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# **SOCIAL MEDIA AND TRAFFICKING NEXUS**

The contribution of social media in accelerating women and children trafficking in Bangladesh

Faculty of Social sciences

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# ABSTRACT

Shoaib Mohammad Salman: Social Media and Trafficking Nexus: The contribution of social media in accelerating women and children trafficking in Bangladesh.

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Cases and reports of women and children trafficking through the use of social media are frequently reported and published in mainstream media in Bangladesh. Previously, attention was mainly given to trafficking victims only, therefore, the issue of trafficking through social media platforms is rarely investigated academically. The purpose of this master's thesis is to assess how different social media platforms contribute to accelerating women and children trafficking in Bangladesh.

The study is based on interviews with key informants from different organizations who are working in the trafficking sector in Bangladesh. The data has been collected through online interview with an open-ended questionnaire. After collecting the data, verbatim transcription has been done to transcribe the data from Bengali to English. After that, the data has been coded to identify relevant themes using NVivo qualitative software.

The outcome of the study indicates that false advertisement on social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok is one of the most prevalent tactics used by traffickers in Bangladesh to allure potential trafficking victims. An interesting finding was indicated by the result that TikTok as an emerging social media platform could be exploited in Bangladesh to target young girls for sexual exploitation. Study findings also indicate that young females and children are mostly targeted for sexual exploitation mainly via TikTok and older females are mostly targeted for labor exploitation mostly via Facebook. The study also found that Traffickers use messaging to communicate with potential victims according to their needs. As a result of these need-based messages, traffickers are able to erase suspicion about themselves and build trust with their victims. These need-based communication from traffickers' side make potential trafficking victims believe traffickers' social media messages so readily. Furthermore, the study finds that one of the most significant factors about why traffickers use social media platforms is the ease of communication, followed by easy access to the private information of potential victims.

The study concludes that trafficking through social media in future may increase significantly. Therefore, additional research with more primary data is needed, preferably from in-depth interviews with survivors, to fathom the problem in greater detail to formulate policy to prevent this emerging problem.

Keywords: trafficking, TikTok, Facebook, young girls, women, fake relationship, fake advertisement online bullying, COVID pandemic.

*The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin Originality Check service.*

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## List of Abbreviation

NGO	Non-Government Organization
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
IGA	Income-generating activities
UN	United Nations
KI	Key Informants
KII	Key Informants' Interview
USA	United States of America
UK	United Kingdom

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## 1. Introduction

The use of social media has become one of the most integral parts of modern society. Globally, over 3.6 billion people use social media, a number that is projected to rise to almost 4.41 billion by 2025 (Statista Research Department, 2020). However, though social media has numerous advantages in daily human life, it has a darker side as well. Recently, the trafficking predators have been using social media sites to recruit and sell vulnerable women and children to get into the trap of trafficking for sexual exploitation (Latonero, 2011). Social media sites and other digital platforms provide users unprecedented freedom and the opportunity to connect with people from a vast distance. The technological capacity and the affordance of these social media thus open a door for traffickers to exploit a larger number of victims of trafficking across geographical borders (Latonero, 2011). The total number of social media users has been increasing too fast as within just 4 years, the number of people using social media sites across the globe has increased by approximately 1 billion from 2.86 billion to 3.78 billion between 2017 and 2021 (Statista Research Department, 2020). Users are mostly found among teens and young adults with the majority of Facebook users which makes it convenient for traffickers to communicate with teens and young adults to obtain a close social relationship (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011).

Located on the Asian continent, Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Its population is over 165 million people, and 45 million of them are active social media users, which is approximately 9 times greater than Finland's overall population (Data Reportal, 2021; Statistics Finland, 2021). The annual digital growth in using social media in Bangladesh is not that much higher in terms of percentage (1% per year) but the number is eye-catching in terms of the overall population which is 1.6 million per year (Data Reportal, 2021). In terms of male and female population fragmentation, the female population is 49.5% of the total population meaning that the number of female social media users is estimated to be around 22 million (Data Reportal, 2021). One of the most significant aspects of using social media in Bangladesh is that almost 88% of the total number of social media users are found to be using Facebook (Global Stats, 2021). Most of the entertaining content produced by female users on Facebook in Bangladesh is now found to be originated from the app called Tik Tok as young adults are quite active in Tik Tok nowadays. Based on the data, it is assumed that the future of social media in Bangladesh is booming. In Bangladesh, like in other parts of the world, most of the users of social media are found to be teens and adult young groups from the community as they think that finding new friends and keeping up the social

ties with relatives and friends in Facebook is quite easy (Hampton et al., 2011). But most of the time, they overlook the authenticity or proper background of their new friends in Facebook.

Social media influence on women and children trafficking in Bangladesh is quite debated and the area has hardly been explored academically with strong primary research data. Scientific data-based research on the role of social media in instigating or accelerating women and children trafficking is not that comprehensive but at the same time research on this sector seems emerging to many. Most of the researchers in this sector have been trying to observe the increasing nexus between the use of social media both by traffickers and traffic victims and the surge of women and children trafficking (Latonero, 2011). However, there are ample of examples how social media in Bangladesh is being used as a prospective way to lure vulnerable women and children who are mostly young for trafficking. An overwhelming number of young girls are being lured by the traffickers through Facebook and TikTok in Bangladesh and the gravity of the problem forced the government of Bangladesh to declare some social media sites, e.g., Facebook and TikTok As a sex racket for young girls (Al-Jazeera, 2021; The Daily Star, 2021). The government has also started its surveillance on some of the social media to find out trafficking gangs involved to allure and trap girls into trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Trafficking has now become a widespread business all over the world. In most cases, vulnerable women and children are recognized as the main victims of trafficking which often demean their human rights and drive them towards a situation in the community where they are denied any protection (Rosy, 2016). Bangladesh, being one of the most densely populated countries in the world along with chronic poverty in rural areas and climate disasters in coastal areas is regarded as one of the most vulnerable countries in the world for women and children trafficking (Sarker & Panday, 2006).

In addition to that, the existing patriarchal family system that prolongs in Bangladesh has also been contributing to making women and children vulnerable to trafficking as daughters in families in Rural Bangladesh are treated as a burden. Most of the time, girls are forced to get married at the very early stage of their life before they lose their virginity as their pre-marital sexual cleanliness makes them expensive possessions to the family of bridegrooms (Sarker & Panday, 2006). Oftentimes, these girls from rural areas are forced to get married to men who they have never seen before in their entire life. These unfamiliar so-called bridegrooms most of the time do not take any dowry from the brides'



family nor impose any financial pressure but have the intention of selling these girls into prostitution as these girls are regarded as most desired and attractive in market value (Sarker & Panday, 2006).

According to a report published by 'The Times of India,' one of the most influential daily newspapers in India published that more than 50,000 women and girls are trafficked each year from Bangladesh to India and in the last decades the number is more than 0.5 million (Chauhan, 2018). Sex trafficking between India and Bangladesh has reached a position that now is regarded as a process of demand and supply. Poor girls and women living in border areas in Bangladesh are particularly vulnerable to networks of traffickers. Most of the time, trafficking victims are found to cross the Bangladesh Border to India from Jessore district of Bangladesh as the border in this area is entirely unfenced and people in this district have been living till zero line of the border between these two countries (Chauhan, 2018).

When any economic or social crisis emerges, the issue of women and children trafficking worsens as the brokers and traffickers exploit the condition of their social and economic vulnerabilities. The current coronavirus situation and its impact on this vulnerable group of women and children is not an exception. Back in 2013-14, another pandemic emerged in the West African region. A correlation was found between the emergence of the Ebola pandemic and the severe impairment of the economic and social fabric of those affected countries which was ultimately impacting the women and girls severely (O'Brien & Tolosa, 2016). The female groups who are affected by this disease, have reported that they faced familial and marital rejection, losing their housing arrangements and in many cases their employment as well. They also reported cases of community segregation and exclusion in the village or even at the markets (Minor, 2017; O'Brien & Tolosa, 2016). These stigmatizations and community and familial expulsion have led them towards isolation, barriers to access to health-related services, increased poverty, and most importantly direct physical violence (Minor, 2017; O'Brien & Tolosa, 2016).

In the same way, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted rural Bangladesh significantly. Covid-19, which resulted in the loss of tens of millions of jobs caused Bangladesh's poverty rate to rise to 29.5% from 20.5% in the previous fiscal year, according to the country's General Economic Division (Ovi, 2020). Moreover, approximately 7 million people have been jobless and more than 28 million individuals directly got impacted financially by the pandemic (Hossain, 2021).

Women and girls in rural Bangladesh have long been vulnerable groups, but the pandemic has added to their vulnerability and increased their risk of trafficking as they are now more easily trapped by the lucrative offers of employment offered by the traffickers. The poor group of people in the society can suffer adverse effects from all types of pandemics and economic shocks, such as lack of food, health services, and a lack of jobs to earn their daily living. In that situation, it may become very easy to entice them into illegal migration for any type of exploitation. Moreover, after a pandemic, when the labor market opens again, competition will arise among jobless people because the number of people who lost their jobs in the informal sector will be much higher than the number of jobs available in the labor market. This unavailability of informal jobs may also push women and girls from poor backgrounds to resort to trafficking for their employment by any means.

Recently, Bangladesh police have arrested some of the gangs convicted to lure females into trafficking through using online platforms, e.g., TikTok, and Facebook. Police have said that these gangs have some secret groups on some social media platforms and by using these secret groups they lure a vulnerable group of women and children from society (Al-Jazeera, 2021; Karim, 2021). The pandemic has fueled their vulnerability which traffickers see as an opportunity for them to lure these groups of women and children very easily. The trend of using various social media platforms in Bangladesh has been rising very exponentially every year. This upward trend in using various social media platforms in Bangladesh seems to find a nexus with the possibility of an unprecedented surge of women and children trafficking soon. The pandemic will leave families in poverty which will affect women and children vastly and force them to seek employment anyhow. It is assumed that children under 18 will be forced to get married to someone unknown as daughters in families in Rural Bangladesh are treated as a burden. In that situation, they will find ways to escape their families and may easily get trapped by traffickers through social media.

Considering the overall situation, it seems that the use of social media platforms in the future will be a driving force when it comes to the trafficking of women and children in Bangladesh. To fathom to what extent social media can contribute to human trafficking, what makes traffickers' social media messages convincing to the potential trafficking victims, and how traffickers use the information and messages on social media to manipulate their potential victims, empirical research and studies with well-documented results are needed. Also, it is imperative to look into and analyze the main target groups for the trafficking through the use of social media platforms as well.

Based on the gravity of the issue, this master's thesis explores the answer to the central question of the paper "how does social media contribute to accelerating female trafficking in Bangladesh". To explore the problem, the paper includes both women and children by mentioning females. Women over the age of 18 will be referred to as women, whereas girls under the age of 18 will be referred to as children. To investigate and analyze the topic, the paper uses primary data from interviews with key informants to derive their technical knowledge about the issue. The interviewees are expected to be working on trafficking issues in Bangladesh for a long time in their careers.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Theory: The abuse of human needs and the success of deception

Theories help researchers to frame their study in an applicable way by explaining the phenomenon through making the relevant connection with their studies. In terms of women and children trafficking, theories could potentially guide researchers to set the context and the background to fathom how and why women and children fall into the trap of traffickers easily. It also allows policy makers and researchers to drive pragmatic policy interventions based on the factual results. In this particular thesis, I describe two theories that could relate to the underline causes of trafficking through social media platforms in the Bangladesh context.

The first theoretical aspect is Maslow's need hierarchy theory. Maslow's need hierarchy theory is one of the most important basic social work theories which are frequently used to demonstrate the importance of the basic needs of a human being (Kaur, 2013; Meshelemiah & Lynch, 2019). Maslow designed his theory in a pyramid shape where at the very bottom of the pyramid, he proposed the need concerned with psychological and social safety and security followed by love and belongingness, self-esteem, and then at the top of the pyramid self-actualization (Kaur, 2013; Meshelemiah & Lynch, 2019). Human beings by nature look for the basic needs at first, e.g., food, employment, health, and property; if they cannot satiate themselves with these basic needs, their minds will not focus anywhere else. To satiate these needs, they can do anything they are offered. Regarding the trafficking issue, Maslow's need hierarchy theory can guide researchers to understand why victims are easily lured by the traffickers.

When the potential traffic victims face the hardship in attaining their basic needs as human beings, e.g., homelessness, family segregation, neglect, and abuse from the relatives; at that time, if someone offers them any lucrative offer, they easily take those by any means. In that situation, traffickers offer these basic needs to the victims and show their sympathy to convince them which ultimately, in the end, makes it difficult for the victims to leave their accompany (Hopper, 2017; Meshelemiah & Lynch, 2019; Stotts & Ramey, 2009). To some extent, traffickers show their willingness to the victims to offer some psychological support at the very beginning of their communication and try to intimate with them as much as they can to convince the victims about their authenticity. This is particularly true for the victims of minority and vulnerability (Meshelemiah & Lynch, 2019; Reed, Kennedy,

Decker, & Cimino, 2019). Thus, traffickers can establish control over the victims by promising the basic human needs which victims usually cannot imagine in their normal life situations. By offering such help and support, traffickers simply try to abuse the basic needs and deprivation of potential trafficking victims.

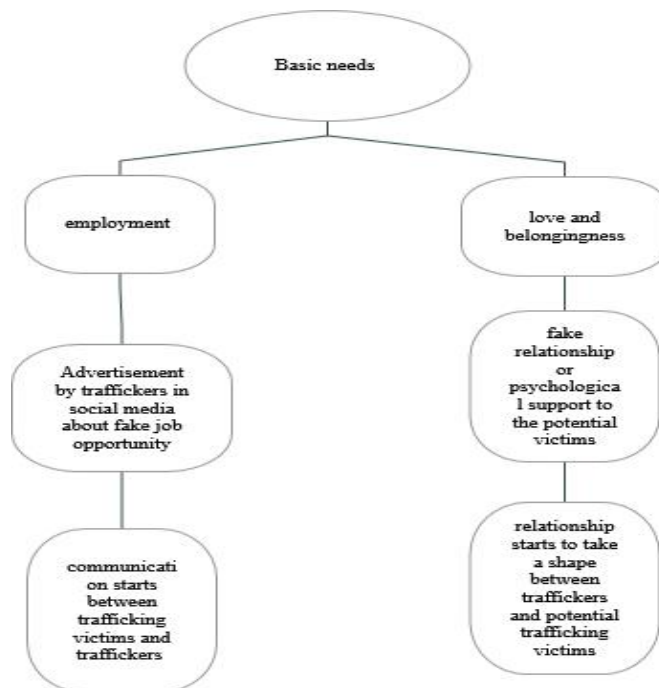


Figure 1: A mind map about the relationship between basic need theory and trafficking according to Maslow's theory (mind map by

The 2nd related theory is Buller's Interpersonal Deception theory. Deception is an act that is done deliberately to deceive and mislead others. In this particular situation, the victims cannot understand that they are being deceived or something is being done to inject false beliefs into them with the aim of deception. Interpersonal deception theory was coined by two renowned communication specialist professors called Judee K. Burgoon & David B. Buller (Burgoon & Buller, 1996). Before their study, deception was not studied as a separate study area based on the communication activity. According to them, deceptive communication happens in different forms, e.g., falsification, and concealment. Under the falsification method, the deceivers try to convince the other parties (receivers of the message) by uttering false statements by using flat lies whereas, in concealment, the deceivers hide out some of the leading information to the receivers to convince them misleadingly. Deceivers think that, if the receivers get near to right information, then it will be

difficult for them to deceive through disinformation. In that case, they try to mislead the receivers with information which are not aligned with the real term phenomenon (Hearn, 2006). Some forms of human trafficking take place through social media platforms where traffickers try to victimize the potential victims by offering them false statements or promises, e.g., better employment, and a higher standard of life. By using various social media platforms, traffickers at first try to look for a vulnerable group of potential victims who are vulnerable in terms financially, and emotionally. Identification of these vulnerable groups of potential victims makes it easy for the traffickers to deceive them by gaining utmost trust by offering them various falsified information and artificial care and affection. The only goal that works here for the traffickers is to accomplish their target by convincing the potential victims through falsification and information concealment. Since the communication or conversation takes place interpersonally between the traffickers and the potential victims. Therefore, the traffickers may happen to be strategic in targeting their prey. They may often target women and children from minority or vulnerable groups which probably makes it easier for them to falsify and conceal information while communicating to allure the victims with the potential opportunities that potential trafficking victims have been searching for. This deceptive way of communication with potential trafficking victims may make it easier for the traffickers to make the potential trafficking victims believe their social media messages without any confrontation or suspicion.

