



MICRO-STUDY ON PATTERNS AND REASONS FOR RE-TRAFFICKING IN CASES OF SEX TRAFFICKING AND COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN THE STATE OF TELANGANA

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Introduction

Sex trafficking is a grave human rights violation that strips individuals, especially women and children, of dignity, safety, and freedom. Despite increased global attention, it remains largely hidden, underreported, and normalized through systemic inequality and demand. The scale of the crime cuts across borders, communities, and digital spaces, demanding urgent and coordinated action. According to the **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)**, women and girls account for **over 60% of detected trafficking victims worldwide**, and trafficking for sexual exploitation continues to be one of the most commonly identified forms of exploitation.

Sex trafficking continues to be one of the most prevalent and complex forms of violence against women and children in India. Despite decades of legal frameworks, rescue operations, and rehabilitation efforts, trafficking continues to evolve in its scale, methods, and geography. An estimated **11 million people in India live in conditions of modern slavery**, as per the **Global Slavery Index (2023)**, with **forced commercial sexual exploitation (FCSE)** and **commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC)** ranking as the **second and third most common forms of exploitation after forced labour**. India functions simultaneously as a **source, transit, and destination country**, with trafficking networks operating across rural-urban corridors, interstate routes, and increasingly through digital platforms. Women and children from socio-economically vulnerable backgrounds affected by poverty, migration, caste marginalisation, lack of education, domestic violence, and gender inequality remain at the highest risk.

National data consistently shows that while rescues and identification of survivors continue year after year, trafficking itself has not declined in any sustained or meaningful way. Much of it remains underreported, and instead of disappearing, patterns fluctuate suggesting not eradication, but adaptation. Traffickers adjust routes, recruitment strategies, and modes of exploitation in response to enforcement actions. This persistence reflects the deep rooted nature of trafficking networks, supported by economic demand, social silence, and structural vulnerabilities.

These national trends are clearly reflected at the state level, with **Tier-1 cities emerging as major hotspots** for trafficking-related activities. In 2023 alone, **Telangana registered around 336 human trafficking cases**, ranking **second highest in India** in the number of cases reported. **626 people were rescued**, including **604 women**, indicating that **96% of identified victims were female** pointing to a significant prevalence of trafficking for sexual exploitation and related crimes. Even as **Hyderabad emerges as one of India's fastest-growing and most livable cities**, the state continues to deal with trafficking networks, highlighting the stark contrast between rapid urban development and the persistent vulnerability of women and children.

At the ground level, shelter-home data reveals the human scale of the problem. Admissions remain consistently high, indicating that new survivors continue to enter the system. However, the majority of survivors are released within short periods, often through court-approved family petitions, raising concerns about whether rescue is being matched with adequate protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The

presence of re-trafficking cases even when numerically small demonstrates that rescue alone is insufficient to break cycles of exploitation.

Importantly, trafficking today cannot be understood only as physical movement or confinement. It increasingly involves **psychological control, emotional dependency, debt bondage, and manipulation through intimate relationships**. Survivors may not always identify themselves as victims immediately, and their pathways out of exploitation are shaped by fear, stigma, economic pressure, and legal uncertainty. These realities demand responses that go beyond procedural rescue and focus on long-term safety, dignity, and agency.

Impact of Trafficking on Victims

Trafficking leaves deep, multi-layered impacts on survivors that extend far beyond the period of exploitation. These effects are physical, emotional, and psychological, and often intersect, reinforcing each other over time.

Survivors of sex trafficking commonly experience severe physical harm. This may include injuries resulting from physical violence, sexual assault, forced substance use, untreated infections, and chronic health conditions. Many survivors suffer from sexually transmitted infections, reproductive health complications, malnutrition, sleep deprivation, and long-term pain due to repeated abuse and neglect. Limited access to healthcare during exploitation often means conditions go untreated for extended periods, worsening outcomes. In some cases, survivors are forced to work despite illness or injury, leading to long-term disabilities. Younger survivors may experience delayed physical development, while older survivors may carry lifelong health consequences that affect their ability to work, care for children, or live independently.

Emotionally, trafficking strips survivors of safety, trust, and self-worth. Many experience overwhelming feelings of shame, guilt, fear, and helplessness often reinforced by traffickers who deliberately manipulate emotions to maintain control. Survivors may feel conflicted about leaving exploitative situations, particularly when traffickers posed as partners, caregivers, or providers. After rescue, emotions often intensify rather than immediately ease. Survivors may struggle with anger, grief, confusion, and fear of the future. Uncertainty about legal cases, family acceptance, and economic survival can trigger emotional distress, sometimes manifesting as withdrawal, aggression, or resistance to institutional care.

Psychologically, trafficking is profoundly traumatizing. Many survivors exhibit symptoms of **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**, depression, anxiety, dissociation, and suicidal ideation. Repeated violations of bodily autonomy can fracture a survivor's sense of identity and control, leading to long-term difficulties in decision-making and relationships.

