting this type of visa into an employment visa. This has made the country a transit country as well as a destination for trafficking in labour migration from Nepal. Destination countries are also reported to have used visit visas for labour recruitment to evade recruitment costs (as per the current 'employer pays' modality adapted by Nepal) that had to be borne

while recruiting workers formally (Kharel *et al.* 2021). As reported in one of the news media sources quoting a representative from the Department of Immigration:

> *Countries like the United Arab of Emirates have relatively relaxed their visit visa policies. Nepalis also find it easier to go on visit visas, and then find a job there rather than getting a labour permit under the individual category… But we can't stop anyone if they meet visit visa requirements – a valid visa, two-way tickets, accommodation arrangements and currency equivalent to US$1,000 as travel expenses.*
> (Mandal 2020d)

4. **Labour demands from non-conventional/new destination countries** – The change in routes and patterns of human trafficking may be related to demands from destination countries, especially in cases of labour trafficking. For instance, the war in Syria and the unwillingness of existing labour-sending countries to send workers created a high demand for Nepali workers in the war-torn nation. According to a newspaper report:

> *Nepal's top diplomat in the region said nationals from the Philippines, Indonesia, and other countries which, like Nepal and Bangladesh, have large migrant labour populations, stopped working in Syria because of the dangers involved. Since then, traffickers have been targeting Nepalis… Criminal networks target nationals from Nepal and Bangladesh in part because their governments have little diplomatic influence in the region and no embassy in Syria.*
> (Agence France Presse 2016)

4.9.4 Reporters' observations on changes in patterns of trafficking

The reporters from the sampled newspapers were also asked if they found changes in the destination and routes of trafficking from Nepal. All reporters expressed that they were able to observe changes in both destinations and routes of trafficking from Nepal. The respondents stated that prior to 2016, trafficking cases were mostly concentrated in the Indian cities of New Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata or the Gulf region. They claimed that traffickers mostly used the land route through the Nepal–India border to traffic girls for prostitution in India or had done so to traffic girls to other countries in the Gulf region.

However, in recent years, the reporters said, the destinations for trafficking have expanded and flourished beyond India and the Gulf region to other countries in North America, Europe, and Africa. Similarly, they noted that the routes for

trafficking have changed drastically, with traffickers finding new avenues. They stated that Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Turkey, Libya, and Mali, among other countries, have emerged as new transit areas for trafficking.

Most reporters and editors agreed that the nature of trafficking has undergone a transformation in recent years. Some reporters mentioned that the cases of trafficking currently reported in the media have links to foreign labour employment and hence have associations with forced labour, domestic servitude, and slavery. In the past, in their view, trafficking reports mostly covered issues about sex trafficking and child labour. As the editor (E1) of one of the sampled newspapers mentioned during their interview:

> *The destination was solely India at some point, but now we see a lot of other destinations as well. It was based on direct trade of people in the past, while now it has taken other forms as forced labour and slavery. Trend has changed; result hasn't. We have been failing to bring out underlying reasons.* [30]

The reporters also noted that the changes in destination of trafficking can be traced to changes in people's aspirations over time. The market for labour trafficking has increased with people's obsession in travelling to industrialised countries by any means to improve their socioeconomic conditions. In the words of a reporter (R1) interviewed for the study: 'People want to live a quality life, and they seek opportunities to go to destinations in Europe and America, but they get duped in the process.'[31]

4.10 Media 'reporting lens' of human trafficking

As discussed in section 3.1, media play a paramount role in informing the public about human trafficking problems and giving victims a voice. The media framing or 'reporting lens' of human trafficking reports can have implications for shaping public opinion, setting the public agenda, and influencing the political sphere surrounding the issue. In this context the present study also analysed how the media framed the issue of human trafficking. In particular, the study sought to identify whether the media framed the incidence of human trafficking as a 'failure of state', the 'outcome of poverty and economic deprivation', and/or from a 'human rights perspective'. These categories were identified in the first round of coding of the news articles. These three lenses were repeatedly used in media reports and were thus quickly identified. These frames also overlapped in individual articles, as the reporters used multiple frames at one time. It is possible that the study has missed out other reporting lenses used in the news

30 Interview with editor (E1), 25 October 2021.
31 Interview with reporter (R1), 20 October 2021.

articles. Many articles also did not use any perceptible frames as they only reported what happened and did not explore how it had happened. This study aimed to analyse only the most dominant frames; it was beyond the scope of the study to analyse every reporting lens used in the news articles.