My purpose in describing these theoretical aspects here is that, after I analyze the findings, I intend to explore whether there is any relationship between these theoretical aspects and trafficking through social media platforms. In other words, I am expecting that these theories will help me understand why potential victims of trafficking so readily believe social media messages from traffickers. After the analysis of the result, the discussion about whether the findings and the analysis support the theories will be discussed in the discussion section of the paper.

## **2.2. The concept: human trafficking & human smuggling**

In recent years, the term "human trafficking" has been used to refer to a wide range of crimes and human rights abuses that involve the recruitment, movement, and sale of people into exploitative or slavery-like conditions (Haque, 2004). The human trafficking paradigm has the disadvantage that many of the definitions used to define this phenomenon are often limited in scope and don't adequately reflect the problem as a whole. It is very difficult to summarize all of the variables into a single agreed definition or framework since trafficking is a social phenomenon with many dimensions and discrete steps (Haque, 2004). When most people are asked to define trafficking, they may find that they have different definitions because the concept is a social phenomenon made up of many dimensions. Therefore, this section defines what 'trafficking' is and what is not in a more encompassing and formal way.

The definition of trafficking is complex because smuggling and trafficking are often misunderstood and used interchangeably. Generally, when people hear about 'trafficking', they think of a movement of people from one place to another combined with some illegal activities. As trafficking is viewed as only involving movement without thinking deeply about its implications, the problems associated with trafficking are given less importance, exacerbating the situation in many ways. The movement of people from one country to another is not the only aspect of trafficking, as it involves serious exploitation, making it comparable to slavery. Consequently, there are many critical issues to be addressed in the definition of trafficking. Under international law, the terms 'smuggling' and 'trafficking' have a precise definition that is often used to differentiate trafficking cases and smuggling cases. However, oftentimes, lawmakers or even NGO workers cannot properly distinguish and frequently confuse these terms. The United Nations protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in person clarifies the term trafficking in a very sophisticated way.

“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, through the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, the abuse of power, or a position of vulnerability or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs (United Nations, 2000b)”.

The definition is quite long and contains three important parts. The first part of the definition is concerned with the act. The act could be interpreted as the initiation of the trafficking process where

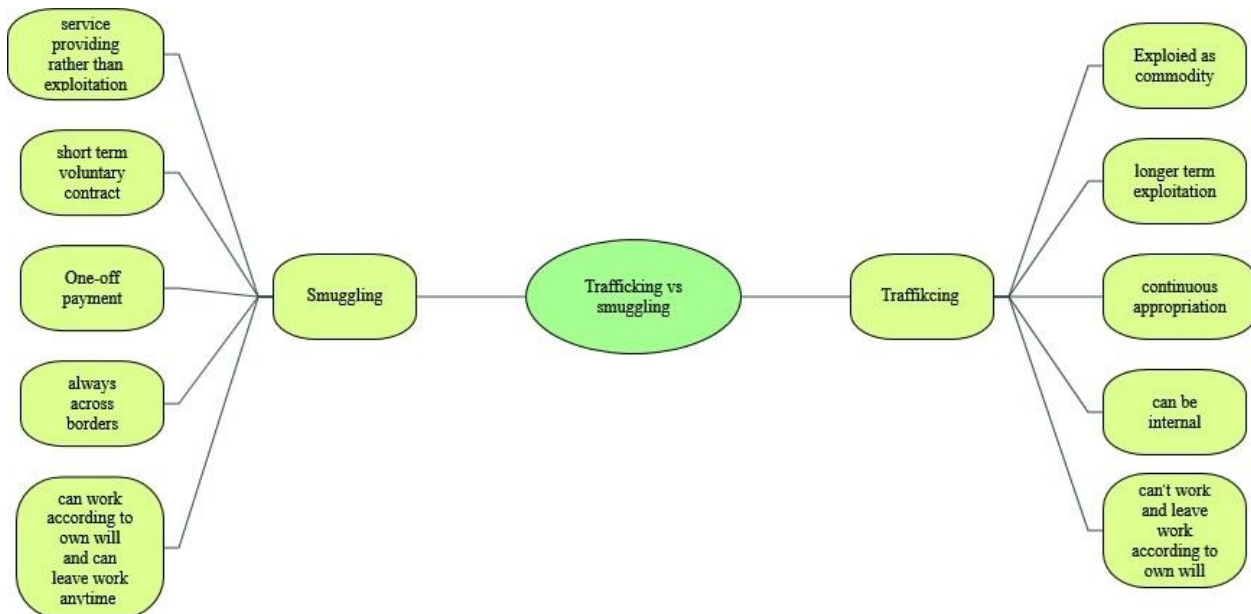


Figure 2: Trafficking and Smuggling

(Deshpande, N., Nour, 2013; Nawyn et al., 2013; Polaris, 2021; Stop the Traffik, 2017).

the traffickers start targeting the potential victims to recruit, transport, and exploit the victims meaning that crossing the border for the trafficking is not mandatory. According to the definition, if the victims are exploited even within their municipalities without their consent is enough to be treated as a trafficking victim. The 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the definition defines the means or ways used for trafficking by the traffickers. The means could potentially be using power and force or disinformation and deception to dupe the victims. The deception is about emotional and psychological manipulation by flirting and offering different kinds of false promises to the victims to earn their trust (Nawyn, Birdal, & Glogower, 2013). The 3<sup>rd</sup> part of the definition clarifies the reason and prime motivation of the traffickers of why they invest their time in convincing and recruiting their victims which are exploitation.

The main purpose of trafficking is thus any kind of exploitation whether it can be a sexual violation, slavery, or forced servitude. On the contrary, the definition of smuggling has a different connotation. The United Nations' protocol against the smuggling of migrants by land, sea, and air has defined the smuggling as:



“The procurement, to obtain directly or indirectly, financial or other benefits, of the illegal entry of a person into a state party of which the person is not a national or permanent resident (United Nations, 2000a)”.

Two key aspects of this definition should be discussed. The first part of the definition is concerned with the fact that smugglers act as service providers under short-term contracts with victims to gain some financial benefits. In the second part of the definition, migrants crossing borders to countries where they are neither citizens nor permanent residents is concerned. As a result, one of the biggest differences between trafficking and smuggling is that smuggling needs border crossings to take place, whereas border crossings are not prerequisites for trafficking to take place. Longer-term exploitation is also another factor that could be used to differentiate between these two factors whereas, under the smuggling, irregular migrants can work and leave their work any time according to their own will but for trafficking victims, this component is entirely missing (Polaris, 2021; Stop the Traffik, 2017; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.). A major aspect of defining the concept of trafficking and smuggling is consent, as victims of smuggling know their purpose and final destination, but victims of trafficking don't know how and why they are being recruited. Consequently, the victims of human trafficking cannot be blamed for their victimization and exploitation, while smuggling victims cannot evade their responsibilities during the entire journey.

Human trafficking is most commonly associated with the exploitation of women and girls in the commercial sex industry. The problem also affects men and boys to a lesser degree (Huda, 2006, p. 375). For women and children trafficked for exploitation, involuntary domestic servitude, debt bondage, and other forms of exploitation, Bangladesh is one of the origins and transit countries (Huda, 2006, p. 375). In this paper, trafficking will only be used as a term to describe the exploitation of women and girls in many forms. This paper will only discuss the acts, purposes, and methods that are used by traffickers to induce potential victims, recruit potential victims, and harbor and transport them via social media.

## **2.3. Understanding connections between trafficking and social media**

Criminals nowadays have been turning away from their mainstream illicit activities to child trafficking [also an illicit activity] from which they can earn more money than their mainstream illicit activities as this seems easy and convenient for them to target and recruit several victims online at a time (Latonero, 2011). Most of the time, social media platforms like Instagram or Facebook are widely used for the recruitment of victims while online classified is being used as a platform for the advertisement about the victims (Latonero, 2011). To understand the connection between trafficking and social media, it is important to explore what has already been studied previously about this phenomenon. The scope of this study is quite based on a specific topic and context, therefore, reviewing the relevant literature by sub-themes seems convenient for the study. The literature review will be covered based on several sub themes: Common social media platform for trafficking, Vulnerable women and Teenagers are at greatest risk of trafficking through social media, and social media as a great platform for traffickers to build trust, groom and control.

### *2.3.1. Common social media platforms for trafficking*

In the 2020 Federal Human Trafficking Report in the USA, 59 percent of all online sex trafficking recruitment in active cases took place on Facebook, and 65 percent of recruitment involving children took place on Facebook. Despite Facebook's reputation as a less popular platform among teenagers, it became a more common recruiting platform for child victims than adult victims in 2020 cases of active sex trafficking (Fight the New Drug, 2021a; Jewers, 2021). Back in 2019, a teenage girl sued a case against Facebook as she was lured by one of the traffickers who groomed her for sex trafficking on Facebook. The lawsuit claimed that Facebook does not contain enough data protection mechanisms and identity verification to track potential traffickers on Facebook (Fight the New Drug, 2021a). Traffickers at first, try to follow the posts posted by the potential victims on Facebook and weigh their level of vulnerability, and then pretend to be understanding their sufferings (Fight the New Drug, 2021b, 2021a). A question is raised here: Why do traffickers use Facebook, why not other platforms? May be because most people use Facebook as a tool for social communication in their daily life.

One of the main reasons for which traffickers use Facebook as the most convincing platform for targeting victims is due to the undermining privacy policy of Facebook. On Facebook, users have unlimited authority to disclose their personal information too much, and Facebook does not have an encrypted policy regarding protecting the privacy of its users; as a result, this is quite convenient for

traffickers to get the entire information about the potential victims which makes easy for the traffickers to know about their vulnerability. The claim could be substantiated by one of the research studies by Jones and Soltren (2005) where they mentioned these anomalies regarding Facebook uses. According to them, to protect privacy and personal information, social media platform like Facebook should have an encryption policy but unfortunately, social media platforms like Facebook do not have that which is violating users' rights and their responsibilities (Jones & Soltren, 2005). This lacking of privacy and security policy are creating a safe floor for the traffickers in many countries, e.g., Bangladesh to exploit traffic victims in many forms. The upsurge in cybercrime against women through using social media and cyberbullying are some examples of that in Bangladesh (Ahmed, Kabir, Sharmin, & Jafrin, 2017). This undermining privacy policy of Facebook and the freedom of users to share unlimited personal information are making it easy for the traffickers to target vulnerable victims as gathering information about the potential victims for the traffickers seems quite easy through Facebook.

Moreover, according to Kunz et al (2018), the virtual relationship between the potential victims and traffickers can grow very easily without even leaving their apartment which was not possible in offline recruitment. On Facebook or TikTok, traffickers can communicate with victims several times within a day which attracted victims to the traffickers so easily and victims think about traffickers to be very friendly and caring (Kunz et al., 2018).

Furthermore, another study mentioned that recruiting victims through Facebook, Snapchat or TikTok is less risky as victims have unlikely to meet the traffickers face to face. So, even after their rescue, they cannot identify their traffickers as these traffickers used fake identifications on Facebook or TikTok and never met them face to face (Withers, 2019). The study found that among all the victims 58% managed to meet their traffickers in person only once but the other 42%, they actually could not meet their traffickers and still they have no clue who those people were (Withers, 2019). They reported that their grooming and manipulation took place on Facebook or Snapchat or TikTok. Some of the victims were seeking employment and they found some job advertisements on Facebook related to dancers and models for the newspaper. But they could not understand that these advertisements on Facebook were a trap for them (Withers, 2019). The question related to privacy and security and authentication in Facebook again comes forward. some of the victims in the study were from an immigration background and they said that in most situations, they found an advertisement posted on

Facebook valid and reliable. Therefore, they contacted those traffickers for potential job offers in the labor market (Withers, 2019). Facebook, being the most popularly used social media platform among all people may pose serious potential risks to the potential trafficking victims from figure 3, it is evident that over 90% of all social media users in Bangladesh are found to be using Facebook.

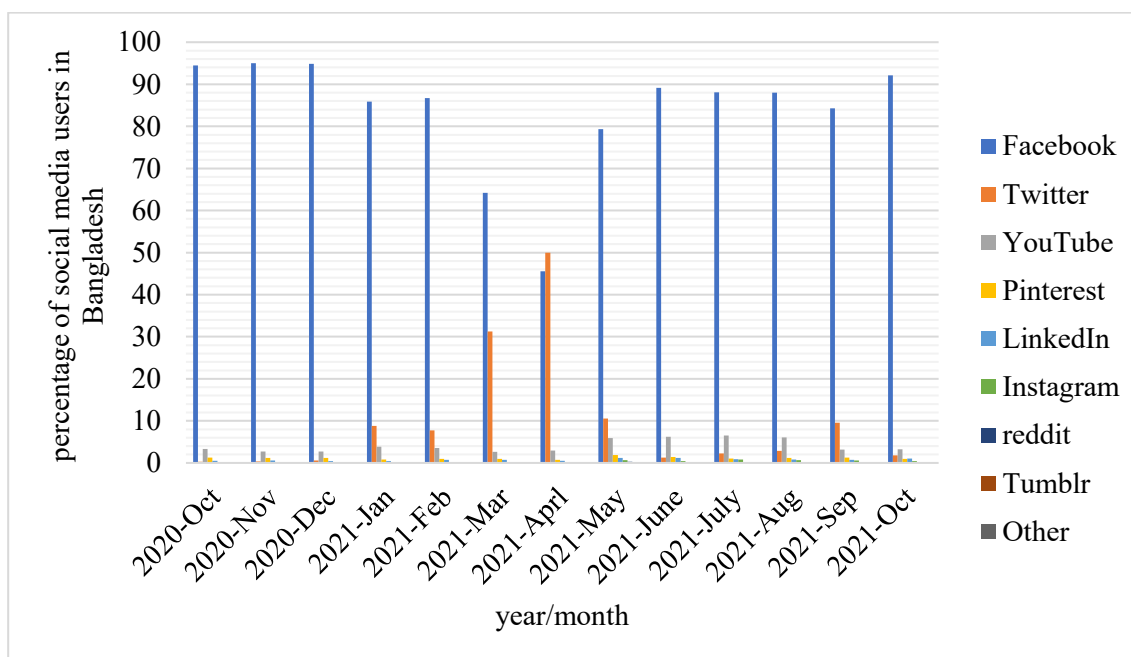


Figure 3: social media users in BD from October 2020 to October 2021

Source: (Global Stats, 2021)

Note: The CSV data has been taken from the StatCounter official website and then the bar has been created in excel. The bar shows that more than 90% of social media users from Bangladesh are found to be using Facebook.

Usually, trafficking takes place offline in Bangladesh. But women and child trafficking in Bangladesh by using social media platforms like TikTok or Facebook are entirely new for the Bangladesh government. However, the police department has been finding lots of reports on that. In most of the cases, victims could be found from families with lower income as convincing them with colorful dreams seems quite easy for the traffickers. The claim could be substantiated by reports published by Al Jazeera (2021) and Karim (2021) who stated the same findings in their report. They mentioned that traffickers entice them through various secret groups on Facebook and TikTok by offering fake promises of well-paid jobs and to some extent letting them dream to become a model or stars in traditional media. The traffickers thus take a new recruitment strategy online rather than

being active offline as face-to-face communication seems sometimes difficult to them (Al-Jazeera, 2021; Karim, 2021).

### *2.3.2. Vulnerable women and Teenagers are at the greatest risk of trafficking through social media*

Human traffickers often use the Romeo technique by building trust to convince victims of trafficking. According to a report by United Against Human Trafficking, they said that 1000 victims have reported that they have been victimized by the online platform in just 3 years, 70% of the children in the USA aged between 13-17 years old use social media and gaming platforms daily which predators exploit to lure young girls to be trafficked (United Against Human Trafficking, 2020). But what are the modes or strategies that the traffickers usually follow to lure these teens is a great question to answer. The traffickers use different numbers of fake Facebook accounts and pretend themselves as potential employers for unemployed women (Whitehead, 2018). Most of the time, they target women with vulnerable economic conditions through their fake accounts and offer them lucrative jobs with falsified information to allure those women. At first, victims find these traffickers trustworthy as they hide themselves using someone else's profile picture and information. This trustworthiness comes from the hope that these traffickers offer them to help in their vulnerable situations.

A report was published on how Albanian gangs trap Albanian vulnerable women to traffic to the UK for sexual exploitation using their fake profiles and information on Facebook (Whitehead, 2018). At first, the traffickers post some job vacancies related to waitressing and hairdressing which do not exist in reality, and allure these women with the hope to recruit them for these jobs. In other cases, the report also found that some of the traffickers promised a fake relationship with these women and tried to allure them and in most cases, they were successful and sold those women into prostitution (Whitehead, 2018).