For example, a recent **traumatic brain injury (TBI) assessment study** conducted in collaboration with **Safe Living Spaces** revealed that **76% victims showed indicators of TBI**. This finding underscores the severe and often invisible physical harm resulting from prolonged sexual violence, exploitation, and repeated trauma. It also highlights the urgent need for integrated medical, neurological, and trauma-informed mental health care within survivor rehabilitation frameworks.

Alarmingly, Survivors may also develop trauma-bonding with traffickers, where emotional attachment coexists with fear and abuse. This can complicate recovery and increase vulnerability to re-trafficking, particularly if survivors return to unsafe environments without adequate support. Without sustained psychological care, trauma may remain unresolved, increasing the risk of repeated exploitation.

Role of Shelter Homes in Healing and Recovery

Shelter homes play a critical role in interrupting the cycle of exploitation and providing survivors with a space for safety and recovery. At their best, shelters offer **physical protection, emotional stabilization, legal support, and pathways toward reintegration**. They serve as a buffer between survivors and the environments that previously failed to protect them.

Effective shelter-based rehabilitation should include:

- Immediate safety and medical care
- Trauma-informed psychological counselling
- Therapeutic Support
- Legal aid and access to Justice
- Support for education, skills, and livelihoods
- Preparation for reintegration based on survivor readiness.
- Risk assessment and safety planning

When these supports are present and sustained, survivors have a greater chance of rebuilding confidence, exercising agency, and resisting future exploitation.

However, when shelter stays are short, resources are limited, or rehabilitation is rushed, risks increase. Survivors may be released before stabilization, without economic security, psychological readiness, or protective monitoring. In such cases, families may not be prepared to support them, or traffickers may still have access. This combination can push survivors back into vulnerability, and in some cases, back into re-trafficking.

Shelters thus sit at a critical junction: they can either be a turning point toward long-term safety or a brief pause before renewed exploitation, depending on the depth and duration of support provided.

This micro-study is an attempt to understand the reasons and patterns of re-trafficking of victims of sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation who are admitted to various shelters in the state of Telangana.

Methodology

Study Framework

This study adopts a **descriptive and analytical framework**, using shelter-homes data to examine patterns of admission, release, re-trafficking, and disturbances in the shelter to understand systemic vulnerabilities within post-rescue responses.

Universe

All the Protective Homes licensed under Section 21 of the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1986 operating in Telangana.

Sample

75% of the homes in Telangana were identified as representative sample for the study.

Objectives

- To assess the extent and patterns of re-trafficking among victims admitted to shelters.
- To understand the various causal factors that trigger re-trafficking of victims.
- To identify practical solutions to prevent re-trafficking and promote holistic rehabilitation.

Tools and Data Sources

- Questionnaire
- Interview with Superintendent/Senior functionary of the Home
- Shelter admission and release registers from 2022-2025
- Disturbance logs
- Internal documentation and program data

Research Process

We collected and compiled data from questionnaire responses and shelter records and analyzed it systematically. Quantitative trends were examined alongside qualitative insights given by field practitioners.

Limitations and Challenges

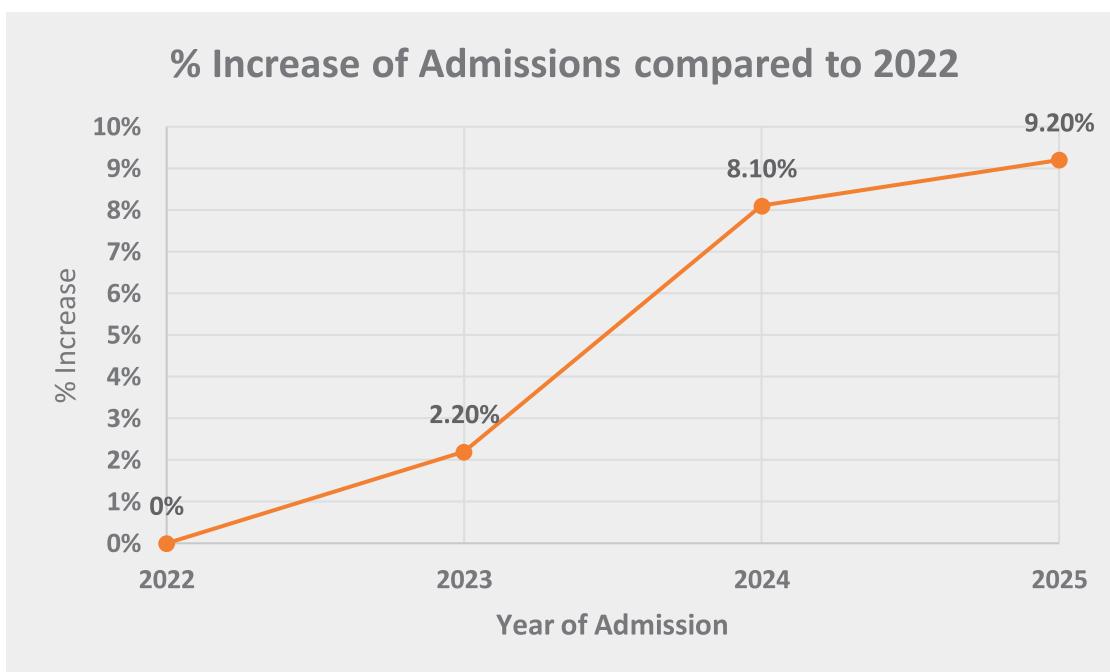
- Most shelter homes lacked documentation and formal mechanism to identify re-trafficking cases and the presence of female offenders in the home.
- The home authorities had reluctance to share sensitive information fearing retribution.
- Homes funded by Government schemes were reluctant to point out systemic failures due to funding obligations.
- The accuracy of data in the context of poor documentation indicates the lower range but is not clear on how high the problem could be.
- As a micro-study it only indicates the patterns but does not provide adequate predictive analysis.