Although these three lenses were used in reports published by both government and non-government news media, government media were less likely to use the lenses of failure of state and human rights perspective and more likely to use the lens of poverty and deprivation, compared to private news media (Table 4.11).

Table 4.11 Reporting lens according to media ownership types

Reporting lens	Government news media (%)	Private news media (%)	Overall (%)
Failure of state	15.3	25.7	23.5
Outcome of poverty and economic deprivation	42.1	21.6	25.6
Human rights perspective	9.5	26.0	22.7
N=480 (government media: 95; private media: 385)			

Source: Authors' own.

Among the 480 articles on human trafficking between 2016 to 2020 that were reviewed in this study, 113 articles (23.5 per cent) presented failure of state in combating human trafficking as the reason for persisting or changing patterns in Nepal. The state was generally criticised for its incompetence in preventing human trafficking or implementing certain rules to take action against the perpetrators. A media report from 2020, for instance, criticised the lack of investigation by the AHTB:

> *The incidents of similar nature of human trafficking have been going on for years due to lack of investigation from the police. Incidents where victims are approached through social media, lured with attractive jobs, and stranded in countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos after scamming millions of rupees are occurring over and over again. What is strange is that the same person is seen to be at the centre of such incidents for years.*
> (*Sapkota* 2020b) [Translated from the original Nepali]

The state's restrictive migration policy against women was also criticised for making women more vulnerable to human trafficking, as observed in this media report from 2020:

> *The government defends itself saying that if the protectionist approach was not introduced then these women workers would have become victims of exploitation and human trafficking. However, by doing so they have rather made them vulnerable, as they migrate through illegal channels.*
> (Mandal 2019b)

While framing the trafficking issue as a failure of the state, airport officials were criticised for their role in abetting traffickers. As reported in one news article:

> *As per the 'International Relations and Labor Committee' under the parliament made public on Tuesday, the fact that 60 per cent of the domestic workers going to work in the Gulf countries fly through 'setting' from Tribhuvan Airport. It has been found that 60 per cent of the domestic workers in the Gulf countries who migrated through illegal channels were sent from the airport on a visit visa or 'setting' and that the immigration officials and security personnel working at the airport, airline employees and middlemen are directly involved in the illegal trade, the report said.*
> (Regmi 2017) [Translated from the original Nepali]

Some 25.6 per cent of the articles (123 out of 480) framed human trafficking from Nepal as an issue of poverty and economic deprivation in the home country. For instance, it was reported in an article dated 2019 that: 'In Rupandehi, many women from impoverished backgrounds continue to fly abroad for employment using illicit measures' (Anmol 2019). Likewise, a news report from 2020 cited an official of an anti-human trafficking organisation stating that:

> *The root causes* [of trafficking] *are a lack of employment and awareness and poverty… Even those who cannot read and write and even make a phone call are being trafficked. This shows they are completely unaware.*
> (Mandal 2020a)

Some 22.7 per cent of the sampled articles (109 out of 480) referenced human rights in their reporting, although they did not frame the issue of human trafficking as an outcome of human rights violations. As a news article from 2019 reported:

> *Two years ago, the government imposed a ban on Nepali women taking up jobs as housemaids in the Gulf countries as part of a bid to protect them from potential exploitation. But concerns are growing, as rights activists and organisations say such a ban infringes upon an individual's right to mobility. The government, nonetheless, seems to be in a dilemma as to what it should do.*
> (Mandal 2019b)

4.10.1 Media reporters' and editors' experience of writing and publishing about human trafficking in Nepal

The reporters and editors were asked about the decision-making process involved in selecting, pursuing, and following up human trafficking cases for publication, and the factors that affect the decision-making process. The reporters mentioned that most news reports of human trafficking cases are event-based reports, meaning that they are sought after by reporters after they occur, or after the information is supplied by sources such as the police or anti-trafficking organisations. The decision to publish a report on human trafficking is taken by the reporter independently, although the editor can have a say on what to focus on and/or omit. Most reporters claimed that they had never faced any hurdle in getting a trafficking story/report published. Similarly, some reporters also mentioned that the decision to publish human trafficking stories, like any other story, is based on periodic meetings that occur in newsrooms.

The reporters also mentioned that many reporters in Nepal lacked adequate training and guidance on reporting on human trafficking-related stories.[32] Some claimed that trafficking-related stories were written and published mostly based on press releases and NGO-driven information rather than through investigative reporting.