Moreover, Vulnerable women and children easily get trapped through social media platforms due to the fact of family feuds and poverty. In most situations, people think those sex traffickers may kidnap or allure children through social media for their interest. But things are not like that in all scenarios. A study was conducted about child sex trafficking in one of the European developing countries Bosnia-Herzegovina by Assistant professor Anjanette Rosga (Griego, 2019). She found that children may aspire to leave their home by their willingness and get trapped by the traffickers on various social

media platforms knowing that they would get sexually exploited because they want to avoid abuse in their family or avoid familial poverty and feud. It means that children may face abuse in their homes and may get trapped easily by the traffickers because of their vulnerability (Griego, 2019).

Economic strain and poverty may fuel the family feud which also may propel young girls to leave their homes and contact potential traffickers by using various social media platforms. The study has also found that some NGOs rescued some of the girls from prostitution against their own will as those girls did not want to get back to their homes (University of Colorado, 2005). AnnJanette Rosga's study is quite comprehensive; however, she did not focus on what types of platforms victims used to communicate with the traffickers and how traffickers came to understand their vulnerability. She also did not mention anything about why teenagers are mostly sought in the sex market? The answer could be found in another study by Dr. Vanessa Bouché (Bouche, 2015). She found that in most the situations, traffickers use some common phrases while advertising about victims, e.g., young, virgin, fresh meat, the little girl of daddy, shaved, and Coochie [to mean 'fresh'] to attract more customers in their grips meaning that comparatively young teenage girls have high demand in the sex market for which traffickers target teenage girls in online platform.

Moreover, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime identified some of the causes which force women and teenagers into vulnerability (UNODC, 2019). It found that in many developing countries, poverty is one of the reasons for which women fall into a vulnerable group that traffickers exploit by offering them jobs and employment. The organization also found that social media plays the most important factor in transnational sex trafficking in alluring potential victims from countries where conflict, war, or political instability are going on. In those cases, women and teenagers feel vulnerable and insecure, so, when they are offered any falsified employment opportunity, they grab this on online social media platforms and get trapped by the traffickers (UNODC, 2019).

Apart from the direct consequences and the detrimental effects of social media platforms in alluring children and vulnerable women into trafficking, the indirect consequences of these social media platforms are also very significant, especially for novice users and children. Livingstone and Smith (2014) explored the harms and detrimental effects confronted by child users who use online and mobile technologies at the early stage of their lives and they have found that the opportunity to meet

and greet a stranger, sexting (sexual messaging), sharing nude pictures are some of the factors that also contribute towards trafficking in offline. These types of risks in all societies have been increasing with the upward trend in using social media platforms. They have also found that it is easier to trap children under 18 as they have an emerging fantasy about sex messaging and pornography. Moreover, due to their low maturity level, they have a lower level of emotional intelligence which is regarded as a great opportunity for the traffickers to deviate from them.

They have also found that adolescents in most of the cases have their involvement in pornography, sexual messaging by using social media platforms or many different dirk sites and strangers' contacts. one of the most interesting things regarding their findings is that they have mentioned victims of cyberbullying. They found that victims of cyberbullying through the internet let different kinds of emotions grow in them, e.g., anger, frustration, stress, loneliness, and embarrassment which make them vulnerable and more susceptible to trafficking as convincing them offline or online seems quite easy for the traffickers (Livingstone & Smith, 2014).

The pandemic situation has compelled educational institutions to close their operation which forced students to isolate themselves from peers, guardians, and other acquaintances. As a result, they are in no way under the supervision of their teachers, community, and guardians. Besides, they have now unlimited access to internet connectivity due to the online classes which paved their way to get access to various online social media platforms very easily. they have now unlimited access to Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and so on. These have made it easy for them to get connected with strangers who they did not even think of.

The transition and the shift from offline classes to online everything made it super convenient for traffickers to access multiple youths and young adults under the age of 18 at a time which was not possible during the normal situation. The demand for pornography and prostitution have increased very exponentially during the pandemic as the viewers of these adult films and the customer for prostitution have increased many folds. In that situation, traffickers also have been trying to fill these vacuums by alluring vulnerable and novice women and children through their online trap (Asongu, S., Usman, U., & Vo, 2020; Dobozi, K., Florczak, V., Kowalski, A., & Anderson, 2021; Katherine, 2020; Perissini, Spessoto, & Facio, 2020). Now a question arises about who has been regarded as

most vulnerable in this pandemic situation? According to Katherine (2020) and Dobozin et al (2021) women who have lost their jobs and insurance, and are in dire poverty due to pandemics have been forced to get trapped by the traffickers. Moreover, Katherine (2020) and Dobozin et al (2021) have also mentioned that women who returned from prostitution to normal life and were living in shelter homes; were also forced to get back to their profession through traffickers as their shelter home was closed due to pandemics.

Furthermore, girls whose parents have been divorced and who are inflicted with other mental and emotional illness are much more vulnerable these days as they are easy prey to the traffickers as social media platform allows them to connect instantly with these group of vulnerable girls (Katherine, 2020; Kunz et al., 2018). Due to the pandemic women and children trafficking through using various social media platforms has risen to such an extent that United Nations currently requested to all social media platforms use artificial intelligence to track potential traffickers in social platforms because the committee has identified social media platforms as an easy way to target potential victims for trafficking (Zehbrauskas, 2020).

### *2.3.3. Social media is a great platform for traffickers to build trust, groom, and control*

Social media platforms are quite convenient to target multiple victims at a time to groom, recruit and exploit them. These platforms made it easy for the traffickers to connect and stalk potential victims within a very short period without the risk of being detected as the privacy and security policies of all social media platforms seemed to be quite weak. This unlimited privacy break and stalking opportunity of potential victims' profiles by traffickers gives them the advantage to build trust among the potential victims without even meeting face to face. Traffickers regularly observe their posts and comment in a tricky way (University of Toledo, 2018; Vaas, 2020).

A study was conducted by the University of Toledo about how traffickers build their trust among vulnerable women and girls. However, what are the reasons for which these women fall into the trap of false relationships with them? Are they oppressed by their family members and existing partner? They found that women and children who share their financial hardship, emptiness, daily struggles, broken relationship, family feuds, and others, are being targeted by the traffickers on social media. There are some common messages, e.g., nobody likes me, I am so sick of being single, am I looking ugly, why do I not have any true friends, why do my parents trust me, I need to go out from here, etc.



These types of messages provide initial guidelines for the traffickers to select their potential prey (University of Toledo, 2018). Then the traffickers usually give some potential response in their posts, e.g., I understand your point of view, I wish I could help you; I wish I could make your life better; I am here for you, I love the way you look and so on (University of Toledo, 2018). These kinds of responses raise a high level of trust in victims about traffickers and they seem to communicate with traffickers for more sympathy. The potential victims find these traffickers romantic and friendly which they pretend to be (University of Toledo, 2018; Vaas, 2020).

In most cases, grooming starts this way and ends up in a very tragic way where these potential victims are victimized by the traffickers. The study by Dr. Vanessa Bouché (2015) found that the traffickers through online communication can easily arouse a sense of belongingness in victims with the artificial love and care they were searching for a long time. One of the respondents of this study said that she was an orphan and the traffickers allured her by giving her fatherly love and care online that she was searching for. Moreover, it is also found that the trafficker resorted to the Romeo technique to the girls who need love and affection by promising them to give the romance they wanted (Bouche, 2015).

The trust-building process in an online platform is a psychological game that traffickers play like a veteran player. These studies (Bouche, 2015; University of Toledo, 2018; Vaas, 2020) focused primarily on the use of social media platforms by traffickers to gain trust from potential victims but did not provide any information on the grooming stages and how this particular trust ultimately leads to the traffickers capturing potential victims. The explanation for the later stages could be found in the study by Lewis & Llewellyn (Llynllewe, P., Lewis, 2019). Lewis & Llewellyn (2019) identified some of the crucial stages that the traffickers maintain after gaining their trust in Online social media platforms to expedite the process of trafficking to the final stage. The latter process of convincing and managing these victims to trafficking seems quite easy for the traffickers.

After gaining the trust at the utmost level, the grooming stage begins to convince the potential victims by giving them small gifts, expensive outfits, outside riding, the invitation to the party, or giving them access to drugs, e.g., alcohol or cigarettes to the teenagers especially. they mentioned that after having all the promised care and affection, the trustworthiness of the victims reaches a maximum level for the traffickers. At this stage, traffickers separate potential victims from their immediate family both emotionally and physically (Llynllewe, P., Lewis, 2019) which establishes ultimate control of traffickers over victims. At this stage, victims are aligned to comply with every order from traffickers from sharing nudes to engaging in sexual exploitation (Llynllewe, P., Lewis, 2019).

To sum up, based on the literature review on the effect of social media on women and children trafficking, it could be assumed that the trend of using social media platforms for women and children trafficking has been accelerating worldwide. The incident of using social media platforms in targeting, grooming, and exploiting vulnerable women and children is quite ubiquitous nowadays and the mainstream newspapers have so much news regarding this issue. In terms of the common social media platform for trafficking, Facebook seems to be the main platform in most cases to allure children. One of the main reasons for which traffickers use Facebook as the most convincing platform for targeting victims is due to the undermining privacy policy of Facebook. On Facebook, users have unlimited authority to disclose their personal information too much, and Facebook does not have an encrypted policy regarding protecting the privacy of its users; as a result, this is quite convenient for traffickers to get the entire information about the potential victims which makes easy for the traffickers to know about their vulnerability. In addition, Facebook seems one of the most popular social media platforms for traffickers to advertise various falsified employment advertisements for vulnerable women.

In addition, it was found from a literature review those women in poverty as a result of conflict and political unrest in their home countries and young people who feel lonely and seek care and sympathy from others are mostly targeted by the traffickers because they seem very vulnerable to them. When dealing with vulnerable women, traffickers use fake Facebook accounts and pose as potential employers for unemployed women, while when dealing with vulnerable teenagers, they pose as caregivers for their loneliness or mental illness.

Moreover, the indirect consequence of social media platforms in enticing teenagers is also significant. Due to undeniable access to pornography and social media platforms online, teenagers often build sexual fantasies in them and some other teenagers get bullied on social media which also entices them to traffic offline.

During a literature review, it was also found that, due to the pandemic, classes were moved from offline to online, isolating students from their peers, teachers, and families while giving them unlimited access to the internet and social media platforms. They exploit this access by getting to know strangers, most of whom are likely to be traffickers targeting teenagers. In addition, women who have lost their jobs, and insurance, and are in dire poverty due to the pandemic have been lured into becoming victims of traffickers engaging in online social networks. Also, the literature review

has revealed that a trafficker uses online social media platforms to gain the trust of potential victims and groom them for trafficking.

However, most of the studies reviewed here focus mainly on developed countries, such as the U.S. Few studies have explored how social media platforms are being used by traffickers in Bangladesh or how social media has contributed to the current phenomenon of women and children trafficking.

The use of social media in Bangladesh has increased incredibly during the last decade as traffickers have been more active on social media to lure their potential victims. The pandemic and the increase in demand for pornography and sex trafficking have equally affected developing countries. The pandemic situation has also caused stress in the labor market in all developing countries, especially for those families that rely on day-to-day earnings. As a result, many families have fallen below the poverty line. The post-COVID pandemic labor market scenario will thus be much more competitive. After the pandemic, traffickers may be able to take advantage of this desperate situation because thousands of females will be looking for work.

Some prominent non-government organizations in Bangladesh have been working in the area of repatriating and reintegrating trafficking survivors into the community, but unfortunately, these organizations lack the empirical studies that could potentially provide evidence as to which social media platforms are being most commonly used in Bangladesh and why nowadays traffickers have been using social media platforms to trap their victims. Further, one of the most important aspects of trafficking cases through social media is the fact that why traffickers' social media messages and communication tend to be believed by survivors and potential victims of trafficking. In addition to that, traffickers do not pick random users from social media channels as their victims. They need to have a specific target group to target, as well as specific strategies to follow to succeed in trapping their targets. However, these fields are still under-researched.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research question**

In the previous section of my master's thesis, I discuss how social media platforms and human trafficking are connected. As a result of a literature review, a research gap has already been identified that is used to formulate the central research question of the thesis, "How do social media platforms contribute to accelerating the rate of women and children trafficking in Bangladesh?". To answer the central research question of the thesis, I also use the following sub-questions to draw some empirical interpretations based on the responses of the interviews taken for this thesis about the connection between trafficking and social media platforms.

1. What are the most common strategies that traffickers follow to seduce a woman on social media platforms?
2. Which groups of women and children are mostly being targeted by the traffickers through social media?
3. what makes traffickers' social media messages convincing to the potential trafficking victims in Bangladesh?
4. what are the most commonly used social media platforms and why are traffickers using these social media platforms to trap their victims?

#### **3.2. Process of data collection**

To conduct this research, only primary data from interview participants is used for analysis. The primary data is collected by interviewing several Key Informants (KIs) with an open-ended questionnaire. KI technique was once used for ethnographic research but is now widely used in social science study under the qualitative research method as key informants explain deeper insights about a phenomenon from personal skills acquired through experience and position in the society (Marshall, 1996). They are natural observers and strategic informants (Marshall, 1996; Tremblay, 1957). Moreover, KIs are regarded as extraordinary in society and occupy a position of responsibility and influence in society. This position in society is not ascribed but achieved with knowledge and empirical experiences (Marshall, 1996). KIs ought to be selected for the study based on five competencies: role in the community, knowledge, willingness to share experiences, communicability, and impartiality (Marshall, 1996; Tremblay, 1957). In addition to that, by interviewing the KIs the data and the relevant information could be gathered within a very short period without comprising

the quality of the data while extracting the same kind of data from the community participants could have been expensive and time-consuming (Marshall, 1996). Based on the time duration and the nature of the research, interviewing KIs is convenient and relevant.

The professionals as the KIs are selected based on some criteria. Apart from the criteria mentioned by Marshall & Tremblay (1996; 1957), their professional experiences in trafficking sectors, positions in the organizations they have been working for, and the organizations' affiliation with trafficking are also taken into consideration.

### **3.3. The data**

The primary data for this master's thesis is collected through interviews with six professionals working in different organizations dealing with human trafficking in Bangladesh: non-governmental organizations, shelter home coordinators, and lawyers. During the data collection process, it was first decided that seven interviews would be conducted for the study; however, due to the unavailability of a prospective interviewee who was a police officer, one interview was not conducted. During first the interview, the interviewee added some additional information apart from the questions he was asked. As a result, the verbatim transcript of the interview was taken into consideration to revise the original questionnaire to add some new questions to the questionnaire. While transcribing and coding the data, some of the discussions were not taken into consideration because these discussions were not relevant to the research question.

Interviews are conducted with various professionals to ensure that the collected data is well enriched to generate sufficient amounts of information to answer the main objective of this study. Lawyers are included among the interviewees as they provide support to victims of human trafficking by ensuring that their traffickers are prosecuted properly. This is why they are interviewed. In addition, two separate interviews are conducted with employees from two organizations, Rights Jessore and Dhaka Ahsania Mission, who are involved in the repatriation and reintegration of victims of trafficking from the neighboring country, India. Both organizations have operations in Jessore, a district on the border between Bangladesh and India. These organizations offer shelter homes in Jessore for the repatriated victims of trafficking as a first step in providing them with psychological support before giving them reintegration services. The BRAC<sup>1</sup>, on the other hand, has a separate migration program operating all over Bangladesh. BRAC Migration program<sup>2</sup> has a project dedicated to repatriating and reintegrating

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<sup>1</sup> BRAC: currently BRAC does not use any full form for its name. Previously, "Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee" was abbreviated as BRAC. Now it is known as just BRAC. This is the largest NGO in the world right now.

<sup>2</sup> Apart from Migration program, BRAC has other programs, e.g., Ultra-Poor Graduation Program, Microfinance programme, Climate change program, skills development program, and so on.

trafficking victims. In total, six interviews were taken, 4 of them are conducted using Skype, and the rest 2 of the interviews are taken using Zoom and Google meet platforms.

### **3.4. Data analysis plan**

To interpret and analyze, thematic analysis (TA) is followed to classify the most pertinent themes in the data. Thematic analysis is not only about summarizing the content of the data but also about identifying, analyzing, and interpreting the patterns of the meaning by using qualitative data (Clarke, Grogan, Clarke, & Braun, 2016). In addition, the homogeneity or the heterogeneity of the data and the sample size hardly matter in analyzing the derived data using thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2016, p. 298). Thematic analysis is also applicable to both the inductive and deductive approaches (data or theory-driven methods) (Clarke et al., 2016). Therefore, many researchers argue that the Thematic analysis should be the core component or skill of conducting and analyzing qualitative data due to its flexibility (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017, p. 02).