Analysis & Interpretation of Data

1. Rescue of Victims

The data from all the homes in Telangana indicates that there is a steady increase in both the rescue operations and the number of victims in the last three years. A cursory glance reveals 9.2% increase in the number of victims in 2025 as opposed to the year 2022.

A total of 2031 victims were provided care and protection by 75% of the shelters in Telangana in the last 3.5 years which includes 543 in 2022, 555 in 2023 and 587 in 2024 and 346 by mid-2025.

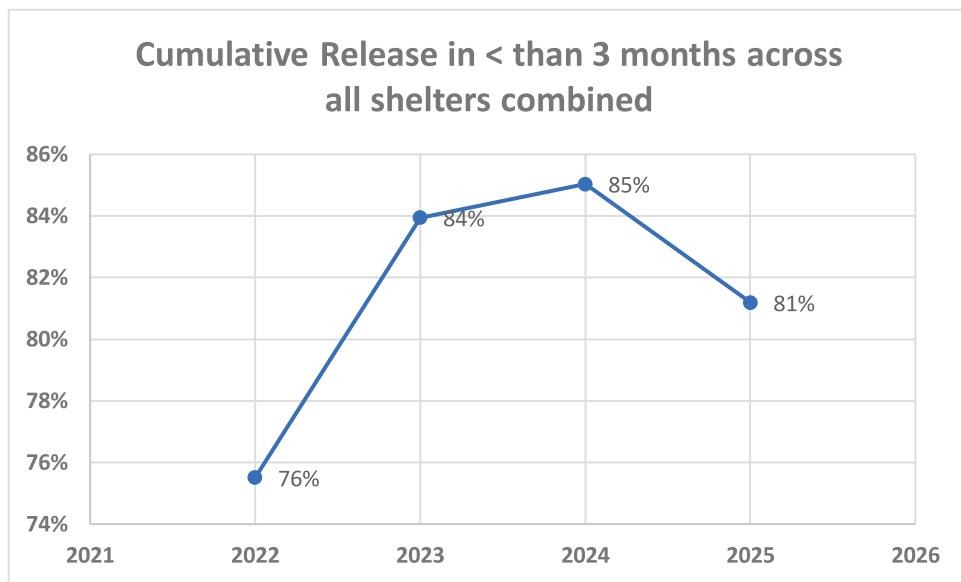
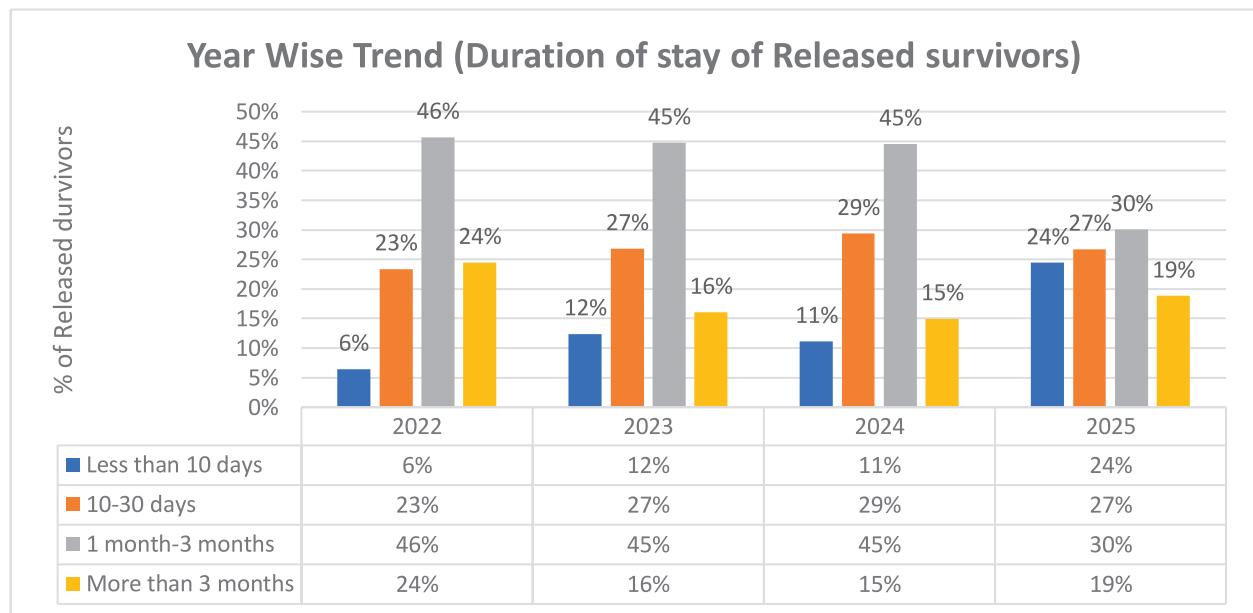
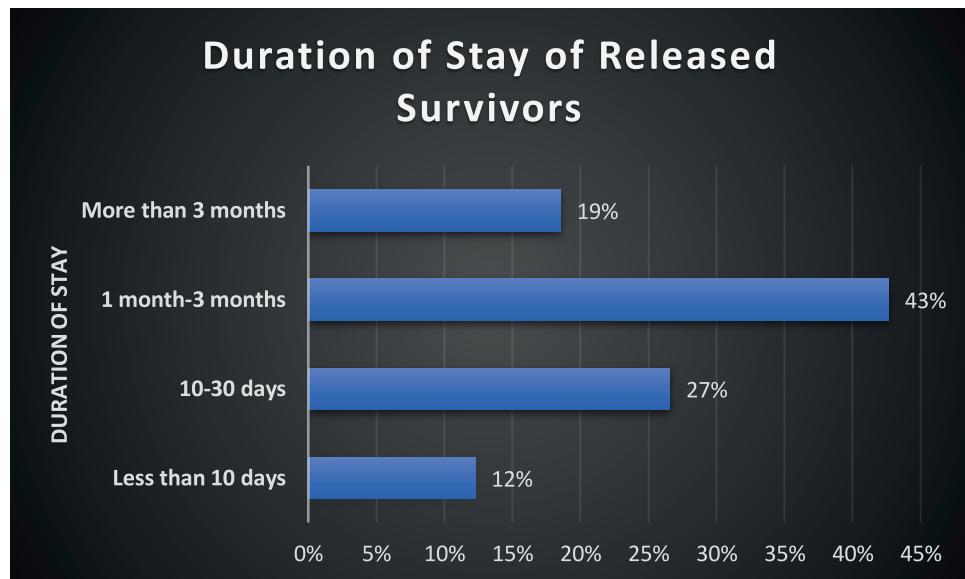