The framing of articles involved a lot of subjectivity. The reporters claimed that their values, knowledge and understanding of human trafficking incidents played a major role in the way stories were reported. The decision about which frame to use in writing or reporting a human trafficking incident was entirely dependent on the reporter's subjectivity, and his/her subsequent ability to convince the editor/newsroom that the frame/angle being used was the most appropriate. When asked about the factors involved in decision-making about what frame/angle to use in writing about or reporting on human trafficking cases, a reporter (R3) responded highlighting that 'the interest of readers' is an important factor shaping the reporting:

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[32] Interview with reporter (R2), 23 October 2021.

> *Frame is decided by reporters themselves, or the newsroom. We try giving the report a new angle, something nobody has heard of before. However, all of us attempt to incorporate all possible frames to this. Several factors come into play for the decision, including the interest of readers and some kind of help it is going to bring for the survivors.*[33]

As illustrated in the quote below, an editor (E1) of a newspaper selected for the study also made a similar point, but giving some further indication, when read along with the preceding quote, that the narrative of women as vulnerable and victims attracts the readers. He also explained that it is the reporters, not the editors, who are responsible for not digging deeper into human trafficking news reporting:

> *Since most of the victims are women, what we often see is an angle of mercy. It drives language and narrative accordingly. Had the reporters put their best foot forward, we could have shed light on the nexus and powerful people behind these nexuses.*[34]

The editor's statement, however, needs to be taken with caution as power dynamics may come into play when making final decisions about stories and the breadth and depth of reporting: one party may point at the other over inadequacies in the stories.

When asked if human trafficking media reports in Nepal had given either more or less attention to a particular issue, most reporters shared that media reports on trafficking were mostly victim centred. The reports mostly portrayed trafficking incidents from the purported victims' angle, while not paying enough attention to revealing the identity of alleged perpetrators or exploring the details of trafficking rackets. An editor (E2) for a national daily shared:

> *We have been focusing majorly on individual instances and less on trends. Our government has often exhibited incompetence regarding this, and it has not been in publication compared to stories filled with a sense of empathy. Apart from the perpetrator and victim, I think we should divert our focus more towards the nexus that operates the trafficking scene. We cannot deny the fact that the feeble police network is another obstacle to this.*[35]

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33 Interview with reporter (R3), 21 October 2021.
34 Interview with editor (E1), 25 October 2021.
35 Interview with editor (E2), 22 October 2021.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Media are a key source of information and their portrayal of and reporting on human trafficking can play an important role in shaping public and political awareness, opinion, and responses. This study primarily analysed sampled content from the news archives of six major national newspapers in Nepal to examine changes in reported international human trafficking routes from Nepal, identify reported victims and alleged perpetrators, and explore the various intercepting agencies. The analysis of archival data was supplemented with a review of existing data/literature on human trafficking and interviews with newspaper reporters and editors on issues surrounding human trafficking reporting.

TIP has been a persistent problem in Nepal for a long time. Nepal is a major source country for trafficking. The fact that the country shares a long porous border with India further serves to intensify the volume of trafficking from Nepal to overseas destinations through India. Most reported trafficking incidents were based on fraud or deception; the traffickers lured or misled victims using false promises and aspirations. Labour trafficking and sex trafficking were the most reported types of human trafficking. Frequent reportage of labour trafficking in newspaper reports is consistent with the findings from the literature that trafficking incidents in Nepal are increasingly linked with labour migration and foreign employment.

The prominence of purported female victims in news articles on human trafficking conforms with findings from media analysis of coverage of human trafficking in other countries. It is noteworthy that national reports on human trafficking in Nepal also identify most victims in Nepal as women. Another important aspect is the prominence of female victims in articles where labour trafficking is reported despite labour migration from Nepal being predominantly male. This could be particularly because women migrant workers may have used unauthorised, informal channels for migration due to a ban on female migration for domestic work. Additionally, the ban on female migration for domestic work as a violation of their human rights has received a lot of attention recently from policymakers, human rights activists, government, and NGOs, among others.