For this research, all the Key Informants Interview (KIIs) are transcribed as ‘verbatim transcription’ to include all the expressions expressed by the KIs to understand the inner meaning of the sentence in more depth. NVivo qualitative software is used to organize and sort collected data. The collected data is coded at first to search for relevant themes according to the research questions and objectives. Since the deductive approach is used for this research, theoretical perspectives described in the paper are taken into consideration while searching for relevant themes (Braun & Clarke, 2008). To demonstrate and interpret the overall data, some direct and short quotes are used in the paper so that readers get an opportunity to experience the original flavor of the texts (Braun & Clarke, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017). The findings of the data are then described and discussed in such a way that the findings of the paper correspond with the findings of previous literature and vice versa.

### **3.5. Research ethics**

The ethical perspective in social science research is a growing concern nowadays. This paper is a part of social science research. All types of research that involve the interaction of human beings are required to maintain a strong data protection mechanism so that individual information or part of conversation and opinions are not published without due consent. The intended study is purely qualitative and requires the direct involvement of interview respondents. The quotes and the opinions of the respondents for this study are used with the due prior informed consent of the interview respondents (Besen-Cassino, Y., & Cassino, 2017). In addition to that, during the interview process, all interview participants are informed about the objectives and the goals of my thesis paper before

the interview begins. Besides, before initiating the main discussion, I asked all interviewees if they would prefer their names and other personally identifiable information anonymized, however, they all indicated that they would not mind disclosing their names and/or having their information anonymized in any way. Moreover, I try to ensure that all the resources used in the paper are cited properly. The research is conducted as a part of degree completion at the University of Tampere; therefore, I am fully aware of to comply with the data protection legislation imposed by the university. In addition to that, I am also aware to avoid any personal biases in selecting the interview respondents as KIs. I tried my best to follow the selection criteria that have been fixed in selecting the right key informants for the interview without any personal bias. The interview is taken in Bangla; therefore, to avoid any biases in interpreting the real meaning of the interview, I decided for 'verbatim transcription' of the interview so that the real meaning of the conversations does not get distorted.

## 4. Findings

Following verbatim transcription of the interview transcript from Bengali to English, the interviews were coded using NVIVO qualitative software. Initially, 48 coding were identified in the data, however, while reviewing the codes and searching for the relevant themes, some of the codes have been merged with the other codes due to their similarity. Finally, 30 codes appeared in the data in total.

Figure 4 displays all the codes and their frequencies from the data. It can be seen from figure 4 that fake job advertisements have been coded most frequently. It appeared approximately 20 times in the data, and all KIs<sup>3</sup> discussed the issue and voiced their concern regarding it. The Key informant who

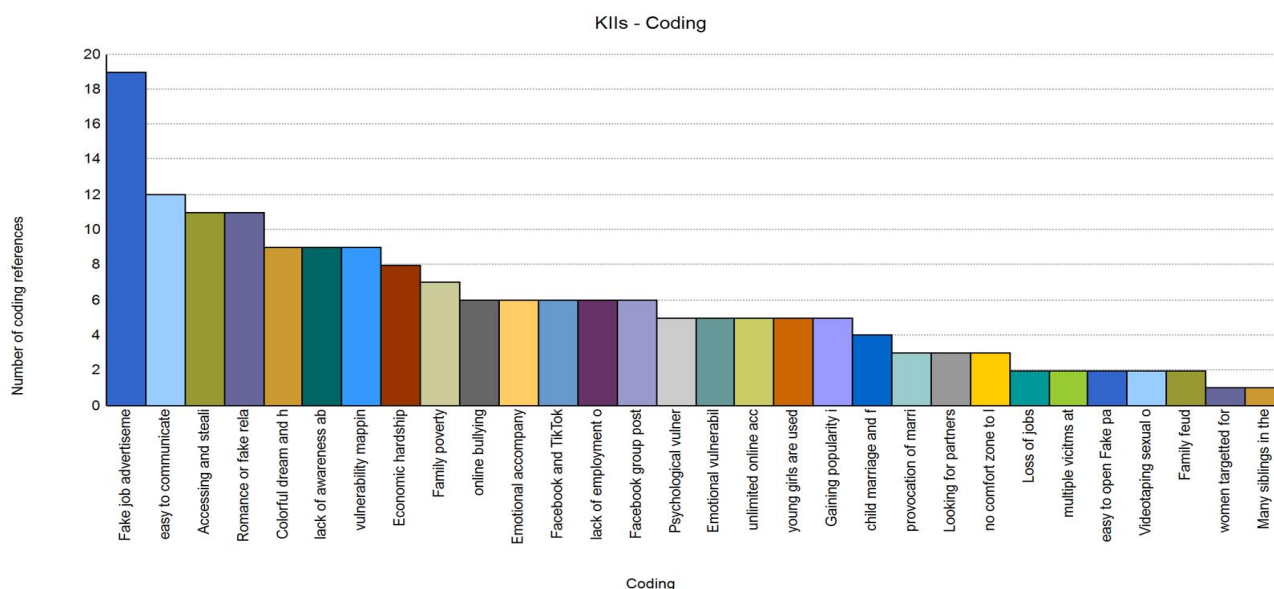


Figure 4: coding references

is a journalist emphasized more on advertisement more in his interviews. Several other codes such as emotional accompaniment to women with broken marriages or divorces, vulnerability mapping via social media, romance or fake relationships, provocation of marriages, and fraudulent modeling offers are also included in the data as codes. All these codes mentioned above together create the theme "Common strategies used by traffickers to seduce females through social media".

After that, it can be seen that the code "easy to communicate" appears in the data 12 times, and has been used to generate one of the themes, "Reasons why traffickers use social media to trap women and girls," followed by other codes such as multiple victims at one time, unlimited online access for

<sup>3</sup> Key Informants



young girls, and accessing and stealing information online without authorization. Another code called "colorful dream and high ambition" has been coded 9 times and it appeared in all interview transcripts at least once. The word "poverty" always appeared in the data connected with the financial issues of families which has been coded as "family poverty".

Additionally, there is a code called "online bullying" which appears directly in the data six times. Another interesting code that appears in the data is "no comfort zone to live in after a broken marriage or divorce", which was mentioned mostly by NGO professionals. All these codes led to another theme called "The reasons that make traffickers' social media messages convincing to potential victims", which is also one of the major objectives of the study.

The data also generated some other interesting codes such as good-looking young girls are used for sexual exploitation, women over 30 targeted for labor exploitation, out of the labor market for a long time, lack of knowledge in using social media, many siblings in the family and so on. These codes generated another theme called "Groups of women and children mostly targeted by the traffickers through social media". Among these codes, the family feud was mentioned the least (by only two of the KIs). However, this code has been discussed with importance as this could be the major reason behind online trafficking in the future as family feuds may be amplified as a result of pandemics.

It is shown in Figure 5 how all these codes have been used to generate each theme. The codes that appeared in the data are categorized into five broad themes based on their association. Some of the codes in themes number 2 and 5 are divided into subtopics to elaborate them a bit further. In the following writings, several sub-sections relating to the findings are discussed in more detail where applicable.

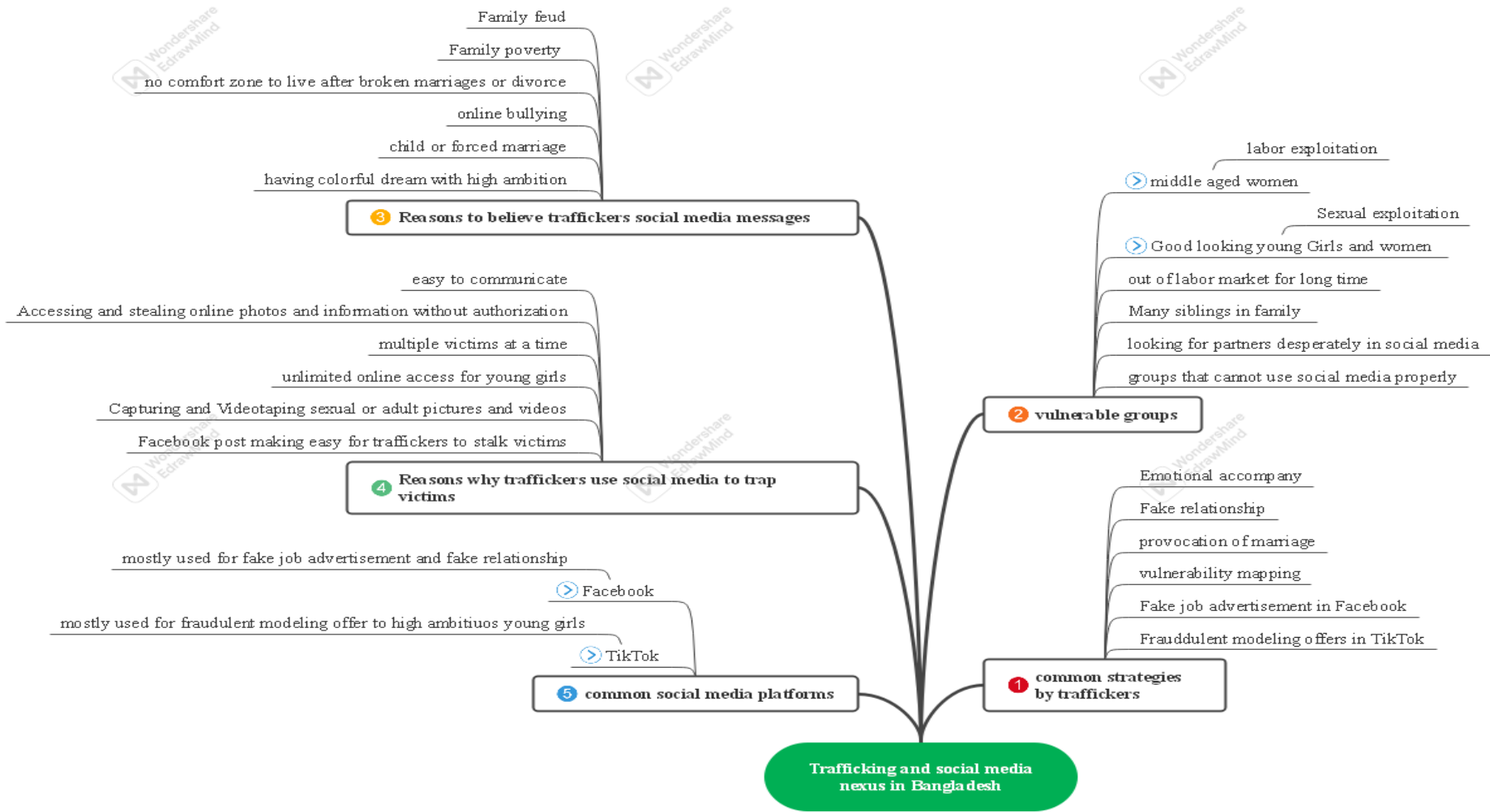


Figure 5: Data findings: how codes have been used to generate themes

#### 4.1. Common strategies by traffickers

Using social media, traffickers engage in several innovative strategies to seduce females. Different strategies are used in different situations based on the vulnerability of the potential victim. Therefore, the first strategy all traffickers use is to identify victims' vulnerability through vulnerability mapping. In this way, they identify the vulnerabilities of potential trafficking victims, which allows them to more easily determine which types of vulnerabilities they may have. The preliminary vulnerability mapping provides the traffickers with a basic understanding of the potential victims. The vulnerabilities of potential victims of human trafficking are typically related to economic, psychological, and emotional aspects.

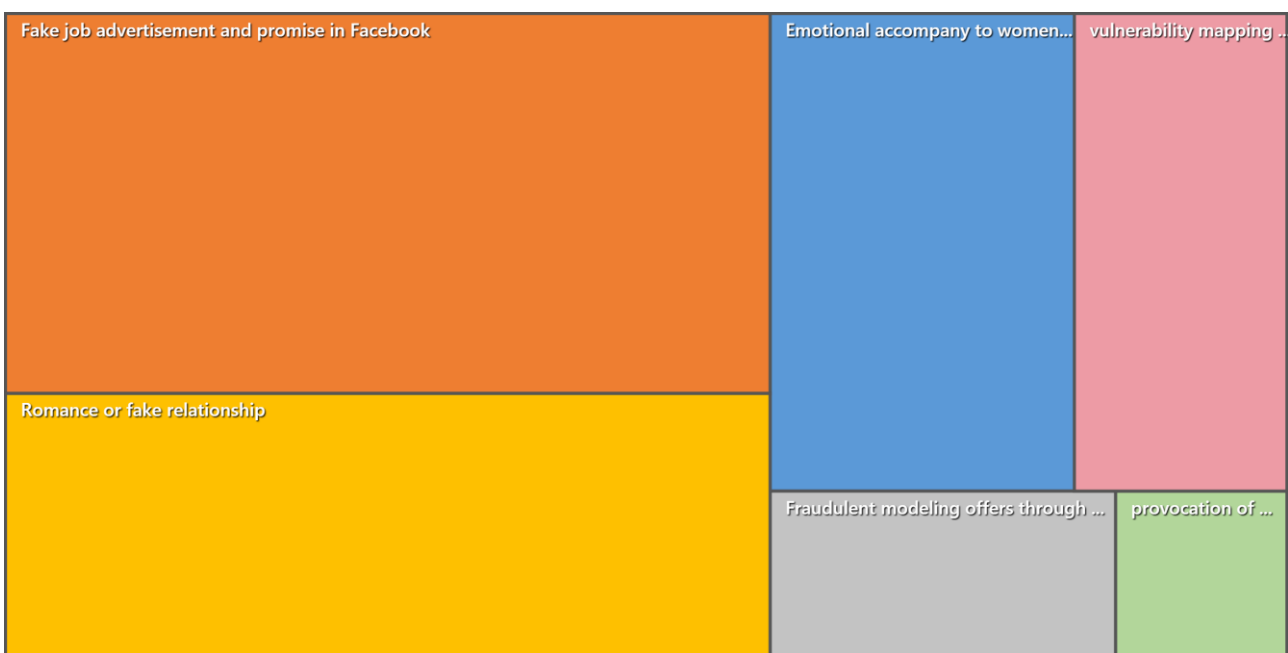


Figure 6: Hierarchy chart about most common strategies by traffickers (char has been generated by NVivo qualitative software-12)

Creating fake advertisements or making false promises on Facebook are among the most common strategies used by human traffickers to trap victims who are seeking economic support, i.e., jobs. Moreover, pretending to be lovers, emotional support to women with broken relationships (divorce, breakups), and provocation of marriages to them are some of the common emotional support strategies traffickers are using nowadays on social media in Bangladesh. A hierarchy chart has been generated in NVIVO software to analyze which common strategies are mostly used by the traffickers. As shown in figure 6 (hierarchy chart), the coding called 'fake advertisement and promise in Facebook' has more regions in the hierarchy chart as this code has appeared most in the data, meaning that fake job advertisements and promises on Facebook have been discussed more frequently in the data. According to KIs, fake job advertisements and promises on Facebook are one of the most

commonly used strategies that traffickers follow to allure females on social media to trap them as potential trafficking victims.

*“We often see that on Facebook, traffickers advertise that they are hiring nurses for one of the hospitals. In the advertisement, it is written that they are seeking any girls interested without any prior degree or experience in nursing. Many females see this advertisement and start communicating with the gang hoping to get a job but not even a single time do they think about why these advertisers are hiring someone without any relevant degrees or experiences (KII 1- NGO professional)”*

From the quote above, it can be seen that according to the KI 1, potential trafficking victims are generally not suspicious about traffickers while checking the online fake job advertisements. It seems that the traffickers in that regard are quite professional to post these fake job advertisements. According to the KIs, traffickers tend to open different kinds of fake pages on Facebook and post fake employment opportunities to attract females. Many women search for opportunities to earn money on social media due to poverty or unemployment and traffickers tend to exploit this situation by posting fake advertisements about employment opportunities such as hiring nurses or hiring female employees for beauty parlors in India. Potential trafficking victims may contact those traffickers through social media for this kind of fake employment opportunity and get trapped by traffickers.

To trick the victims' hopes and post false advertisements on online platforms, traffickers take advantage of victims' lack of education and poverty and exploit the limitations of their knowledge. After being contacted, if traffickers discover that victims need economic support, they offer fake promises of economic well-being by promising lucrative jobs. Since thousands of women search for work on social media, they are successful in their advertising strategy. According to the interviewees, almost every job posting is about beauty parlor work, which comes with high salaries and different kinds of perks without any prior experience in that field. Assuring victims that they will have a decent life and the freedom to pursue their economic dreams is a common tactic employed by traffickers.