2. Duration of Stay in Shelters

The duration of a victim's stay in a shelter home indicates the amount of time care-providers in homes have to ensure holistic rehabilitation. The shorter the duration, the lesser the access a victim has to trauma-informed services, thereby increasing the potential for re-trafficking.

Over the last three and a half years, a total of 1,942 victims were released. Of these, 81% were released within three months, and nearly 12% within 10 days. There has also been a steady decline in long-term stays in safe homes, decreasing from 24% to 19% in 2025.

The duration of stay for any victim in a Protective Home is decided by a concerned court with little or no stake of the care providers in defining the rehabilitation process.



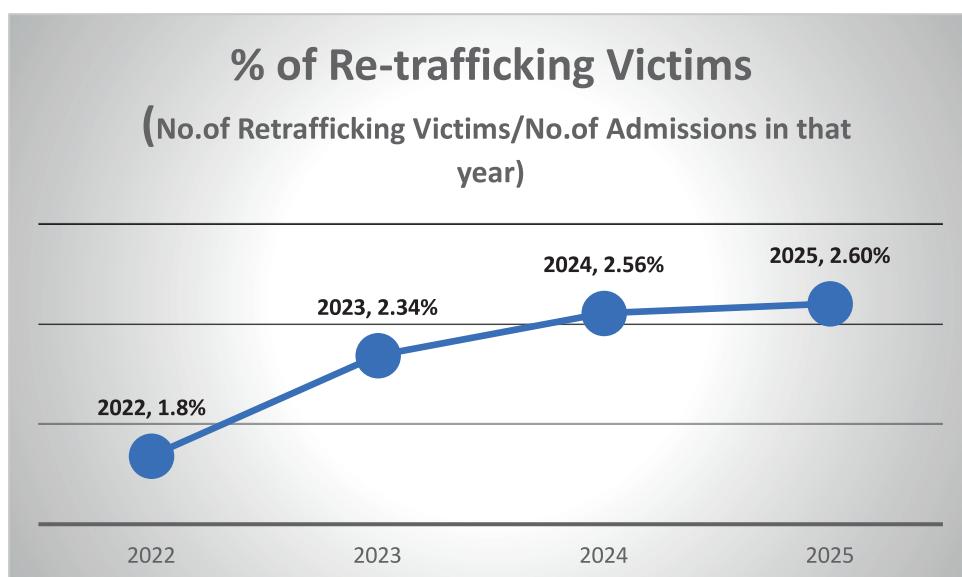
The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1986 clearly provides for a minimum period of 21 days for a court-ordered inquiry. As per Section 17(4), a victim may be placed under care and protection for a minimum period of one year and up to a maximum of three years in a Protective Home licensed under Section 21 of the Act.