Hence, the reportage on female labour migration through informal, unauthorised channels is more likely to appear in newspapers. The higher rate of reportage of purported female victims could have resulted from the focus of anti-trafficking organisations and the police being on the mobility of independent women migrant workers. Additionally, considering the convergence between human trafficking and migration, varied jurisdiction and complaint mechanisms for human trafficking and foreign employment cases and the male-dominated

foreign employment sector in Nepal may not provide a complete picture of trafficking victims. This points to the need for coordination between government agencies responsible for investigating human trafficking and labour migration issues in Nepal.

The Tibet Autonomous Region and Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region) of China, South Korea, and the countries in the Gulf were traditionally major destinations of trafficking prior to 2016. Likewise, the existing literature also notes the persistent use of land routes (e.g. through the Nepal–India open border) by traffickers to transport victims to India as well as other countries. As has been found in this study, India is still reported as the major destination and transit country for TIP, and South Korea, China, and countries in the Gulf, have continued to be reported as major destinations since 2016. New destination and transit countries have also been reported since 2016: European countries, countries in Latin America, Myanmar, and various African countries.

Analysis of news articles between 2016 and 2020 shows that traffickers often change routes and use new transit areas for trafficking. The approach used by the GoN to 'protect' Nepalis from trafficking and exploitation, as in the case of the ban imposed on female migration for domestic work and the NOC requirement for flying via Indian airports, has been reported as a leading cause of trafficking of women to different destination countries. The analysis also indicates that traffickers used new land routes via India to take victims to Myanmar after the GoN mandated the requirement for NOCs for air travel from Indian airports. This also calls for policies that provide comprehensive and long-term responses to issues of exploitation and trafficking rather than looking for an immediate fix.

Based on these conclusions, this study provides the following recommendations:

1. The findings from the study point to a lack of investigative journalism on issues related to human trafficking in Nepal. Most media reports on human trafficking are based on reports from interceptors. Hence, there is a need for the GoN as well as related stakeholders to create an environment where journalists can conduct investigative reporting on issues related to TIP. For this, it is necessary to identify challenges to investigative journalism in Nepal and address those barriers through coordinating between relevant government agencies and journalists' associations, among others. Allocation of financial resources could be a motivating factor in reporters pursuing investigative journalism on human trafficking.

2. Reporters interviewed for the study reported that they did not face any obstacles from management in reporting on human trafficking from Nepal. Provisions for training reporters on investigative and news reporting on human trafficking issues, and to clarify this is a broad field with nuances and grey areas and link it to migration and rights could contribute to quality

reporting. This is to avoid a tunnel vision or compartmentalised reporting and promote comprehensive reporting. The reporters and editors could be given training on effective communication about relevant human trafficking news stories, including the reporting angle, language sensitivity, and extent of exposure of crime and perpetrators. Similarly, training should be provided for robust reporting, fact finding, and analysis including critical gender analysis.

3. Trafficking-related news gives prominence to female victims as well as sex/labour trafficking. Hence, it is necessary that news articles also focus on other aspects and forms of human trafficking that are often under-reported. Trafficking stories should try to delve deeper and provide more comprehensive reports about cases and where possible follow investigative journalism. Organising training sessions and workshops for editors and reporters on these issues could help minimise shortcomings in the reporting of human trafficking.

4. The Government of Nepal should take steps to revise counterproductive policies such as banning foreign employment for women in certain sectors, which serves only to fuel the trafficking of women. The study found that Nepali women are trafficked through dangerous routes to countries where the Government of Nepal bans them from seeking employment, which puts them at even higher risk of abuse and exploitation. A gradual reopening of opportunities for women to work abroad, and a reconsideration of the 'restrictive approach' could lead them to use normal, legal routes for dignified and safe employment abroad.

5. As most labour migration-related cases are handled by the DoFE, it is necessary for the DoFE and AHTB to work in close coordination and provide comprehensive data on labour trafficking-related cases. Such coordination between the two agencies could entail mutual vigilance of suspected perpetrators complicit in trafficking, mutual communication about potential trafficking cases, and sharing of available information about the nature of employment/trafficking in employment/trafficking destinations. It is also important to amend prevailing human trafficking and labour migration law in Nepal in consideration of changes in the forms and patterns of trafficking from the country.

Annexe 1: Verbal consent agreement (for key informants)

Hello, my name is _____, I am a researcher at CESLAM based in Kathmandu. A study on the Changes in the International Routes of Human Trafficking from Nepal for Labour Migration is being conducted in collaboration between Winrock, IDS, and the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM) at Social Science Baha, Kathmandu.