Traffickers also use fake success case stories about some girls who are previously trafficked and are now under the grip of traffickers. Traffickers try to portray in those case stories that those girls are working decent jobs and making a handful amount of money. As a result, most of the time, potential victims find it difficult to distinguish between real and fake advertisements because traffickers' advertising seems so convincing. According to KII 5:

*“While advertising on Facebook, traffickers use different kinds of success stories of some other girls and try to convince prospective victims that previously these girls grabbed this opportunity and now they have been earning huge amount of money and enjoying a happy life. However, the girls who are being used as a case story do not even know that they are again being used to provoke other girls to fall into the same traps and at the same time, prospective victims cannot know that these case stories are all made up. This is quite a new strategy from the traffickers and we have found some victims who shared the same stories that they were convinced after seeing these kinds of advertisements on Facebook (KII 5- NGO professional).”*

Posting fake success stories is quite a tricky option from the traffickers' side. It seems even hard for educated people to find out traffickers' real motifs. Since potential trafficking victims are typically from the less educated group, it may be quite hard for them to distinguish between fake and genuine advertisements.

Most of the online advertisements on social media platforms are linked to employment and job as it is quite easy for traffickers to attract numbers of potential victims at a time with their economic vulnerability. That is why traffickers may use social media platforms to post their fake advertisements. Another type of advertisement is connected to fake modeling hiring advertisements which are mostly posted on TikTok. According to KIs, a common tendency is found among young girls that they want to become famous or models by posting fancy videos on TikTok. Traffickers know this phenomenon very well. As a result, they post modeling-related fake advertisements on TikTok in addition to posting job-related fake job advertisements on Facebook. All KIs also agreed that the traffickers have different kinds of targeted groups based on the social media platform.

The KI interviewees were also asked about how a pandemic could potentially be linked to the advertisement on social media in the future. Most of the KIs discussed the same issues. According to most of the KIs, due to COVID, thousands of people lost their jobs and returned to their villages

from the city areas. When the labor market reopens and the economy recovers from COVID, many people will be striving to find employment, but the labor market cannot accommodate all the people at a time. Even many industries and small entrepreneurs have been closed down in Bangladesh and they are not sure if they will be able to restart their businesses once again. There will be a threat that traffickers may exploit this vulnerable scenario by posting more and more fake advertisements on social media for employment opportunities to attract women and many of whom will fall into their trap and thus become victimized.

Another strategy that traffickers use frequently is pretending to provide emotional accompaniment to women with broken marriages or divorce. If traffickers find that the potential victims are not in a peaceful condition in their families, then they try to attract the victims by offering emotional support and different kinds of hope. One of the most common forms of hope that traffickers install in these vulnerable women is that of marriage and a decent family life with them. KI from shelter homes described that a few cases show that broken marriages and divorces can sometimes trigger people's feelings to be expressed through social media posts and pictures. Additionally, cases in which individuals are openly seeking partners using social media platforms which are quite common nowadays and can be considered quite a normal phenomenon in Bangladesh. Even sometimes women with broken marriages or relations openly look for a partner on different Facebook pages. In general, it can be assumed that traffickers play their role well since the victims give evidence to distinguish them from common people which was not easily possible if they did not share those feelings. As a result, oftentimes they end up finding someone who is a trafficker trying to support them mentally to build the trust before finally proposing for marriage with the intention of trafficking.

A further strategy that traffickers employ is to cultivate a love affair with young girls. Oftentimes, it is quite difficult for young girls to distinguish between traffickers and true lovers as traffickers seem too well trained to trap girls in love affairs.

*“...you will be surprised to hear that some of the victims we are looking after got victimized by the traffickers through Facebook within a month. Most of them were emotionally attached to the traffickers (love affairs). When young girls are in a relationship with traffickers on social media, they do not even believe their parents or any legal guardians. Traffickers convince them in such a way so that they cannot share any information with their parents or guardians (KII 2- NGO professional)”.*

Economically vulnerable women or girls are not the only ones targeted by traffickers. It is possible for women to be in a vulnerable situation due to emotional fragility or loneliness, or not receiving enough support and attention from their families. If potential victims do not receive emotional support from their family members, they feel lonely and deprived. Bangladesh has quite a unique family culture in that aspect, as it is common practice that the children in a Bangladeshi family stay with their parents until they get married. Usually, wives in a family take care of the children by accompanying them and playing the role of a housewife. In urban areas, the situation is somewhat mixed where women are found both as housewives and as working mothers. In the case of children whose parents work outside, they do not have much time to be looked after by their parents. Occasionally, these children make comparisons between the level of support from their families and other children living and studying with them.

*“...This is quite surprising for us as well that we have so many cases nowadays where we found that the victims were not getting family care even if their families were economically and financially well off. They were just emotionally vulnerable. In those cases, we found that victims were in a relationship with the traffickers for emotional care and support, but in the end, they were victimized by their lovers. They tried to survive the way they dreamt for. As a result, they were so desperate to look for a partner and ended up victimized. In most of the cases, they shared nude pictures with their partners [traffickers] and partners exploited those private moments to force them to do what they ordered (KII 1- NGO professional)”.*

From the empirical experiences, one of the KIs added that potential trafficking victims’ emotional loneliness becomes exacerbated when they notice that their friends are receiving more attention and emotional accompaniment from their parents. They then seek social media companionship or share their emotional loneliness on social media. These are opportunities that traffickers enjoy from time to time. The traffickers pretend to provide emotional support to the girls and establish a relationship with them. As mentioned earlier, those who were divorced at an early stage of their life or have a broken marriage are oftentimes one of the most targeted groups of females as convincing them through pretending to provide emotional support is a quite easy task for traffickers.

*“We dealt with several trafficking victims who are divorced and actively seeking partners in social media. One of the women who got trafficked told us that she met her traffickers (lover once) from a Facebook group called ‘Desperately Seeking Soulmate*

*(DSS)<sup>4</sup>. That woman was emotionally too vulnerable and mentally stressed as after her divorce she could not find any comfort zone in her father's house, so she just wanted to leave her house (KII 2- NGO professional) ”.*

As it is said earlier, the girls who have been divorced at an early stage of their life are often targeted. Traffickers always know their vulnerability, making it easy for them to target and groom. Traffickers know that girls and women who are divorced, are emotionally fragile and are being deprived of care by their families or to some extent even neglected. Particularly, this is the way divorced girls are treated in Bangladesh society. There is no doubt that traffickers are aware of the fact that divorced women suffer a stigma in Bangladesh and are frequently neglected by their families. As a result, they exploit the vulnerabilities of these women by directing their attention to them through social media platforms. For traffickers, it is a great opportunity to extend their emotional accompaniment and support through social media. Many social media secret groups are working as a source for the traffickers to trap these emotionally vulnerable groups of females by providing them emotional accompaniment and support.

#### 4.2. Reasons to believe traffickers' social media messages

One of the most important objectives of this study was to identify “reasons that make traffickers’ social media messages convincing to the potential trafficking victims”. KI respondents were questioned about this issue from different perspectives to determine the empirical evidence

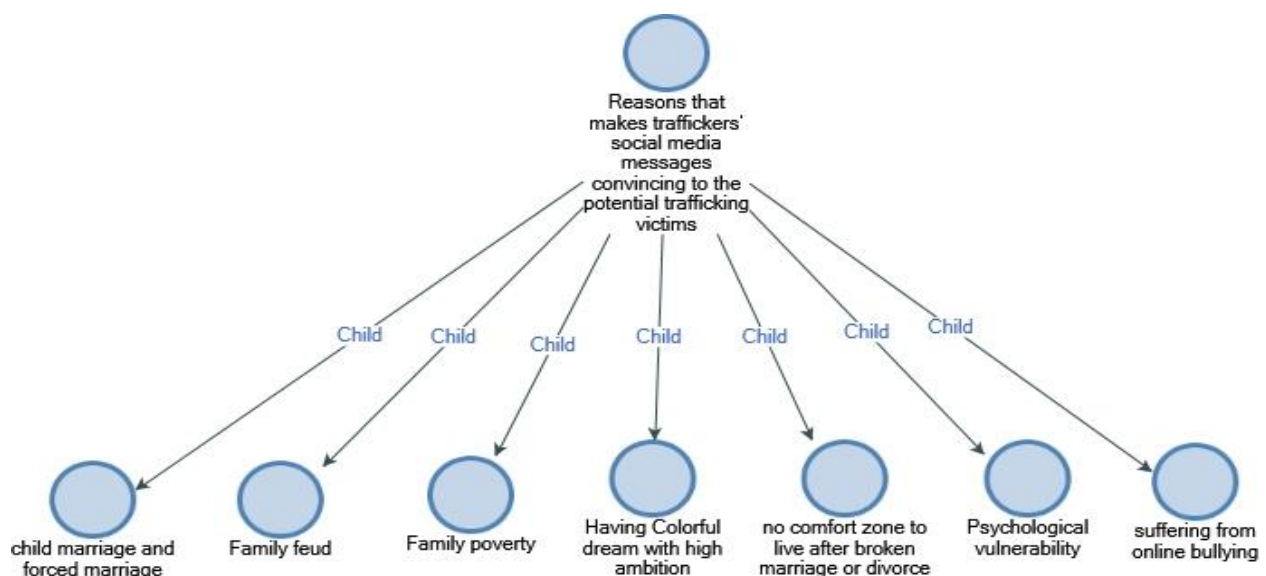


Figure 7: Reasons that make traffickers' social messages convincing to potential trafficking victims

<sup>4</sup> The group claims to be a private group in Facebook. It has more than sixteen thousand active members. The group has a cover picture with a couple standing in front of a wall and they seem to be very happy to have found each other. The wall has a message which is translated as “I love you”. The group can be found by searching the key words mentioned in the quotation by KII 2.



behind why potential victims trust social media messages from traffickers so readily, and several explanations have been suggested based on their responses.

While coding the data, discussion about family poverty was found frequently in the interview transcript as the main reason. Some other reasons such as having colorful dreams with high ambition, having no comfort zone after a broken relationship or divorce, etc. are also found in the data as the potential causes which make potential trafficking victims believe traffickers' social media messages. The discussion about the fact of "psychological vulnerability" was pointed out in the interview transcript of the NGO professionals who work in shelter homes and NGOs providing reintegration support to the trafficking victims. KI 2 who works for an NGO providing reintegration support to the trafficking victims said that they have specific designated psychological para-counselors<sup>5</sup> who provide initial psychological assistance to the repatriated trafficking victims from the neighboring country, India. According to his discussion, multiple factors potentially contribute to accelerating the psychological vulnerability of potential victims. Oftentimes, they found that psychological vulnerability is one of the most significant reasons for which potential trafficking victims convincingly believe traffickers' social media messages quite often. Sometimes, they find some repatriated trafficking victims from India who are much more psychologically vulnerable that they need professional psychiatric support from the medical for a long term as they are abused sexually so seriously. He also added with the reference of a para-counselor that the psychological vulnerability of potential trafficking victims may be significantly affected by a variety of factors, such as poverty or a family feud, online bullying on various social media sites, mental instability caused by a broken marriage, or insufficient family cares.

It was surprising that all of the respondents (except KII 4) have discussed child marriage and linked it with how child marriage or forced marriage at an earlier stage of the girls' lives could potentially lead to a broken marriage or divorce. According to their responses, this broken marriage or divorce at an earlier stage often creates a "no comfort zone" for many girls as they return to their paternal homes.

*"Not only forced marriage, marriage by mutual understandings and negotiation at an earlier stage as a form of child marriage is also a phenomenon. In most cases, bride and bridegrooms are unknown to each other in the marriages that take place through*

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<sup>5</sup> Para counselor is a designation of some special certified social workers working for the NGOs from where I interviewed some of the professionals. These NGOs are working to repatriate and reintegrate the trafficking victims from India specially. They also provide only reintegration services to the trafficking victims from Bangladesh.

*mutual understanding and negotiation. Many cases are found where we witnessed that after marriage due to lack of understanding, couples get separated during the early stages of their marriage life, and thus the brides at some point get back to their father's house where they feel neglected continuously by their parents and brothers in the family (KII 2- NGO professional)."*

Respondents indicated that many girls get married before they reach the age of 18, so, they do not have a clear understanding of what kind of family obligations and responsibilities they will face after marriage. Due to the lack of understanding of the complex issue of family chores and responsibilities, they experience severe mental pressure at the start of their marriages, which makes them decide to divorce at some point. Most often, these girls are forced to return to their parents' homes after divorce and then another phase of the struggling period starts for them.

Parents in Bangladesh, particularly fathers, have a responsibility to arrange for their daughters to get married. Sometimes, brothers share some of the responsibility for getting their sisters married as well. After getting married for a certain period, women who get divorced and return to their paternal home may not be able to marry again so easily. Meanwhile, based on the quote from KII 2, it is quite clear that families including parents and brothers do not want to bear the responsibilities of these divorced women for a long time, so they are forced to take on their responsibilities anyway.

The KII 2 also tried to add that after they reach this point of being neglected by their own families, they begin feeling deprived of the proper care and mental support that they were supposed to receive after experiencing a critical turning point in their lives. They cannot endure this neglect for a long time by their family and at some point, they begin looking for other partners on social media and share their feelings of loneliness and vulnerability and how they feel neglected in the family. As they desperately search for a partner or a job to get out of their no comfort zone, they feel that different social media platforms especially Facebook could be the most convenient platform to find out a job or a partner. Traffickers in social media always lurk to find these kinds of girls to bring them under their traps. KII 3 pragmatically explained this phenomenon. He explained that it's pretty easy for traffickers to target these divorced women because they don't have to spend a lot of time convincing them to maintain contact with them since they are already convinced by their current state of deprivation from mental well-being. The majority of traffickers target these kinds of women because victimizing these groups is relatively convenient and the success rate is relatively high. According to this KI, many trafficking victims with such background are found who were victimized within just 3 months.

The KIs were also asked a subsequent follow-up question about how the current pandemic situation could deteriorate the phenomenon of child marriages in Bangladesh. Most of them agreed that the number of child marriages, especially in rural areas, will rise very exponentially and this may eventually cause a significant rise in the early divorce rate. One of the KIs stated a very alarming example of the effects of the pandemic in accelerating child marriages in rural Bangladesh:

*“We found that many girls have been married during the pandemic. Even in my region, there is a school from where all the girls have been married and no one left to attend the secondary school certificate (SSC) last year. Most of the girls I assume may be within their 15 or 16 (KII 3- NGO professional).”*

From the responses provided by KIIs, it may predict that due to the pandemic situation, the number of child marriages in village areas may increase more than ever before. Because they are getting married at such an early age, there is a very high probability that thousands of those girls will get divorced after a certain period. Due to pandemics and the high rise of this kind of marriage and divorce, trafficking through social media may rise in the coming future.

Family poverty and family feud have been coded separately in the data based on the responses of KIIs. According to the respondents, family feuds and family poverty are distinguished in the same way. Several KIIs have suggested that even if a family is financially prosperous, there may be instability regarding a stable family relationship between parents or between parents and children. Families where parents are divorced and living separately or families where husbands and wives have a bitter relationship between them have a significant influence on the children living in those families. Even children living in families where their freedom of movement and choice is restricted by their parents may develop a bitter relationship with their parents at some point in their lives which may affect them psychologically. One of the KIs added that these children may strive hard to get out of their family spheres and seek emotional accompaniment or friendships on social media platforms by posting different kinds of emotional posts and or by sharing different kinds of quotes and writings. These emotional posts and sharing different kinds of quotes and writings on social media platforms may give traffickers a clear indication of their potential targets.

Traffickers pretend to be their emotional partners to accompany them during their psychological vulnerability caused by family feuds and make them fall into their traps. Children from both financially rich and poor families may fall into this psychological vulnerability due to family feuds, however, family poverty only affects those women and children who belong to families with

economic fragility. In that regard, the vulnerability of women and children depends on the familial economic condition. One KI added specifically that children in families which have earnings less than the minimum threshold are more prone to trafficking. Most of the time, members of those families including children are deprived of basic education facilities and drop out of school at the very early phase of their lives. The fragile familial economic condition referred to as family poverty always forces these children and women to engage in IGA<sup>6</sup> at some point in their lives. Due to poverty and unemployment, these women and children search for earning opportunities in any way possible.

As discussed earlier, human traffickers often post false job-related advertisements mentioning employment opportunities to take advantage of this situation. To attract women and children, traffickers create a variety of fake Facebook pages and post fake employment opportunities. It seems that women who are from low-income families or out of work with less education tend to visit different kinds of Facebook pages to search for jobs that seem most complementary to their skills.