The duration of stay of adult victims in Protective Homes before 2022 was longer and provided greater scope for rehabilitation. An important interim order by the Supreme Court in May 2022 in the Bhudhadev Karmaskar case indicated that prolonged stay in a home is equivalent to incarceration, amounting to the languishing of adults. The Court directed a review of all homes and sought a status report. This created confusion among both judicial officers and police officers across the country, compelling officers in the criminal justice system to release adult victims as soon as they were admitted to the shelter, adversely impacting their rehabilitation status.

3. Re-Trafficking of Victims

When a victim of sex trafficking does not get access to any comprehensive rehabilitation support and is released back to the society, she is compelled to opt back to commercial sexual exploitation. This can happen in two ways: (a) the keepers and organizers of the brothels who were instrumental in filing petitions on behalf of the victim take her back to the same situation, and she is coerced to continue as she is indebted to them; (b) the victim herself goes back to the same situation as she has no other skills to depend on, and her original situation of optionlessness continues.

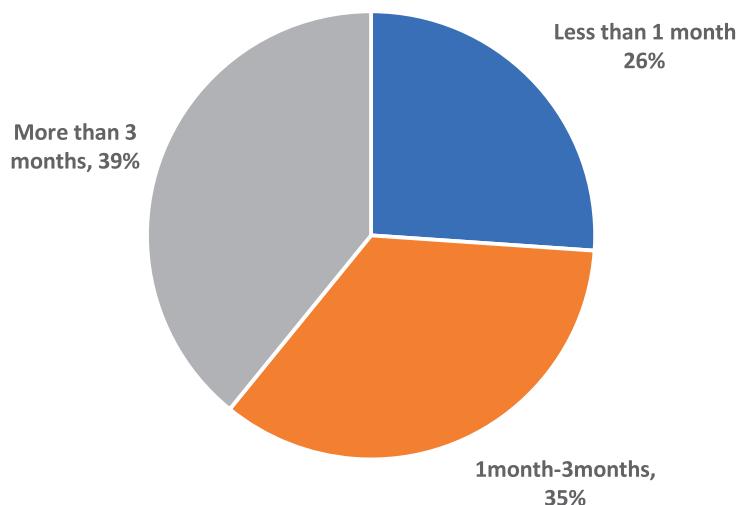
The available data indicates a steady increase in the number of re-trafficked victims being admitted back to the shelter. In the last 3.5 years, 47 victims were readmitted. While this data needs to be re-examined for accuracy, as some of the homes had not maintained a tracker to identify re-trafficked persons, the above-said number should be taken as a modest indicator, with the actual number likely being higher than the stated figure.



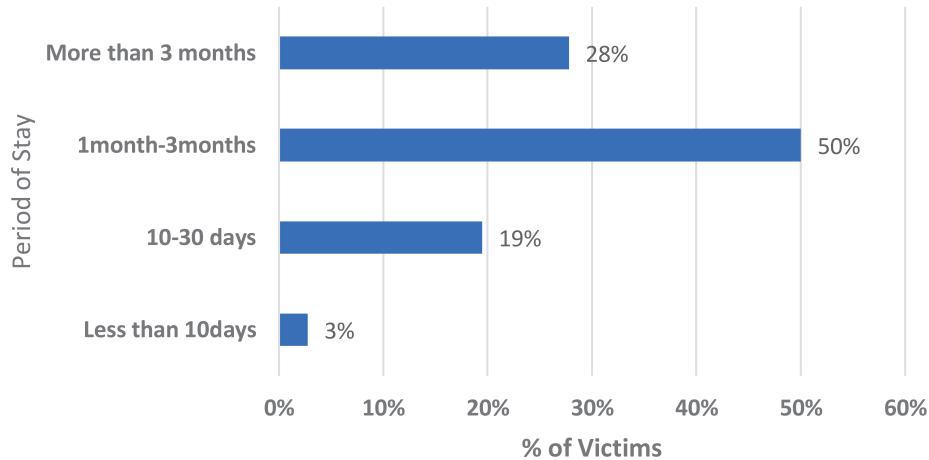
Of the 47 who were re-trafficked, 61% of them were released within 3 months of their first stay in the shelter. This clearly shows that the duration of stay in a home has the potential to play a critical role in the exit options.