I would like to ask you to be a part of this research by answering some questions for us. Any information that you provide will not be directly linked back to you. The interview data will only be accessible to the interviewer, translator, and main researchers. The information will be stored in a password-protected private file that can be accessed by the researchers involved in this study through a shared Google drive. The data will be used for research purposes.

There is no direct potential benefit to you for taking part in this study. It is hoped that the research will help gain information that can help evaluate and inform policies on human trafficking.

Our interview will take about one hour to complete. We encourage you to choose a place that is comfortable and maintains aural privacy for you. Participation in this research is completely voluntary and you can withdraw your consent at any point if you want to do so by informing me. Do I have your consent to move ahead with this interview? Can I record it?

Yes **No**

Thank you for your participation in this study, we value your response and time. Should you have any questions or concerns about the research at any time, please feel free to call the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM) at +977-1-4572807 (office hours 10am–5pm).

Thank you again!

Annexe 2: Interview checklist (for reporters and editors)

Personal information: Name, Designation, Organisation

Note: *The questions will be adapted and updated based on the stakeholders' relevance and scope of work as well as the findings from the initial results from media analysis.*

1. How do you make a decision on what kind of stories on human trafficking to publish? Who decides what stories will be pursued? Who decides what gets published and what does not?
2. Has there been an instance where a story regarding trafficking that you pitched has not been published? What was the reason?
3. What do you think good media coverage on human trafficking would look like? What is needed for good coverage and is this possible?
4. Has anything been missed or received too much attention in the media reporting of human trafficking in Nepal? What stories have received too much/too little focus or needs more/less coverage?
5. Most news articles include stories about suspected victims. Why are perpetrators barely identified in the news reports? What challenges are there for journalists in getting access to both suspected victims and (alleged) perpetrators and identifying them?
6. Different articles have different media frames. Some focus on human rights, some put the emphasis on poverty while others focus on the failure of state in curbing human trafficking. How is the decision made regarding which frame to pursue while writing the article?
7. How do you get preliminary information about the incidents/cases of human trafficking?
8. Have you found any changes in the international routes of trafficking from Nepal? What do you think are the reasons for such change? Do you follow international media to track the incidents of international human trafficking?

Annexe 3: Quality assessment tool

The following criteria will be used to assess the quality of the news articles and score them.

1. Relevancy: the extent to which information provided in the news article is applicable and helpful for the study at hand.
2. Completeness: whether the article provides sufficient information with regards to the breadth and depth of the study.
3. Opinions versus facts: whether the article is an op-ed or a news article.
4. Accuracy: the extent to which data is correct, reliable, and free of errors and not misleading.
5. Understandability: whether the data is clear, without ambiguity and easily comprehended.
6. Correctness, truthfulness, and reliability: whether or not the information provided is correct and reliable.

Two of the researchers involved in the study will each independently score on the quality indicators. A five-point scale, with 1 corresponding to the lowest level of quality and 5 corresponding to the highest level of quality, will be used. Any article scoring less than 50 per cent will be excluded from the study.

Annexe 4: Destination as reported in news articles

Destination	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total	
	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Percentage of articles
Destination not mentioned	16	16	21	40	14	107	22.3
GCC countries	25	39	33	28	13	138	28.8
India	18	19	33	31	18	119	24.8
US	5	5	5	7	3	25	5.2
European countries*	0	2	4	5	2	13	2.7
Australia	3	2	1	7	0	13	2.7
Malaysia	5	3	1	0	1	10	2.1
Kenya	1	1	3	5	0	10	2.1
China	1	1	2	5	0	9	1.9
Canada	2	2	1	3	0	8	1.7
Kyrgyzstan	4	0	1	1	0	6	1.3
Syria	1	2	2	1	0	6	1.3
South Korea	2	0	4	0	0	6	1.3
Turkey	0	0	2	0	4	6	1.3
South Africa	0	1	2	1	1	5	1
Italy	0	0	2	3	0	5	1
African countries*	0	0	4	0	0	4	0.8
Afghanistan	2	0	2	0	0	4	0.8
Lebanon	1	1	1	1	0	4	0.8
Middle East countries*	1	0	0	2	0	3	0.6
Libya	0	0	0	3	0	3	0.6
Myanmar	0	0	0	2	1	3	0.6
Malawi	0	0	0	2	0	2	0.4
Macao	0	0	1	1	0	2	0.4
Turkmenistan	1	1	0	0	0	2	0.4
Nepal	0	2	0	0	0	2	0.4
Greece	0	0	0	0	2	2	0.4
Sri Lanka	1	1	0	0	0	2	0.4
Togo	0	0	2	0	0	2	0.4
Southeast Asia*	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.2
Azerbaijan	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Estonia	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Hong Kong	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Iran	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.2
Japan	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Cambodia	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.2
Laos	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.2
Maldives	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
New Zealand	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Portugal	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.2
Romania	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.2
Russia	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.2
Singapore	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.2
Thailand	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.2
Multiple responses; n=480							
*Note: except for the 'GGC countries', all the terms used to refer to regions or regional associations in the table were used in the original news reports and were not formulated by the study team.							