According to one of the KIs working at shelter homes in Jessore<sup>7</sup>, the majority of the women who were duped by the traffickers on social media while seeking employment by communicating with the traffickers are from low-income families. In that case, unemployment is closely linked to the phenomenon of family poverty. According to all KIs, the higher the unemployment rate, the higher the incidences of social media trafficking. To follow up, all the KIs were asked how the pandemic situation may exacerbate family poverty, the unemployment phenomenon, and trafficking through social media in future Bangladesh. According to some of them, they have already started experiencing the negative effects of the pandemic due to the increase in trafficking cases. The program head of BRAC's migration program made a very crucial comment regarding the reverse migration<sup>8</sup> that is happening in Bangladesh due to pandemics and how this reverse migration may contribute to the rise in family poverty and social media trafficking.

*“Currently, Bangladesh is undergoing reverse migration. Once upon a time, people used to come to the cities for employees, but due to the devastating effects of the pandemic, people have now left cities and returned to their villages since they were unable to pay for living expenses in the cities. Thousands of labor migrants from abroad were also pushed back to Bangladesh, where they were once the only source*

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<sup>6</sup> Income Generating Activities

<sup>7</sup> A district in Bangladesh adjacent to India Border

<sup>8</sup> Reverse migration: returning of Bangladeshi labor migrants to their place of origin from abroad due to COVID 19 pandemic. Returning from abroad is referred to as effects on external migration and returning from cities to the place of origin within a country is referred to as internal migration.

*of income for their families. As a result, thousands of families have already fallen into poverty. The number of internal trafficking<sup>9</sup> will increase, and social media will be the primary platform used for sexual exploitation and labor exploitation (KII 5- NGO professional).”*

Among the most important variables determining the reduction of poverty among Bangladeshi families, especially in rural areas, is internal or external migration. This internal and external migration will be affected by the phenomenon of reverse migration, which could slow the pace of family poverty reduction in rural areas of Bangladesh. Many families will be left with little economic stability, which may force many women and children to seek immediate employment to recover their economic stability and reduce their poverty. The explanation of KII 3 in that regard matches as well. He explained that many families will be afflicted with family feuds and will be under extreme economic pressure, causing many children to be psychologically vulnerable and many women to regain employment anyway to sustain their maintenance. The KII 4 who is a journalist discussed the issue from a different perspective. According to him, Bangladesh's garment sector has predominantly female employees which has a significant contribution to reducing family poverty. The first-time pandemics struck; garments were closed down in anticipation of uncertain times. The salaries of women in the garment industry are extremely meager. Many female garment workers lost their jobs and economic solvency as garment industries closed for months upon months due to the pandemic. As a result, they had to return to their villages which deteriorated their family poverty once again. The deterioration of their familial economic situation may trigger them to search for immediate employment. In that situation, they may resort to searching for employment on social media platforms like Facebook which could be dangerous for them as they may encounter fake job advertisements and end up being trafficked.

Moreover, the closure of many small businesses and entrepreneurship in Dhaka caused thousands of female workers to lose their jobs as well. Once the labor market reopens, thousands of women will be seeking employment hoping to get out of the vicious cycle of poverty once again, but the labor market won't be able to accommodate all of them at the same time. Social media in that case will play an important role in deteriorating the trafficking situation as traffickers' social media communication regarding various fake employment news and promise for emotional accompany will be regarded as

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<sup>9</sup> By referring “internal trafficking” The KI indicated about trafficking within Bangladesh

too convincing to those children and women because of their family poverty and economic vulnerability and psychological vulnerability caused by family feuds.

According to the data, another reason why potential victims believe traffickers' social media messages so readily is that they have a colorful dream and a high ambition to be a model or celebrity. According to the KII 1 who is coordinating an anti-trafficking project in Jessore, these high ambitious groups of girls are mostly found from families with economically poor backgrounds. The traffickers always try to keep these high-spirited girls daydreaming about something they could never imagine in their entire lives. On TikTok, traffickers tend to target girls who have weaknesses to be an actress or models. For these girls, aspiring to be involved in the media is high on their list of priorities, but due to family constraints or lack of opportunity, they cannot pursue it. He also added that there has been a recent increase in traffickers targeting teens on TikTok and offering them various modeling opportunities. In addition to that, some TikTok users wish to gain more followers to increase their popularity on the platform. In some cases, they become so attracted that they disregard the traditional safety and security features of TikTok. These users are most commonly found among young girls. They are also most often targeted by traffickers since traffickers find it extremely easy to make them believe that they can help them to become celebrities or models. Due to their young age and their high hopes, they might be a preferred target of traffickers since these girls have unlimited access to the internet through which traffickers might get in touch with them very easily. Hence, the victim is under the impression that if they communicate with the traffickers on social media such as TikTok, they will become celebrities. One of the KIs stated that-

*“A few days back a girl was trafficked by one of the TikTok celebrities in Bangladesh. The victim was trafficked to India after being lured into the role of a model and gang-raped by the traffickers for several months before being rescued by the Delhi<sup>10</sup> police. This is not the only case. It is just an example. Police may have better information about the cases as this is happening quite often because nowadays it is very easy for traffickers to do so (KII 3- NGO professional).”*

The quote from the KI again substantiates the claim that those young girls who are aspiring to become models and have colorful dreams of achieving their dreams are more active on TikTok, where they are often captured by traffickers with the hope of becoming actresses or models. TikTok users who create fancy videos want more likes and comments on TikTok to gain popularity on the TikTok

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<sup>10</sup> The capital city of India

platform. Traffickers often track these girls very easily and offer them opportunities to become models or actresses. These aspirant girls readily accept these offers. Subsequently, they are trapped by traffickers quite easily. As stated earlier, most of the time, these highly ambitious girls are from families with fragile economic conditions in which they lack access to basic amenities. Probably because of that, they have a hidden desire to become a popular model or celebrity on different online platforms to be financially solvent as financial sovereignty could be a motif to strive for such big goals.

The aspect of online bullying presents an interesting perspective about making women, particularly young girls, more vulnerable to trafficking. From the literature review, I found that online bullying has also negative effects on both offline and online trafficking as online bullying affects potential victims psychologically. So, the KIs were asked a question about how online bullying may increase the possibility of trafficking. This question was addressed to KIs to examine and review whether online bullying has any effects on young girls in Bangladesh and if it will cause them to come into close contact with traffickers. The response of one of the KIs who also takes care of one of the shelter homes in Jessore was both compelling and daunting. According to him:

*“Some of the victims who have been trafficked in our shelter home were not that much good-looking. When they used to share photos on Facebook, they used to get many negative comments about their skin color and posture. They told us that when they uploaded any photos some of their close friends used to give laughter emo which offended them mentally frequently. Their trafficker also used to react and comment on their photos but all their comments and reactions were positive, i.e., caring reactions and praiseworthy comments. They used to talk to traffickers so frequently and were attached to a relationship at some point. They left their home to get married to those traffickers but ended up getting trafficked in India for years (KII 2- NGO professional).”*

According to the KIs, the majority of cyberbullying victims they dealt with are young girls. Emotional instability could be an effect of cyberbullying. As stated by KII 2, it is normally common for young girls to become emotionally upset as a result of any form of online bullying because of their age and

lack of maturity to tackle the situation. In a subsequent question about why it happens with young girls particularly, KII 2 assumed that this typically occurs when girls post pictures and videos of themselves on social media platforms and their mutual friends on Facebook or other social media platforms are not mature in terms of their age as they are also typically young, therefore, they are unable to comment on other people's posts or pictures responsibly. They attempt to make fun of the postures and gestures depicted in the uploaded photographs. It is also not uncommon for them to comment on a person's height or skin color, which has the greatest negative impact on the uploader's psychology. In the beginning, the uploaders take these comments and react as a fun aspect, but later they are adversely affected psychologically. Probably, traffickers keep on searching for these kinds of potential victims being treated differently due to their skin color or body postures.

Whenever traffickers may come across these kinds of posts or pictures on social media, they take the initiative to comment and respond to those pictures and posts in a caring manner to evoke positive emotions within victims of bullying. Because of this situation, the message of the traffickers might be even more convincing for the person being bullied. As social attachment increases with time, the frequency of communication may also increase and private conversations may also become more prevalent between traffickers and potential victims. KI 2 suggests that at this point, two separate incidents could potentially occur. Firstly, at the very beginning of the relationship, potential victims leave their homes hoping to marry traffickers and end up being trafficked. Secondly, traffickers continue their communication with potential victims by providing them with emotional accompaniment and keep on trying to strengthen potential victims' trust in them. For the second group of potential victims, there is a possibility that they will not be with traffickers right away and thus traffickers may have to wait a bit longer to build their trust.

When trust is built, at some point, these traffickers usually demand private pictures from the potential victims or record some private moments through video calls. Similar kinds of discussions have been noted from several KIs. According to them, some of the victims shared their life stories that their so-called lovers threatened or intimidated them to comply with everything they instructed them after having their photos and private videos. The most interesting aspect is that these so-called lovers always use fake profiles on social media and build a relationship with girls and try to trap them. For potential victims, it is quite hard to understand their motives at the very beginning of their communication. KIs stated that most victims' case stories related to online bullying are to some extent



similar as they found that victims used to find something special in every message and communication they received from traffickers, as those messages and communications express the exact feeling they were seeking during their emotional vulnerability.

### **4.3. Vulnerable groups for trafficking**

In responding to the question of which groups of women and children are mostly targeted by the traffickers through social media, and why do the traffickers target those groups? It was unanimously agreed that girls who are attractive and under the age of 18 are most likely to be targeted for sexual exploitation, and women who might not be perceived beautiful according to certain standards and are over the age of 25 or 30 are most likely to be targeted for labor exploitation. The statement from KI 3 is quite explanatory about this phenomenon. He said that-

*“... From my empirical experience, all the trafficking victims who were sexually victimized after getting trafficked are good looking and younger (aged between 15 to 25); and the victims who used to be trafficked for servitude and physical labor, are not good looking and aged over 30 in most of the cases. So, I can say good-looking divorced women and girls are mostly targeted for sexual exploitation and comparatively aged women are targeted for servitude and physical labor (KII 3- NGO professional).”*

From the quote above it is quite apparent that women over thirty years of age receive less demand in the sex market compared to girls under the age of eighteen. Women over the age of 30 are also at risk of sexual exploitation. Yet, they are more likely to be exploited in the form of labor marketing, which involves being lured by lucrative job opportunities on social

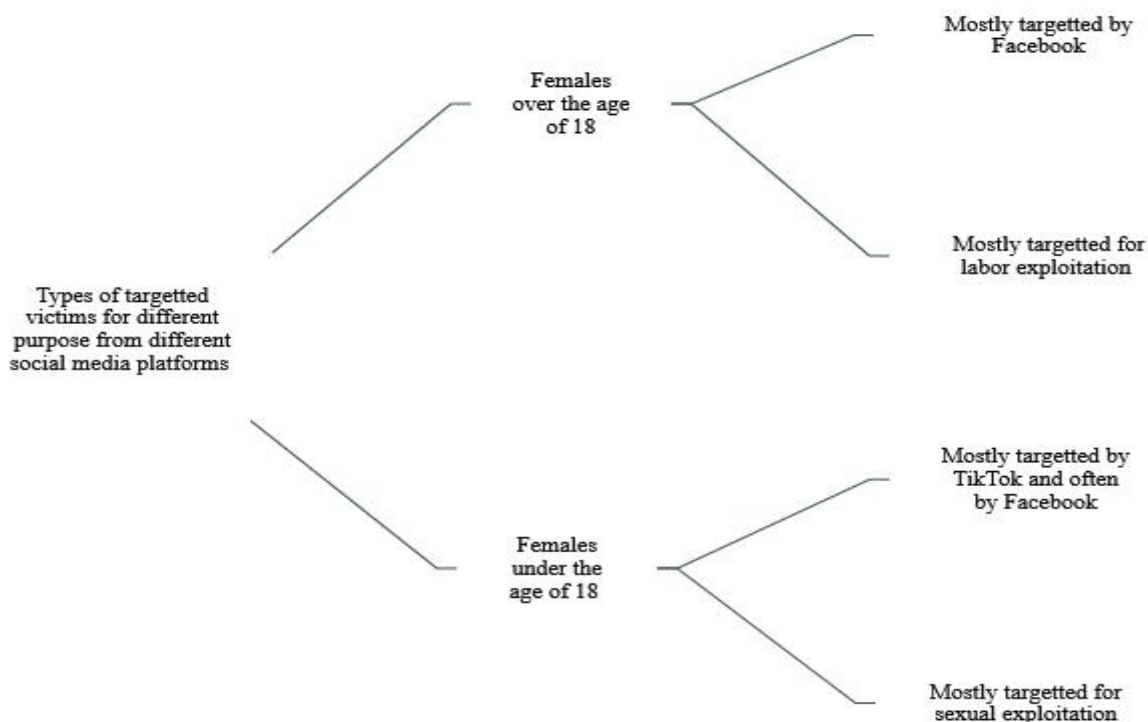


Figure 8: reasons for targeting different groups of females

media platforms like Facebook, because, women are most prone to searching for employment on social media. On the contrary, girls, and women who are good-looking and smart, have different kinds of colorful desires as they look beautiful, and oftentimes, they are targeted by the traffickers for sexual exploitation due to their high demand in the sex market. The code "good-looking young girls are used for sexual exploitation" has been cited eight times from four interview files, whereas the code "women over 30 targeted for labor exploitation" has been cited six times from three interview files. The data indicates that most respondents discussed sexual exploitation much more than domestic servitude, supporting the notion that sexual exploitation is the most prevalent form of trafficking. Furthermore, the data indicate that, compared to women over thirty years of age, girls with a good appearance are more vulnerable to human trafficking and are generally targeted by traffickers for the sex market.

As coded in the data, according to KIs, another group of women who have been out of work or out of the labor market for a longer period is also rather vulnerable to trafficking since they are also frequently targeted by traffickers via social media as they are seeking employment. In certain cases, these groups remain quite determined to obtain employment and accept any job offers without verifying their legitimacy.

Moreover, NGO professionals who have been working for the reintegration support programmes for the trafficking victims added that vulnerability to trafficking somehow also relates to low skills in using social media and a general lack of awareness about what to share and what not to share on social media platforms. KII 5 indicated that girls and women who do not know how to use social media correctly or who lack the necessary knowledge about the safety and security features of social media platforms are one of the most common targets for social media traffickers. According to him, young girls are sometimes so addicted to social media that they defy traditional safety and security concerns and share personal information publicly, such as where they live, where they study, where they roam, what they are feeling, what they like, what they are seeking, what they are passionate about, etc. It could be confusing for young girls to find out what platforms are safe, which platforms are bad, and which platforms they should use when using online platforms. They try to learn new things since they are using those platforms for the first time. The traffickers might stalk those new users and try to form friendships, relationships, and so on.

As stated earlier, depending on the mental, emotional, economic, or social vulnerability of their targets, traffickers use different kinds of strategies to convince their potential victims. The responses from KI 3 in that regard match with the response of KI 5. According to them, if traffickers find someone under 16 and a new user, it's something like a huge opportunity for them. Moreover, most parents and teachers are unfamiliar with social media platforms and technological sites, which makes it difficult to monitor their children and students. This may leave these vulnerable young people without guidance and more susceptible to trafficking through social media.

These two KIs also added that girls who belong to a family with multiple siblings are also at risk of being trafficked since they are targeted quite often as the traffickers make them believe that they are not in a peaceful situation in their family. One of the KIs states-

*"... Children who belong to a family where she has several siblings are also vulnerable as they do not get sufficient care and love from their families, so, they feel lonely and sometimes they feel the pressure of marriage and different bitter words... (KII 3- NGO professional). "*

This code has only been coded two times from only two files, indicating that only two KIs mentioned this phenomenon, but the phenomenon may have greater implications because, as a result of many children in the family, girls may have extra pressure on them to get married at a young age or may be forced to seek employment by themselves at a very young age, making them very susceptible to trafficking through social networking. According to KIs who discussed this phenomenon, traffickers may also ask potential traffickers about the number of siblings they have in their family. Traffickers also tend to ask their potential victims if they are receiving sufficient and equal care and treatment from their parents. Answers to these questions may give traffickers insight into the vulnerabilities of potential victims.

#### **4.4. Reasons why traffickers use social media to trap victims**

The data reveals an additional, important theme related to "the reasons why traffickers use social media to trap women and girls". Six different codings have been identified from the data which are related to this theme. The code called "easy to communicate" has been coded most frequently 12 times. One of the KIs states the following:

*"...Once traffickers had to spend days after days to search for a potential victim offline but the unrestricted use of social media has eased their work as they can easily find more potential victims online... (KII 3- NGO professional)."*

There is an implication in the quote that offline trafficking is more time-consuming for traffickers, and at the same time, more effort is required on the part of traffickers to locate potential victims. Even though it used to take more time and effort, offline traffickers had less success due to communication barriers.

