

# Invisible chains: How child trafficking thrives in India's shadows

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On World Day against Trafficking in Persons, a closer look at how children continue to disappear in India's villages & cities, and what must be done to stop it

**T**wo men arrived in her village, promising her mother a better future: work in Delhi, a bed to sleep on, regular meals, and a chance to study. Persuaded by poverty and hope, her mother agreed. That was the last she saw of her daughter.

Gudiya's story mirrors thousands of others across India, children who are lured, trafficked, and forced into domestic labour, abuse, and exploitation. When she was finally rescued four years later from a Delhi household, she had almost forgotten her name.

Human trafficking is the third-largest organised crime globally after arms and drug smuggling, as per the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). In India, an estimated 20,000 women and children are trafficked every year, with many cases going unreported.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) recorded over 6,000 human trafficking cases in 2022, with a majority involving minors. However, experts say these figures barely reflect the scale of the crisis.

Children are trafficked under the pretext of job opportunities, education, or marriage, only to be pushed into forced labour, domestic servitude, or sexual exploitation. In some instances, they are victims of organ trafficking.

Unregulated placement agencies are central to this crime network. Operating mostly in Delhi NCR, these agencies scout children from states such as Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal, and Assam, regions with high poverty and low literacy levels.



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A child employed as domestic help can generate Rs 15,000–Rs 25,000 monthly for these agencies, while receiving little or none of the money themselves. Families that employ trafficked children often remain unaware of the illegality, or choose not to ask questions.

Beyond homes, trafficked children are found in bangle-making units in Firozabad, embroidery workshops in Mumbai, roadside eateries, and brick kilns. An International Labour Organization (ILO) report estimates over 10 million child labourers in India, many of whom are trafficked or semi-trafficked through informal networks.

When rescued at 14, Gudiya was placed in a shelter home. But the institution lacked trained staff, psychological support, and vocational programs. She attempted to escape twice.

Rehabilitation remains a weak link in India's anti-trafficking efforts. Survivors often return to hostile environments without education or skills, increasing the risk of re-trafficking.

Despite existing laws such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act and the Prohibition of Child Labour Act, enforcement remains inconsistent. Regulatory oversight of placement agencies is limited. A 2019–20 drive in Jharkhand to register such agencies saw weak follow-through due to lack of resources and political will.

Local governance structures, especially gram panchayats, can play a vital role. Empowering them with training and tech tools to monitor migration patterns and school dropouts could be the first line of defence.

Proposals for a digital Child Movement Tracking System, linked to Aadhaar and school records, are under consideration. Technology-driven solutions, mobile apps for village-level child protection committees, biometric school attendance, and data analytics, can improve detection and prevention.

Experts believe law enforcement alone cannot solve the problem. Employers must question the background of underage domestic workers. Truck drivers, railway staff, schoolteachers, and hotel workers need to be trained to detect and report suspicious activities. Schools and media platforms can help create awareness.

Some interventions have shown results. In West Bengal, the "Bandhan Tod" campaign rescued over 800 girls in three years through a collaboration of police, NGOs, and panchayats. Delhi-based Association for Voluntary Action (AVA) claims to have rescued over 11,000 children in 2025 alone.

Gudiya now lives in a government-run shelter in Ranchi. She attends school and is enrolled in a tailoring course. "I didn't know what trafficking meant," she says. "Now I know. They stole my life."

July 30, observed as World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, must not remain symbolic. Combating child trafficking in India requires coordinated action, enforcement of existing laws, community vigilance, data-driven interventions, and a national-level commitment to child rights.

A single rescued child, like Gudiya, can be the beginning of change. "If one Gudiya is saved, a generation is saved." But systemic reform is needed to ensure that thousands more don't disappear silently into the shadows.

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