Annexe 5: Recoding of reported destination countries into different regions

Destination region	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
GCC countries	25	39	33	28	13	138
South Asia	21	20	36	31	18	126
North America	7	7	6	10	3	33
Africa	1	2	11	11	1	26
Europe	2	2	7	8	5	24
West Asia (excluding GCC countries)	3	3	6	5	4	21
East Asia	3	1	9	6	0	19
Southeast Asia	5	4	1	3	5	18
Australia and Oceania	3	2	2	7	0	14
Central Asia	5	1	1	1	0	8
Multiple responses; n=480						

The classification used in the report is based on the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) classification of the geographical regions of the world.[36]

[36] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division. **Standard country or area codes for statistical use (M49 Standard)**, accessed on 9 January 2022.

Annexe 6: Transit countries as reported in the news articles

Transit countries	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total	
	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Percentage of articles
Not available	44	64	70	85	41	304	63.3
India	30	20	34	41	12	137	28.5
Myanmar	0	0	0	17	4	21	4.4
UAE	2	3	3	9	3	20	4.2
Thailand	4	2	6	1	1	14	2.9
Sri Lanka	4	4	3	1	0	12	2.5
Mexico	2	4	4	1	0	11	2.3
African countries	1	4	2	0	0	7	1.5
Nigeria	0	0	5	0	0	5	1.0
Azerbaijan	0	0	0	3	1	4	0.8
Ethiopia	0	0	0	3	1	4	0.8
Indonesia	0	1	0	3	0	4	0.8
Jordan	0	0	0	4	0	4	0.8
Kuwait	2	1	1	0	0	4	0.8
Libya	0	0	0	4	0	4	0.8
Vietnam	0	1	0	2	1	4	0.8
Bangladesh	2	0	0	1	0	3	0.6
Gulf countries	0	0	1	2	0	3	0.6
Kenya	1	2	0	0	0	3	0.6
Malawi	0	0	0	2	1	3	0.6
Malaysia	0	0	2	1	0	3	0.6
Nicaragua	1	1	0	1	0	3	0.6
Singapore	1	0	2	0	0	3	0.6
Tanzania	1	2	0	0	0	3	0.6
Bulgaria	0	0	2	0	0	2	0.4
Croatia	0	0	2	0	0	2	0.4
Guatemala	0	1	0	1	0	2	0.4
Haiti	0	0	0	2	0	2	0.4
Honduras	0	1	0	1	0	2	0.4
Costa Rica	1	1	0	0	0	2	0.4
Madagascar	0	0	0	2	0	2	0.4
Russia	0	1	0	1	0	2	0.4
Serbia	0	0	2	0	0	2	0.4
Slovakia	0	0	2	0	0	2	0.4
Cambodia	0	1	0	0	1	2	0.4
Bahamas	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.2
Bhutan	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Brazil	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.2
China	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.2
Cyprus	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Ecuador	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.2
France	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.2
Iran	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.2
Japan	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.2
Laos	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.2
Micronesia	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.2
Oman	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.2
Pakistan	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.2
Panama	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.2

Transit countries	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total	
	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Percentage of articles
Papua New Guinea	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.2
Qatar	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.2
Saudi Arabia	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.2
Turkey	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Mozambique	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.2
Colombia	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.2
Multiple responses; n=480							
Note: the terms used to refer to regions or regional associations in the table were used in the original news reports and were not formulated by the study team.							