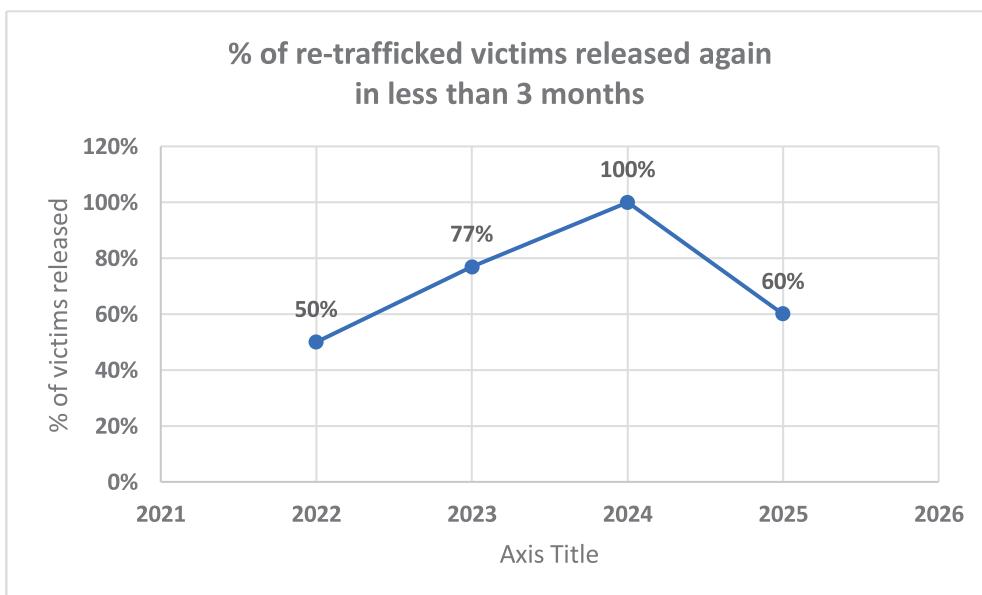
But it is also imperative to mention that mere duration cannot be a deciding factor, as rehabilitation is facilitated through access to healing process, justice from the court of law, skill development, life skills and reintegration channels. The chances of a victim never reaching the stage of a survivor and getting rehabilitated even when kept in a home for a long duration is a great possibility if rehabilitation measures are denied in the shelter.

Duration of first stay of re-trafficked victims in shelters



Period of Stay in shelters after re-trafficking





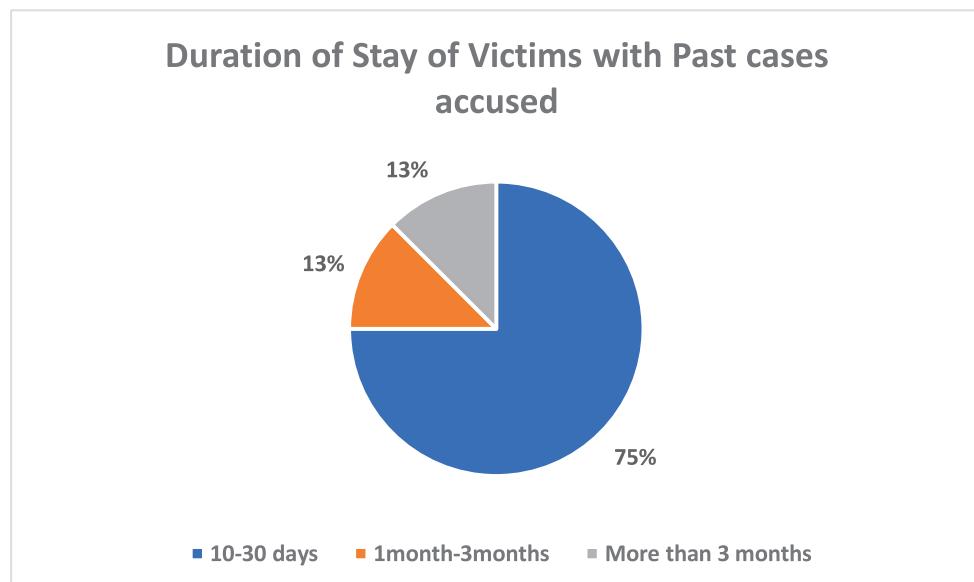
72% of the those re-trafficked and admitted to the shelter for the second time were also released within 3 months.

This is a disturbing data indicating a lack of review from both the judicial officers and the managers of the Protective Homes on the objective of the existing law.

On the part of Protective Homes, this could also mean a lack of a proper mechanism to intimate the judicial officer about a re-admission, resulting in the routine dispensation of cases.

4. Infiltration of Traffickers

Other than one home, the other two homes under study did not have a clear mechanism to identify female offenders under ITPA who were cited as victims and admitted to the shelter home. A total of eight women were identified as having past cases where they were apprehended as key accused in cases of commercial sexual exploitation.



All the eight women had multiple cases booked against them in the three commissionerates over the last three years.

While the agenda of these female offenders is not clearly understood and has not been studied in comparison to the parallel legal processes of other victims, the data indicates a serious lack of guidelines for the rescuing authorities to differentiate between a victim and a female offender. This is despite the fact that the female offender has been already identified as an offender in another jurisdiction. The lack of synergy in data sharing and management among the law enforcers could be one factor contributing to such happenings.