Social media platforms, such as Facebook or TikTok, have made it easier for traffickers to target potential victims in a more coordinated way. Now the process requires less time and less effort, while at the same time it has a better chance of success because of its ease of use. To demonstrate social

media's ability to foster communication, one of the KIIs provided an example that seems to closely align with the findings of the study. His statement was as follows:

*" Communication has got easier for the traffickers in social media with potential victims. Let us take an example: you are talking to me from Finland using an online platform but we have not met each other in real-time. Same way, the utmost freedom in using social media and online platforms has made it so easier for the traffickers to communicate with victims so easily (KII 2- NGO professional)."*

It indicates that, due to the online platform, traffickers do not need to meet potential victims face to face, rather, traffickers can continue their communication on the online platforms without any barriers. The respondent, who also manages a shelter home in Jessore, explains that almost all trafficking victims have been in contact with traffickers at some point during their exploitation. For some, social media was their primary tool, whereas, for others, social media was an influence, especially during the communications process. To identify a potential victim, traffickers had to spend months in the past, but now that social media has become widely available, it has been as if they are taking control of the situation. This easy way to communicate has made social media platforms a hub for traffickers to trap their victims for trafficking.

The data also reveals that accessing and stealing information such as photos, whereabouts, and so on is very easy via social media, which is another reason why traffickers use the platform to lure potential victims of human trafficking. As coded in the data, four different respondents discussed this six times. One of the KIIs states that:

*"...You do not have to spend hours to find out personal information about any individuals on Facebook now. You just have to search their names and everything that is put on Facebook comes forward for you. This easily accessible hoard of information about individuals has made social media platforms heaven for the traffickers to target their victims... (KII 4- Journalist)."*

Taking advantage of social media platforms can result in collecting personal information without permission, saving personal photos, or sending personal messages without permission. Traffickers don't need to be friends with potential victims. The process of stalking potential victims and checking their profiles is very easy for traffickers. This makes it easier for traffickers to identify the different vulnerabilities of their potential victims.

It seems that the ease of access to the personal information of trafficking victims can be directly attributed to another code called "Facebook posts that make it easier for traffickers to stalk their victims". In many cases, potential victims post all their feelings and personal details about themselves on social media without thinking twice about it. According to one of the KIs, the victims who are found within the network of traffickers have been contacted after they learned about their vulnerability through Facebook posts. KI 3 has explained this scenario from his empirical perspective. He runs a shelter home for traffic survivors and stated that while talking to survivors to listen to their life stories, many have admitted that they should not have disclosed all the details about the events, feelings, and information on social media platforms like Facebook. That means users share personal information on social networks such as Facebook or TikTok, making it very easy for traffickers to identify new users and keep track of their every post/movement to assess their vulnerability.

One of the other reasons why traffickers use social media to trap victims is coded as "multiple victims at the same time". This specific code may be connected to another code called "unlimited online access for young girls". A result of the ease of communication and unlimited online access of young girls on social media has made it easier for traffickers to engage and keep in contact with multiple victims at once, which would not have been possible without social media platforms. The responses from KIs about this fact indicate that before the proliferation of social media platforms, to identify a single potential victim, traffickers had to spend months, but now, due to social media, it has been so easy that now they can identify them within minutes and continue their communication and contact with multiple victims by creating a secret group. The code "capturing and videotaping sexual or adult images and videos" has only been cited twice from a single interview file. The interviewee discussed this issue while answering the question about how online bullying may contribute to offline trafficking.

His statement is as follows:

*"...This happens mostly when girls share their pictures and videos with their so-called partners, children under 18 years old remain reluctant about cyberbullying, and they easily share their nude pictures with their so-called partners, and at the end of the day, their so-called partner's threat or intimidate them in online or social media to accept everything they order them to do... (KII 4- Journalist)".*

From the quote above, it is quite clear that the trafficker in disguise as a lover may somehow persuade the potential trafficking victims to share their pictures so that they can use these pictures later on to blackmail the potential victims. From the quote, it is also seen that while

traffickers and potential trafficking victims have video phone calls, traffickers may record the videos of their private moments to blackmail them later on to do anything they direct them to do. The interviewees specifically discussed the girls under 18 who share their private photos most of the time. The interviewee mentioned these young girls more specifically as according to him, these young girls have less understanding of the issue of cybercrime. Moreover, as stated earlier that the girls under 18 or comparatively young girls are used for sexual exploitation in the sex market after trafficking, therefore, traffickers may take these opportunities of collecting nude pictures and videos of private conversations so that they can use these pictures and videos to intimidate the potential victims to engage in sexual exploitations.

#### **4.5. Common social media platforms for trafficking**

In addition, it is evident from the data and responses provided by the KIs that Facebook and TikTok are the most popular platforms used by traffickers since they find most of their potential victims on these two sites. All of the respondents mentioned that Facebook and TikTok are the most popular social media platforms being used by traffickers when asked about their own empirical experiences regarding the relationship between social media platforms and female trafficking in Bangladesh. They have also reiterated how weak privacy policies of social media platforms like Facebook and TikTok make it convenient for traffickers to learn about the vulnerabilities of potential victims. For easy communication to find suitable victims, Facebook and TikTok are suitable social media platforms for traffickers to reach their victims.

Moreover, according to the data, Facebook is linked to many different topics such as fake employment opportunities and partners, different types of fraudulent pages, leaking personal information, etc. Additionally, the data also demonstrates TikTok's association with video sharing, fake modeling advertisements, photoshoots, high expectations, and so on. According to the responses, these two social media platforms are mentioned by all the KIs as these two online social media platforms give traffickers the most access to steal online photos and information without authorization, capture, and videotape sexual or adult pictures and videos, easy way to communicate and to target multiple victims at a time due to unlimited online access for young girls.

## 5. Discussion

This study examines the role of social media platforms in accelerating women and children trafficking in Bangladesh. To investigate this phenomenon, the study explores some questions, e.g., what are the most common strategies that traffickers follow to trap women on social media platforms, Which groups of women and children are mostly being targeted by traffickers through social media, what makes traffickers' social media messages convincing to potential trafficking victims in Bangladesh, and what are the most commonly used social media platforms and why are traffickers using social media to trap their victims? In the analysis, evidence is found that the study advertising on social media, such as Facebook or TikTok for fake job employment or modeling opportunities is one of the most common strategies used by traffickers to lure their victims to fall into their trap. Women in poverty or without employment for an extended period frequently search for employment on social media, where traffickers offer them fake employment through fake job advertisements to trap them.

Furthermore, the results revealed that there is another group of girls who come from middle-income families having high expectations of becoming a celebrity or model in the social media world. Through fake modeling advertisements on TikTok, they are often targeted by traffickers. It appears that women over the age of 25 are most likely to be targeted through Facebook, as they search for employment on Facebook, whereas girls under the age of 18 are likely to be targeted through TikTok, as they search for modeling opportunities on TikTok. The same claim was made by Withers (2019) and Whitehead (2018), who mentioned that victims seeking employment found job offers on Facebook as dancers or models. Thus, they contacted the traffickers for job offers on the labor market. Their studies did not mention how TikTok is used for fraudulent advertising to attract young girls. Withers (2019) discussed how Snapchat is being used to groom young girls. Therefore, the results of this study provide a new perspective on how TikTok is being used in Bangladesh since Snapchat is not a popular social media platform in Bangladesh(Global Stats, 2021).

The result also indicated that offering romance or emotional accompaniment to women with broken marriages or divorce or the girls with loneliness is another common strategy used by traffickers to fall their target into their trap. The findings also correspond with several studies (Bouche, 2015; University of Toledo, 2018; Vaas, 2020) which also claim that traffickers allure children and women by offering them emotional accompany and psychological support. Additionally, the results indicated



that fake job advertisements will also increase due to the COVID pandemic, as traffickers will exploit the pandemic scenario and post more fake job advertisements on social media to attract women, and many young women may fall into their trap by believing they have employment opportunities. Eventually, this could lead to more and more young women falling into the trap of false employment opportunities. Katherine (2020) & Dobozin et al (2021) in their study claim the same issue that women who have lost their jobs and insurance and are in dire poverty due to pandemics would be lured by seeing fake job advertisements to get trapped by the traffickers.

It is evident from the findings of this study and the literature review that, regardless of whether a country is developing or developed, traffickers employ and follow similar strategies to lure women and children into trafficking. The study also found that potential victims of online bullying may believe traffickers' social media messages to be convincing as they find fake emotional support from the traffickers against their online bullying. This finding is quite similar to one by Livingstone & Smith (2014), who asserted the same about how online bullying might lead potential victims to believe traffickers' social media messages to be convincing.

However, the study revealed some interesting unique findings regarding the question of what makes traffickers' social media messages convincing to potential victims which are particularly relevant to the trafficking phenomenon in developing countries like Bangladesh such as family poverty, child marriages, or having no comfort zone to live in after a broken marriage or having a colorful dream with high ambition. Most of the previous studies that have examined the detrimental effect of social media on online trafficking are based in developed countries where child marriages or family poverty are not common. According to these findings and based on the data, poverty, and lack of education are likely to be the most important factors in determining whether social media messages are convincing to potential victims. As a result of the findings, it can be assumed that child marriage or the lack of a comfort zone after a broken marriage or divorce is directly related to family poverty. These findings are particularly relevant and unique to Bangladesh.

Further, there was evidence that girls who are attractive and under the age of 18 are more likely to be targeted for sexual exploitation, while females who are not so beautiful and over the age of 25 or 30 are more likely to be targeted for labor exploitation. Some previous studies and articles reported

similar findings as well (Bouche, 2015; Whitehead, 2018). According to Bouche (2015), teenage girls have a high demand in the sex market for which traffickers are targeting teenage girls online which corresponds to the findings in this study as well. The study found that one specific group of girls with multiple siblings are frequently targeted by traffickers online in Bangladesh. Study findings indicated that girls with many siblings in the family may be subjected to extra pressure to get married at an early age or to seek employment on their own, which makes them particularly vulnerable to being trafficked through social networking sites. Previously, no studies have discussed this particular group, which makes this finding unique from Bangladesh's perspective.

Furthermore, multiple factors have been identified, based on the findings of this particular study, as to why human traffickers use social media to entrap women and girls. For traffickers, social media is the most convenient method of communication with their targets because they find social media to be very easy to communicate with. The same finding was stated by Kunz et al. (2018) in their study, which stated that social media has facilitated communication between potential victims and traffickers, and virtual relationships between potential victims and traffickers can flourish very easily without even leaving their apartments, which was not possible when recruiting offline. The study also found some other factors such as multiple victims at a time, accessing and stealing online photos and information without authorization, Facebook posts making it easy for traffickers to stalk victims, and so on for which traffickers tend to use social media platforms to trap their victims. These particular findings are quite similar to the previous research and findings by Jones and Soltren (2005), University of Toledo (2018), Vaas (2020), and Ahmed et al (2017).

The study also indicates that in Bangladesh, Facebook and TikTok are used as common platforms by traffickers to capture their victims. As indicated in the literature review, according to Global Stats (2021), more than 90% of social media users in Bangladesh are found on Facebook which to some extent corresponds to the study findings. However, according to the study, trafficking through using social media, TikTok is one of the most influential platforms both for traffickers and potential trafficking victims which is a bit surprising according to the percentage of other social media users. According to Global Stats, along with Facebook users, Twitter and LinkedIn users are also found in Bangladesh, but these platforms are not involved with trafficking in any way, as it is assumed that most of the users of Twitter and LinkedIn are professionals who are highly educated and therefore out of the reach of traffickers. Even though the number of TikTok users in Bangladesh is small, it is

clear from the data that most of the TikTok users are young girls who are very ambitious and come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

According to the study, in Bangladesh Facebook is used to trap women seeking employment or partners out of loneliness, whereas TikTok is mostly used to lure girls aspiring to be models or celebrities. As a result of these findings, it can also be implied that those who are victimized by Facebook are often used for labor exploitation, while those who are victimized by TikTok are often used for sexual exploitation. This finding of different kinds of social media platforms being used for trafficking is unique in this study, as it has not been documented in the previous studies.

Moreover, the study's results and analysis support the theoretical discussion proposed in this paper. The paper mentioned specifically two theoretical aspects to explore if there is any relationship between those theories and the interpretation of the main topic of this research. In light of the results and the analysis of the study, it is evident that the study is relevant to these two theoretical aspects. This study proposes Maslow's hierarchy of needs as the first theory. The main aim of describing Maslow's need hierarchy theory was to explore how the basic needs and psychological needs of women and children could lead them to fall into the trap of traffickers. The analysis and the findings of this paper explained some of the basic needs of women, e.g., employment opportunities to secure their social safety and satiate basic daily needs for which women often come close to the contact with traffickers. Data has revealed that potential victims of human trafficking are often in contact with traffickers via Facebook to find employment during times of financial hardship due to family poverty or to take on their responsibilities after their divorces. The findings of the paper also found and explained some crucial psychological needs of young girls and women, e.g., love and belongingness during times of loneliness following a broken marriage or divorce. Traffickers lurk on social media platforms to find out about these young girls and women to provide them psychological support in disguise as lovers or close friends. At some point, traffickers blackmail them in various ways exploiting their intimate relationship as a lover or a close friend. According to Maslow's need hierarchy theory, from the bottom of the hierarchy to upward, Maslow proposed five types of needs namely physiological needs, safety needs, love, and belongingness need, self-esteem, and self-actualization (McLeod, 2018). However, the analysis and the findings of this master's thesis found a correlation between the three needs from the bottom of the hierarchy and the trafficking through

social media platforms. The paper did not find any correlation between trafficking through social media and the rest of other two upward needs of human being proposed by Maslow.

The study also proposes Buller's Interpersonal Deception Theory as the second theory. Having analyzed the results and data, it has been discovered that traffickers have been using social media to promote a great number of fake job advertisements to entice women seeking employment. Traffickers advertise fake job advertisements on some unrecognized Facebook pages and try to attract needy women by posting falsified information and concealing their real motive behind this advertisement which is according to Judee K. Burgoon & David B. Buller is a part of the deception (Burgoon & Buller, 1996). The deception may take place in many different forms. Firstly, the process begins with manipulating the information between the senders and receivers. At the very beginning stage, the receivers of information or messages remain suspicious about the fact they are receiving. Then the deceivers more strategically try to control the behavioral characteristics of the receivers which makes it easier for the deceivers to make the receivers believe their information and messages (Burgoon, Buller, Dillman, & Walther, 1995). When the behavioral characteristics of receivers of information or any messages start to be controlled by the deceivers (e.g., traffickers), they fall into the trap of deceivers and at this point, deceivers can control the receivers and receivers tend to believe and trust the deceivers without any confrontation or suspicion (Burgoon et al., 1995). This is the moment deceivers take their utmost chance to deceive the receiver.

According to the study findings, different kinds of communication take place between traffickers and potential trafficking victims. The findings also indicate that potential trafficking victims with psychological vulnerability at some point in their communication with traffickers are behaviorally controlled by the traffickers and start trusting them so seriously. The findings also showed how traffickers trap their potential victims by gaining trust. The stage of gaining trust works fully when traffickers understand that the potential trafficking victims are not showing any suspicion about the messages and communication between them. According to the findings, the traffickers attempt to attract young women by offering fake modeling offers through a fake modeling agency on TikTok which is another type of deception. Moreover, according to the findings, if traffickers discover that potential trafficking victims need emotional support due to their psychological vulnerability and emotional loneliness, they attempt to induce romance and make love affairs in the disguise of lovers or partners. For this purpose, traffickers at first try to communicate with potential victims by sending

potential trafficking victims personal messages on social media platforms. After that, they try to be as close as possible which is also a form of deception in communication through social media platforms. The transition of the communication between traffickers and potential trafficking victims from suspicion to utmost trust may make potential trafficking victims believe traffickers' social media messages so convincing. Based on the findings of the study, it seems Buller's Interpersonal Deception Theory and the findings of the study are well matched.

Moreover, the results of this study, along with its analytical approach, provide additional evidence of how social media is contributing to the escalating rates of women and child trafficking around the world. This study contributed to the existing literature about the use of social media to facilitate women's and children's trafficking. In line with other previous studies, it seems that the majority of traffickers' strategies used in social media are quite similar in both developed and developing countries. Furthermore, the study found that the purpose of targeting groups of women and girls for trafficking is similar throughout the world.

However, the study provides new insight into how TikTok as an emerging social media platform could be exploited in Bangladesh to target young girls for sexual exploitation. Additionally, according to the study, family poverty may be a major factor in determining why traffickers' social media messages are so convincing to potential victims of human trafficking. In Bangladesh, some studies have been conducted, but these have primarily focused on how social media's weak privacy and security policies might lead to cyberbullying. Despite this, there have been a significant number of articles found in national and international newspapers that relate to how trafficking victims have been victimized by traffickers on social media such as Facebook and TikTok. It has not yet been possible to find an academic paper providing primary data on how social media platforms in Bangladesh are accelerating trafficking.