Annexe 7: Recoding of the reported countries of transit into different regions

Transit by region	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
South Asia	37	24	38	43	12	154
Southeast Asia	5	6	10	24	7	52
Africa	3	8	7	11	3	32
GCC countries	4	7	5	11	3	30
Central America and Caribbean	3	4	0	6	0	13
North America	2	4	4	1	0	11
Western Asia (excluding GCC)	0	0	2	7	2	11
Europe	1	1	8	1	0	11
South America	1	0	0	2	0	3
Australia and Oceania	1	1	0	0	0	2
East Asia	1	1	0	0	0	2

The classification used in the report is based on the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) classification of the geographical regions of the world.[37]

[37] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division. **Standard country or area codes for statistical use (M49 Standard)**, accessed on 9 January 2022.

Annexe 8: Exit districts as reported in the news articles

Exit district	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total	
	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Percentage of articles
Not available	55	74	79	107	35	350	72.9
Banke	6	3	8	10	3	30	6.3
Kathmandu	3	4	3	7	3	20	4.2
Jhapa	2	2	1	9	5	19	4.0
Kanchanpur	5	3	5	0	1	14	2.9
Rupandehi	1	0	4	3	3	11	2.3
Parsa	1	0	3	2	2	8	1.7
Bardiya	1	1	2	0	1	5	1.0
Kapilvastu	2	0	3	0	0	5	1.0
Morang	0	0	2	1	2	5	1.0
Mahottari	1	3	0	0	0	4	0.8
Baitadi	0	0	3	0	0	3	0.6
Sunsari	0	0	0	2	1	3	0.6
Dhanusa	1	0	0	1	0	2	0.4
Chitwan	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.2
Ilam	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Kailali	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.2
Nawalparasi	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.2
Rasuwa	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Rautahat	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.2
Multiple responses; n=480							

Annexe 9: Reported origin districts of victims

District of origin	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total	
	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Percentage of articles
Not available	44	56	71	96	32	299	62.3
Morang	3	3	5	7	7	25	5.2
Jhapa	4	7	1	6	6	24	5.0
Dang	2	4	5	4	4	19	4.0
Sindhupalchowk	4	9	3	3	0	19	4.0
Makwanpur	3	5	4	4	0	16	3.3
Kathmandu	1	2	1	5	6	15	3.1
Nawalparasi	1	1	4	3	5	14	2.9
Chitwan	3	3	1	6	0	13	2.7
Sunsari	0	3	1	6	2	12	2.5
Baglung	2	0	6	2	1	11	2.3
Bardiya	4	1	6	0	0	11	2.3
Nuwakot	1	2	3	4	1	11	2.3
Banke	2	0	3	2	3	10	2.1
Dhading	2	1	3	2	1	9	1.9
Dolakha	2	3	3	1	0	9	1.9
Kavrepalanchowk	3	1	1	3	1	9	1.9
Parbat	0	1	2	3	3	9	1.9
Sindhuli	2	3	2	2	0	9	1.9
Rupandehi	0	2	2	2	3	9	1.9
Udayapur	2	2	2	1	1	8	1.7
Rolpa	3	0	3	1	0	7	1.5
Saptari	2	1	1	1	2	7	1.5
Sarlahi	0	0	2	3	2	7	1.5
Siraha	2	1	1	2	1	7	1.5
Surkhet	0	0	2	2	3	7	1.5
Gulmi	1	1	0	4	0	6	1.3
Kailali	0	2	2	2	0	6	1.3
Kaski	1	0	3	1	1	6	1.3
Lamjung	0	0	1	4	1	6	1.3
Myagdi	1	1	2	2	0	6	1.3
Dailekh	1	1	3	0	0	5	1
Gorkha	3	0	2	0	0	5	1
Illam	1	1	2	0	1	5	1
Khotang	1	0	3	0	1	5	1
Mahottari	3	0	1	0	1	5	1
Pyuthan	1	0	1	3	0	5	1
Ramechhap	3	1	1	0	0	5	1
Salyan	1	0	2	2	0	5	1
Dhanusha	2	0	1	1	0	4	0.8
Kapilvastu	0	2	2	0	0	4	0.8
Rasuwa	1	1	1	1	0	4	0.8
Rukum	0	0	2	2	0	4	0.8
Tanahu	1	0	3	0	0	4	0.8
Taplejung	0	0	3	1	0	4	0.8
Bhojpur	1	1	0	0	1	3	0.6
Dhankuta	1	1	1	0	0	3	0.6
Jajarkot	0	0	2	1	0	3	0.6
Lalitpur	0	1	1	1	0	3	0.6