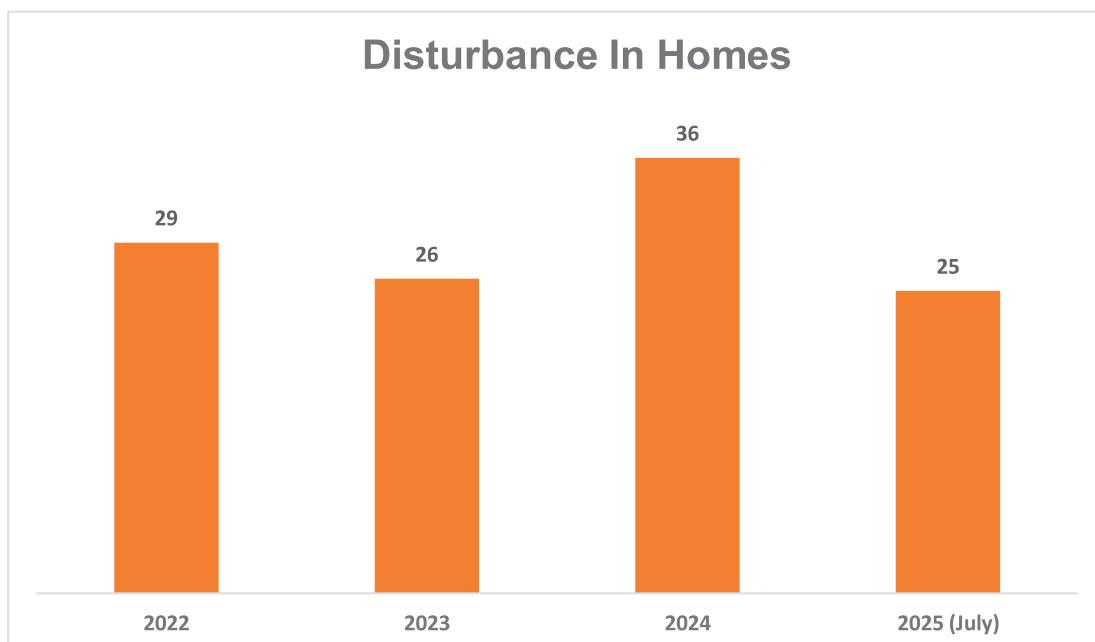
The wilful actions of organizers and brothel keepers to prevent victims from sharing details of their abusers cannot be ruled out, as the presence of such female offenders has also coincided with incidents of physical violence, disturbances in the home and an increased number of survivors turning hostile in the court.

5. Disturbances in Shelter

116 instances of disturbances were reported in all the shelters under study ranging from vandalism, attacks on staff, escape attempts and extreme aggression. These incidents have been steady in their occurrence, 29 in 2022, 26 in 2023, 36 in 2024 and 25 by mid-2025.

The disturbances reported could be due to the following factors:

- psychological state of victims, especially those suffering from withdrawal symptoms due to substance/alcohol abuse at the time of admission.
- those who are blackmailed by the organizers to report back within a specified period of time.
- wilful act by female offenders who are mandated to bring disrepute to the home or as an act of exerting pressure to facilitate early release by the court.



6. Reasons for re-trafficking

100% of the respondents, who were managers of the Protective Homes, cited early release as the primary reason for instances of re-trafficking. Additionally, 50% felt that aspiration for easy income and addiction to a luxurious life were other factors, and 25% felt that the lack of a follow-up mechanism, where the victim/survivor is devoid of any safety net, was a reason for re-trafficking.

The respondents chosen were senior managers with rich experience in managing the shelters. It was evident that early release left them feeling completely helpless in providing adequate support to the victim. As all releases are court-ordered, the need to sensitize judicial officers on the importance of adequate time for rehabilitation becomes imperative.

7. Reasons for disturbances in the shelter

100% of the respondents stated that they observed disturbances when a re-trafficked victim or a female offender was admitted to the shelter. Additionally, 25% felt that disturbances could also arise from genuine grievances, such as delayed repatriation, especially in the case of a foreign national.

It is very clear that all the home authorities have identified disturbances as a wilful act. Both re-trafficked victims and female offenders have close ties with the organizers of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, and the probability of instigating acts of violence to create disturbances in the home, which would coerce authorities into early release, cannot be ruled out.

8. Time Duration for Rehabilitation

On the question of how much time is required for initiating holistic rehabilitation, 100% of the respondents felt a minimum of 6 months will give them enough time to ensure all support is given to the victim to become a survivor and get rehabilitated. 25% also felt extending it to 1 year will be more ideal as the survivor would have developed better coping skills and will be equipped to live with dignity.

The responses of the respondents clearly indicate the understanding of the care-givers regarding rehabilitation as a process that requires both skill and time. The deep psychological wounds left during the process of being exploited requires a safe healing space and time to recover and start afresh.

9. Suggestions to prevent re-trafficking

The following are suggestions given by all the senior managers and care-providers of the homes under study to prevent re-trafficking of victims:

- Legal action to be taken against petitioners in cases where the victim is re-trafficked.
- AHTU/Police should be mandated to conduct a detailed inquiry for every rescued victim to ascertain whether she has been re-trafficked, as the victim may have previously been admitted to another shelter.
- Courts should refrain from giving releases in cases where the Protective Home has informed the occurrence of re-trafficking.
- Re-trafficked victims to be considered as female offenders and admitted to corrective homes.

- Increase the quantum of immediate relief fund to 1 lakh to support the survivor's economic vulnerability.
- Criminal antecedent verification of all petitioners should be undertaken to ascertain if traffickers are filing petition.
- Economic rehabilitation to be strengthened on priority.