Since no academic studies have been carried out in Bangladesh on the role social media has played in accelerating human trafficking, it is hoped that this study can serve as a clear guideline for understanding the common strategies used by traffickers to trap victims on social networking sites, the most popular groups of women and children targeted by traffickers through social networking, and some of the reasons that make traffickers' social media messages persuasive to potential victims from the perspective of Bangladesh.

## 6. Conclusion, limitation, & scope of future study

In Bangladesh, the use of social media platforms has been increasing exponentially. The number of newspapers reports on human trafficking utilizing social media has also increased over the past decade. The social media platform is expected to be an important driving force for accelerating the case of women and children trafficking in the future in Bangladesh. Therefore, the primary objective of this study was to determine how social media contribute to accelerating women and child trafficking in Bangladesh.

This study aimed to discover and investigate the most common strategies used by traffickers in social media to lure vulnerable women and girls into trafficking as well as the reasons why traffickers use social media to lure vulnerable women and girls. The study also sought to determine what makes traffickers' social media messages more persuasive to potential victims and the groups of women and children most targeted by traffickers.

This paper uses a qualitative approach to study these phenomena by conducting interviews with individuals working in the women and children trafficking sector in Bangladesh. Study findings revealed that the most common strategy exploited by human traffickers on social media is posting fake job advertisements to trap women seeking employment due to poverty and financial hardship, followed by the emotional accompaniment to women who are struggling with broken marriages or divorce, romance or provocation of marriage to psychologically vulnerable women and girls, and fraudulent modeling offers through fake modeling agencies on TikTok to allure financially poor and high-achieving girls aspiring to be celebrities or models. The study also points out that traffickers use social media extensively to take advantage of the ease of communication with their potential victims, as they find it quite easy to trap multiple victims at once by stalking their social media profiles. To be able to communicate effectively and to have access to a wider variety of possible victims, traffickers tend to take advantage of Facebook to lure women for exploitation of their labor and girls on TikTok for exploitation of their sexuality.

In addition, the study found that due to family poverty and having no comfort zone at home following a failed marriage and divorce due to child marriage, potential victims are more likely to trust traffickers' social media messages as they desperately want to leave their homes to find a new start in their life by finding employment or a partner. Based on the findings of the study and the literature review, it is evident that traffickers' strategies to trap potential victims and the target groups are almost identical across developing and developed countries. On the other hand, some unique findings have been identified regarding the factors that make traffickers' social media messages persuasive to potential trafficking victims in Bangladesh.

The current global context caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the overall context for social science researchers while the pandemic has made data collection from the field a difficult undertaking. To maintain the government's lockdown rules and regulations as well as the social distance, face-to-face data collection is not feasible today. The proposed study requires the participation of human participants, e.g., Key Informant Interviews (KIIs).

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it has not been possible to collect face-to-face data. The interview data have been collected by appointment using an online platform, such as Zoom, Teams, Google Meet, etc. Face-to-face human interaction is always advantageous for understanding the facial expressions of the interview respondents, which helps to understand the sentiments of the respondents. This perspective is not available when conducting interviews through an online platform or telephone interview. Furthermore, KII participants were high-level officials in different non-governmental organizations, and newspapers, therefore, getting their appointments in due time was a challenge to collect the data in due time. Even an interview had to be omitted due to the unavailability of the KI in the end. Moreover, the paper intended to examine how social media affects women and children trafficking in Bangladesh; therefore, interviewing survivors who were trafficked through social media would have improved the overall quality of the research from an empirical perspective. There are many reasons why an individual may be in the vulnerable population, e.g., the group to which the individual belongs may be less capable than the average person of giving informed consent. The category includes children as well as individuals suffering from mental illness and trauma. According to this perspective, traffic survivors are from a group of socially vulnerable individuals, therefore, interviewing them would be ethically problematic, which constitutes one of the major limitations of this study.

The use of vulnerable populations in this study was not ethically acceptable according to the university's policies and regulations. The study also involved a relatively small number of participants for the primary interview. This small sample size may not provide sufficient information to meet the 100% requirement of the intended topic. Larger sample sizes would be beneficial in future research.

Moreover, in the data collected from the key informants through interviewing them, some of the discussions and conversations are quite generalized and are not up to the academic standard. However, it is also true that they have talked about this problem from their empirical perspective. While interviewing them, they have been found quite enriched with technical knowledge. Since, no academic research has been done in Bangladesh on trafficking through social media platforms, for me, it was quite difficult to substantiate their claims and discussions. This is one of the major limitations of this study.

The study's generalizability is limited by the amount of data collected for analysis and to grasp the problem at a deeper level. Additional data is required to understand the extent of the phenomenon. The methodological choice was a constraint as only qualitative data was decided to analyze. Research using quantitative data is a good option for understanding this phenomenon in greater detail and for quantifying the problem in the future. In the beginning, it was decided that the study would include IDI with survivors, but because of certain constraints, this was not possible in the end. To gain a comprehensive understanding of survivors' experiences, IDI<sup>11</sup> with survivors in Bangladesh is recommended as a future research option. In trafficking cases, an analysis of newspaper articles could be a valuable resource to identify possible policy interventions based on the genre of the reports and the crimes perpetrated using social media.

In addition to that, it was beyond the scope of the study to find out effective ways of preventing trafficking on social media. Based on the findings of the study, it may predict that the trafficking cases through social media in Bangladesh will arise significantly in the future since the number of users of social media in Bangladesh has been rising day by day. Bangladesh has trafficking prevention

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<sup>11</sup> In depth Interview



policies but these policies are only focusing to resist trafficking in person. Future studies should evaluate these existing prevention policies in Bangladesh and formulate different prevention policies to resist trafficking through social media platforms. To do this, interviewing and listening to empirical experiences of survivors will be a great resource, as they will be able to direct the future researchers in regards to potential prevention strategies in more depth by sharing their life experiences.

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## 8. Annex

### Annex 1: from data coding to themes

Transcribed data	Code	Themes
<p>...we found that victims after getting divorced or broken relations were in a relationship with the traffickers for emotional care and support, but in the end, they were victimized by their lovers...</p>	<p>Emotional accompany</p>	<p>Common strategies used by traffickers to trap trafficking victims in social media</p>
<p>...Traffickers mostly exploit this situation by posting fake advertisements about the employment opportunity...            ...Traffickers tend to open different kinds of fake pages on Facebook and post fake employment opportunities to attract females...</p>	<p>Fake job advertisement</p>	
<p>...they are mostly targeted by the traffickers because traffickers find it very easy to allure them to be a model or celebrities...             ...TikTok and try to draw the attention of mass people. They are often targeted by the traffickers and convincing them with fake promises is so easy...</p>	<p>Fraudulent modeling offers</p>	
<p>.....as a result, they do not want to go into a relationship or affairs, they just want to get married after their divorce and want to start a new life with new hope...</p>	<p>Provocation of marriage</p>	

<p>...When I was in a relationship with my trafficker as a lover, I could not even believe what my parents told about him” said one of the trafficking victims...  ...distinguish between traffickers and true lovers as traffickers seemed too well trained to trap girls in love affairs! This is what they feel now...</p>	Romance or fake relationship	Reasons that make traffickers’ social media messages convincing to the potential trafficking victims
<p>...traffickers also stalk different Facebook pages, e.g., Desperately Seeking Dhaka to identify who looks for what, and then they at the preliminary stage do a vulnerability mapping...</p>	vulnerability mapping through social media	
<p>...We have so many cases where we found that due to family feuds many young girls remain psychologically vulnerable and they just want to leave their homes through these families are financially well off...</p>	Family feud	
<p>...girls from slum areas are some of the examples that traffickers take into consideration due to poor familial economic conditions....  ...Most of them are highly ambitious but their family economic background is highly poor and vulnerable...</p>	Family poverty	
<p>...Even there are some circumstances where we have seen that during the pandemic all the girls of a certain school have been married and no one left to attend the secondary school certificate (SSC). When girls are married at their earlier stage of life, they remain psychologically vulnerable...  ...due to the pandemic and the high rise of these kinds of marriages, trafficking through social media is expected to rise in the coming future and there is no doubt about that...</p>	Child marriage or forced marriage	
<p>...desire to be a model in the media (urban areas, e.g., Gulshan)!!!! They are highly ambitious with big dream girls but familial economic conditions poor...</p>	Having a Colorful dream with high ambition	

...they also become vulnerable physically. At a certain point, they are divorced by their husband and sent back to their father's house. then, for them, another phase of struggle starts as their parents tend to be reluctant to take their responsibilities...	no comfort zone to live	
.... we had a victim in our shelter home who was not that good-looking. When she used to share photos on Facebook, she used to get many negative comments about her skin color and posture. She told us that when she uploaded any photos some of her close friends used to give laughter emo which offended her mentally frequently...	suffering from online bullying	
You know this easily accessible hoard of information about individuals has made social media platforms heaven for the traffickers to target their victims.	Accessing and stealing online photos and information without authorization	Reasons why traffickers use social media to trap women and girls
...Once traffickers had to spend days after days searching a potential victim offline but the unrestricted use of social media has eased their work as they can easily find more potential victims online...	easy to communicate	
...they shared nude pictures with their partners [traffickers] and partners exploited those private moments to force them to do what they ordered" ...	Capturing and videotaping sexual or adult pictures and videos	
...in offline but the unrestricted use of social media has eased their work as they can easily find more potential victims online...	multiple victims at a time	
...you will see many school-going students have unprecedented access to social media and online now as their classes have been shifted to online, they do not	unlimited online access for young girls	

know anything about using social media...		
...When they start using online platforms, they do not know which platform is safe, which platform is bad and which platform they should use. Since they start using those platforms for the first time, they try to explore new things....	Lack of knowledge in using social media	Groups of women and children are mostly targeted by the traffickers through social media
...where we have found that girls looking beautiful aged between 15-and 17 years are mostly targeted for the trafficking because their demand in the sex market is outstandingly...	Good looking young girls for sexual exploitation	
...children who belong to a family where she has a number of siblings are also vulnerable as they do not get sufficient care and love from their families, so, they feel lonely and sometimes they feel the pressure of marriage and different bitter words...	Girls having many siblings in the family	
...and the victims who used to be trafficked for servitude and physical labor, they are not good looking and aged over 30 in most of the cases...	women targeted for labor exploitation	
...those who desperately seek employment...	Women out of the labor market for a long time	
...Another reason, women search for earning opportunities due to poverty and unemployment...		

## Annex 2: KII questionnaire

Name of the Interviewee:	
Name of the organization:	
Working tenure:	
Positions in the organization:	

### Ice-breaking session:

- Express appreciation
- Describing the reasons for the interview
- Determining the duration

Duration of the Interview: it will depend on how much KI wants to talk

### Key selection criteria of KI:

- Must have a direct affiliation with the organization working on trafficking
- Must have at least 5 years of professional experience
- Must be in a position of leading a team
- Must have direct experience with women and children trafficking

### Questions to be asked for the interview

Q: নারী পাচারের ব্যাপারে সোশাল মিডিয়ার ভূমিকা নিয়ে আপনার বাস্তব অভিজ্ঞতা কি? [Could you please share your personal empirical experience about the relationship between social media platforms and female trafficking in Bangladesh?]

A:

Q: পাচারকারীরা একজন নারীকে প্রলুব্ধ করার ক্ষেত্রে কি কি ধরনের পন্থা অবলম্বন করে বলে আপনি মনে করেন? [What do you think about the common strategies and communications traffickers follow to seduce a woman on social media platforms?]

Q: আপনার মতে সোশাল মিডিয়ার মাধ্যমে পাচারকারীরা সবচেয়ে কোন শ্রেণীর নারী ও শিশুদের বেশি টার্গেট করে এবং কেন? [In your opinion, which groups of women and children are mostly targeted by the traffickers through social media, and why do they target those groups?]

Q: যুবকদের মাঝে সোশাল মিডিয়া ব্যবহারের প্রবণতা দিন দিন বেড়েই চলছে। সোশাল মিডিয়া ব্যবহার বাড়ার সাথে নারী পাচারের কি ধরনের সম্পর্ক থাকতে পারে বলে আপনি মনে করেন? [Number of young people using social media platforms has been rising nowadays. What is your opinion about the nexus between the uprising of social media platform usage among youths and the risk of trafficking?]

A:

Q: করোনা ভাইরাস পরবর্তী সময়ে অনেক পরিবারই চরম দারিদ্রে নিপাতিত হবে। সে ক্ষেত্রে করোনা মহামারি পরবর্তী সময়ে নারী পাচারের ব্যাপারে সোশাল মিডিয়ার ভূমিকা কি রকম হতে পারে বলে আপনি মনে করেন? [The pandemic will leave too many families into abject poverty. what do you think about the effects of pandemic in accelerating trafficking through social media in Bangladesh specially in Jessore?]

A:

Q: করোনার এই সময়ে আমরা দেখেছি যে, অনেক মেয়েকেই জোরপূর্বক বিয়ে দেয়া হয়েছে, এবং এই ধরনের ঘটনা সামনে আরো ঘটবে বলে আশা করা যাচ্ছে। মেয়েদের এই ভাবে জোরপূর্বক বিয়ে দিয়ে দেয়া এবং সোশাল মিডিয়ার মাধ্যমে পাচারের শিকার হওয়ার সাথে কোন সম্পর্ক আছে কি না? এ ব্যাপারে আপনার মতামত কি? এ ব্যাপারে আপনার কোন কেস আছে কিনা? যদি থাকে, একটু বর্ণনা করুন। [Several news media reported that underaged girls have been married during this pandemic against their own willingness. It has also been predicted that in future, these cases will rise more. What do you think about a nexus between girls being married forcibly during and after the pandemic and their vulnerability to get trapped by traffickers through social media? Do you have any empirical example for this, if yes, could you please describe?]

A:

Q: দিন দিন সাইবার বুলিং বেড়েই চলছে। সাইবার বুলিং এর সাথে নারী পাচার ও সোশাল মিডিয়ার ভূমিকা নিয়ে আপনার বাস্তব অভিজ্ঞতা কি? [Recently, we have seen a dramatic increase in cyberbullying on social media. What is your opinion/ experiences about the linkage between cyberbullying and the effects of those bullying in offline trafficking?]

A:

Q: করোনা মহামারির কারণে অনেক বাচ্চারা তাদের অভিভাবক, ও শিক্ষক দের তত্ত্বাবধান থেকে আলাদা হয়ে যাচ্ছে এবং অতি মাত্রায় সোশাল মিডিয়াতে আসক্ত হয়ে যাচ্ছে। এই পরিস্থিতি সোশাল মিডিয়ার মাধ্যমে নারী পাচারকে কিভাবে বাড়িয়ে দিতে পারে বলে আপনি মনে করেন? এ ব্যাপারে আপনার কোন কেস আছে কিনা? যদি থাকে, একটু বর্ণনা করুন। [the pandemic situation has isolated children from their guardians and it has given utmost freedom to the children to use different social media. What is your opinion about the potential detrimental effects of this scenario and the possibility of increasing trafficking through using social media? Do you have any empirical example for this, if yes, could you please describe?]

A:

Q: করোনা মহামারির সময় পর্নোগ্রাফির ব্যাপকতা ও সোশাল মিডিয়ার মাধ্যমে নারী পাচারের মধ্যে আপনি কোন সম্পর্ক খুঁজে পান কিনা। এ ব্যাপারে আপনার মতামত কি? আপনার মতে নারী ও শিশু এই দুই শ্রেণীর মধ্যে কাদের বেশি ভালনারেবল মনে হয় এবং কেন? [what is your opinion regarding the linkage between pandemic, increase demand in pornography and the trafficking using social media? From your point of view, which group (among females) is the most vulnerable? Why?]

A:

Q: সোশাল মিডিয়ার দুর্বল গোপনীয়তা নীতিগুলি যেমন, ব্যক্তিগত তথ্যে সহজ প্রবেশাধিকার, দুর্বল পরিচয় যাচাইকরণ, এবং সোশ্যাল মিডিয়া প্ল্যাটফর্মের মাধ্যমে মহিলাদের সাথে যোগাযোগের সহজ সুযোগ পাচারকারীদের জন্য সম্ভাব্য পাচারের শিকারদের দুর্বলতাগুলি জানতে কতটুকু সুবিধাজনক করে তোলে বলে আপনি মনে করেন? [To what extent, do you think that the weak privacy policies (e.g., easy access to personal information), weak identity verification, and easy access to communicate with females through social media platforms make it convenient for traffickers to know the vulnerabilities of potential trafficking victims?]

A:

NB: Some follow-up questions will also be asked depending on their answer!