District of origin	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total	
	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Percentage of articles
Palpa	2	1	0	0	0	3	0.6
Panchthar	1	1	1	0	0	3	0.6
Parsa	0	0	2	0	1	3	0.6
Solukhumbu	1	0	2	0	0	3	0.6
Syangja	0	0	2	1	0	3	0.6
Baitadi	0	0	2	0	0	2	0.4
Kanchanpur	0	0	1	1	0	2	0.4
Accham	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Arghakhanchi	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Bara	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Bhaktapur	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.2
Kalikot	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.2
Okhaldhunga	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Rautahat	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Sankhuwasabha	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.2
Multiple responses; n=480							

Annexe 10: Caste and ethnic groupings in Nepal

The caste and ethnic groupings used in this study are consistent with the caste and ethnicity classification suggested in Pitamber Sharma's book *Some Aspects of Nepal's Social Demography: Census 2011 Update* (Sharma 2014). This categorisation was used because it provides an integrated ethnic map of Nepal's diverse caste and ethnic groups by categorising them into clusters based on shared social, ecological, linguistic, and religious attributes.

1. **Hill caste:** Bahun, Chhetri, Sanyasi/Dasnami, Thakuri;
2. **Hill Dalit:** Badi, Damai/Dholi, Gaine, Kami, Sarki;
3. **Hill Janajati:** Aathpariya, Bahing, Bantawa, Brahmu/Baramo, Chamling, Chepang/Praja, Chhantyal/Chhantel, Dura, Ghale, Gharti/Bhujel, Gurung, Hayu, Hyolmo, Jirel, Khaling, Khawas, Kulung, Kusunda, Lepcha, Limbu, Loharung, Magar, Mewahang/Bala, Nachhiring, Newar, Pahari, Rai, Sampang, Sunuwar, Tamang, Thami, Thulung, Yakkha, Yamphu;
4. **Inner Tarai Janajati:** Bote, Danuwar, Darai, Kumal, Majhi, Raji, Raute;
5. **Mountain Janajati:** Bhote, Byasi/Sauka, Dolpo, Lhomi, Lhopa, Sherpa, Thakali, Topkegola, Walung;
6. **Tarai castes:** Badhaee, Baraee, Bin, Brahmin Tarai, Dev, Dhunia, Gaderi/Bhedihar, Hajam/Thakur, Haluwai, Jain, Kahar, Kalwar, Kamar, Kanu, Kathabaniyan, Kayastha, Kewat, Koiri/Kushwaha, Kori, Kumhar, Kurmi, Lodh, Lohar, Mali, Mallaha, Marwari, Nuniya, Nurang, Rajbhar, Rajdhob, Rajput, Sonar, Sudhi, Teli, Yadav;
7. **Tarai Dalit:** Bantar/Sardar, Chamar/Harijan Ram, Chidimar, Dhandi, Dhankar/Dharikar, Dhobi, Dom, Dusadh/Paswan/Pasi, Halkhor, Kalar, Khatwe, Musahar, Natuwa, Sarbaria, Tatma/Tatwa;
8. **Tarai Janajati:** Amat, Dhanuk, Dhimal, Gangai, Jhangad/Dhagar, Kisan, Koche, Meche, Munda, Pattarkatta/Kuswadia, Rajbanshi, Satar/Santhal, Tajpuriya, Tharu;
9. **Other (specify):** Bangali, Musalman, Punjabi/Sikh, Churaute;
10. **Unspecified:** Adibasi/Janajati, Dalit others, Tarai others, undefined others, foreigner.

Annexe 11: Data extraction form

Title	
Publication	
Author	
Year	
Month	
Day	
Media content	
Data use	
Quote use	
Source use	
Means of trafficking	
Nature of trafficking	
Source district of trafficking	
Destination	
Transit countries	
Transit cities	
Exit place (border point)	
Exit district	
Alleged perpetrator's mention	
Alleged perpetrator's name	
Alleged perpetrator's gender	
Alleged perpetrator's age	
Alleged perpetrator's caste/ethnicity	
Alleged perpetrator's ethnic category	
Mention of victim	
Victim's gender	
Victim's caste/ethnicity	
Victim's ethnic category	
Victim's age	
Victim's origin	
Victim's origin district	
Alleged perpetrator contact	
Interceptor mention	
Interceptor name	
Interceptor type	
Lens of reporting	

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Institute of Development Studies
Library Road
Brighton, BN1 9RE
United Kingdom
+44 (0)1273 606261
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