10. Suggestions to prevent traffickers/female offenders from entering shelters

The following suggestions were given to prevent the admission of female traffickers posing as victims into the shelters.

- As soon as a rescue operation is over, the AHTU/Police should do thorough enquiry to check whether the removed person is a victim or a trafficker by checking data in all other police stations.
- Inter-state & cross-border trafficking cases should be handed over to Pan-India investigating agencies such as NIA so that proper investigation can be done to differentiate victims and traffickers.
- Police accountability should be increased if negligence in such cases is observed.
- AHTU/Police should regularly circulate photographs of all female offenders apprehended across all stations to all Protective Homes.
- At the time of recording the first statement, efforts must be made to access the Aadhaar card of the person to ascertain their true identity.
- Police/AHTU should maintain data base of all sex traffickers which should be regularly circulated among stakeholders.
- Biometrics, such as those used in Aadhaar cards, should be introduced for victims and traffickers so that immediate alerts are generated if a person has been identified as a trafficker in another jurisdiction.
- Once a trafficker/female offender is identified and reported, police and judiciary should take immediate action.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The micro-study to understand re-trafficking patterns in Telangana was done taking 75% of the homes in the state as a sample which could be used as representation for the entire state. The major findings of this study are:

1. Sex trafficking is on the rise, with a steady increase in the number of victims every year.
2. 12% of the victims were released in less than 10 days and 83% of the victims were released within 90 days/3 months of their rescue compromising the rehabilitation process.
3. The number of re-trafficked victims being re-admitted in the shelter has steadily increased over the last four years.
4. 72% of the re-trafficked victims were released within 3 months of their second rescue building a potential situation for continued recycling in Commercial Sexual Exploitation.
5. Traffickers/female offenders posing as victims and infiltrating the homes is on the rise.
6. A total of 116 instances of disturbances in the homes, in the form of vandalism, escape attempts, and aggression, were observed, with an increase noted in the presence of re-trafficked victims or female offenders/traffickers.
7. Early release and shorter duration for rehabilitation was identified as the primary reason for re-trafficking.
8. A minimum period of 6 months was cited as the duration required for holistic rehabilitation.

Recommendations

The micro-study which was done through long interactive sessions with practitioners on the ground who have rich experience in managing Protective Homes was the source of grass root wisdom which is now compiled as recommendations to prevent re-trafficking:

1. In collaboration with Judicial Academy and Police Academy, sensitization programs should be conducted for judicial officers and police officers on victim care, trauma-informed services, and the importance of adequate time for rehabilitation.
2. A comprehensive, practical protocol should be issued for police officers and AHTUs on how to differentiate between victims and traffickers before, during, and after rescue operations.
3. A SOP/executive order should be issued outlining the mechanism for reporting when a re-trafficked person or trafficker is identified in a Protective Home, with clear guidelines for officers in the criminal justice system on the nature of action to be taken.
4. Petitioners in cases where the person has been re-trafficked should be considered as abettors and prompt legal action should be taken.
5. A state-level database of all female sex traffickers and alleged offenders in sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation cases should be maintained by the CID or the Women Safety Wing, and be accessible to all officers in Telangana to verify the antecedents of any rescued person.
6. The Department of Women and Child Welfare should review the existing rehabilitation measures and the follow up process, and design and conduct a comprehensive social audit to study the functioning of the homes.
7. The Department of Women and Child Welfare should review the interim relief and economic support programs for victims of sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation and update the same regularly.

Annexure 1

Micro-study on re-trafficking

1. Date:
2. Time: From..... To.....
3. Name of the Home:
4. Name of the interviewee:
5. Number of admissions

2022	2023	2024	2025

6. Number re-trafficked

2022	2023	2024	2025

7. Duration of stay in home

	Less than 10days	10-30 days	1month- 3months	More than 3 months
2022				
2023				
2024				
2025				

8. Duration of stay of re-trafficked persons

	Less than 10days	10-30 days	1month-3months	More than 3 months
2022				
2023				
2024				
2025				

9. Number of women with past cases as accused

2022	2023	2024	2025

10. Duration of stay of past accused

	Less than 10days	10-30 days	1month-3months	More than 3 months
2022				
2023				
2024				
2025				

11. Disturbance at home

2022	2023	2024	2025

12. Describe nature of disturbance

- a) Vandalism
- b) Riots
- c) Attack on staff
- d) Escape
- e) Any Other

13. Cases filed on disturbance

2022	2023	2024	2025

14. Reasons for re-trafficking

- a) Early release
- b) Not provided rehabilitation
- c) Poor follow up
- d) Any Other

15. Reasons for disturbance

- a) Presence of re-trafficked victims
- b) Presence of accused in cases
- c) Traffickers posing as victims
- d) Genuine grievance (repatriation, legal status, food)
- e) Any other

16.Time required for rehabilitation

- a) 3 months
- b) Minimum 6 months
- c) Minimum 1 year
- d) Any other

17.Suggestions to prevent re-trafficking

18.Suggestion to prevent traffickers from entering homes