HUMAN TRAFFICKING OF INDIGENOUS GIRLS AND WOMEN IN CANADA

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Author Note

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Abstract

Human trafficking in Canada remains a critical human rights issue which disproportionately affects Indigenous women and girls due to colonial legacies, economic marginalization, and systemic racism. This research will evaluate the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking 2019-2024 (NSTCHT), focusing on its effectiveness in addressing human trafficking among Indigenous girls and women, particularly the role of social media in recruitment, exploitation, and trafficking facilitation. A qualitative analysis was conducted, reviewing government reports, academic literature, and statistical data to assess the implementation and impact of the strategy.

Data from the 2014 National Task Force on Sex Trafficking of Women and Girls in Canada reports that although Indigenous people only make up 5% of Canada's total population, they account for 51% of trafficked women and 50% of trafficked girls (The Centre, 2023). However, the NSTCHT incorporates prevention, victim support, and law enforcement measures but inadequately addresses digital recruitment for exploitation, fails to implement Indigenous-led interventions, and lacks accurate data collection on Indigenous trafficking victims. This research highlights the prevalence of online grooming tactics, including "love bombing" and economic coercion, as key recruitment methods and calls for a survivor-centred, intersectional approach, including stricter online monitoring, Indigenous-led anti-trafficking programs, and culturally relevant digital literacy initiatives. Addressing these gaps is crucial to ensuring the safety of Indigenous women and girls in Canada.

Keywords: Human trafficking, Indigenous girls, Canada, digital exploitation, social media recruitment, National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking.

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Human Trafficking of Indigenous Girls and Women in Canada

Background

Human trafficking is a global problem, and it affects about 2.4 million people around the world; approximately two-thirds are women or children trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation. This form of exploitation is manifested in different ways, where the victims are coerced or forced into industries, including the sex trade (Reid, 2012). According to The Centre (2023), 51% of women and 50% of girls trafficked in Canada are Indigenous despite comprising just 5% of the overall population. Human trafficking remains one of the most critical human rights violations in Canada, with Indigenous women and girls disproportionately affected.

According to Novotney (2023), although boys and men are trafficked as well, most labour and commercial sex trafficking victims identified are Indigenous women and girls. In a 2021 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, out of every ten victims found worldwide, five are adult women and two are girls. Despite legal frameworks such as Sections 279.01 to 279.04 of the Canadian Criminal Code prohibiting human trafficking (Government of Canada, 2021), Indigenous women and girls continue to be at heightened risk due to colonial legacies, economic disadvantages, systemic racism, and gaps in social protection mechanisms. This is why an intersectional study is required.

Problem Statement

Reports indicate that while Indigenous females constitute only 4% of Canada's female population, they represent 50% of all trafficking victims (Roudometkina, 2018). This stark overrepresentation highlights the failure of existing policies to protect Indigenous communities from trafficking-related harms effectively. According to Conroy (2022), sex trafficking and labour trafficking are the most prevalent forms of

human trafficking in Canada, consistent with global trends in human trafficking. Allan et al. (2023) state that while there is no precise definition, sex trafficking refers to the act of recruiting, using a facility for, or maintaining a person for commercial sex, particularly when it involves force, fraud, or coercion. Public Safety Canada (2021) defines labour trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, or harbouring of individuals by force to compel them to work.

One of the emerging concerns in human trafficking is the increasing role of social media as a tool for recruitment and exploitation. Traffickers utilize online platforms to groom victims through deceptive relationships, financial incentives, and emotional manipulation tactics such as "love bombing," which is excessive flattery and attention (Loui, 2017) as a recruitment method.

Settler colonialism has a legacy of systematically displacing Indigenous peoples from their land, disrupting traditional economies, and imposing socio-economic structures which have served to marginalize them. Also, residential schools and assimilation policies were forced to destroy generational knowledge and skills, which worsened economic disparities. Today, Indigenous communities face high poverty rates, high housing and employment barriers, and direct consequences of colonial policies that settled economic interests over Indigenous sovereignty. Many Indigenous youth, particularly those from rural and remote areas, are attracted to trafficking under the false excuse of economic opportunity and companionship, exacerbating their vulnerability (Loui, 2017). Despite the implementation of the NSTCHT, concerns persist about its ability to effectively address digital exploitation and the systemic conditions that place Indigenous women at risk.

Research Question

Main Research Question:

How effective are the provisions of the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking (2019–2024) in addressing human trafficking among Indigenous girls and women in Canada?

Sub-question:

What role does social media play in facilitating the trafficking of Indigenous girls and women living in rural or remote communities, and how does the National Strategy address or fail to address this digital threat?

Thesis Statement

This study evaluates the effectiveness of the NSTCHT by analyzing its implementation, strengths, and limitations in preventing the trafficking of Indigenous girls. The research explores how colonial histories, institutional failures, and digital platforms intersect to aggravate trafficking risks. By identifying gaps in enforcement and policy measures, the study argues for stronger Indigenous-led interventions, improved digital monitoring, and survivor-centered approaches to combat human trafficking effectively. This is important in that it contributes to the understanding of why existing measures may be insufficient and how they can be improved. Finally, to link the gap between government strategies and real-world events.

Literature Review

Understanding the human trafficking of Indigenous women and girls in Canada requires an analysis of historical, structural, and fundamental factors that contribute to their disproportionate vulnerability. Research indicates that colonialism, racism, economic marginalization, and failures in law enforcement and social services intersect to create conditions that facilitate trafficking. Additionally, the rise of social media in Indigenous communities as a recruitment tool has intensified the issue, making trafficking harder to detect and prevent. According to Loui (2017), traffickers are using

Facebook to groom Indigenous people from reserves into moving to cities. This section examines the key themes in the existing literature, highlighting both the strengths and critical gaps in current research.

Colonialism and the Systemic Marginalization of Indigenous Women.

Colonialism has played a central role in creating the conditions that facilitate the trafficking of Indigenous women and girls. The devaluation of Indigenous lives, combined with state-imposed racial and gender hierarchies, makes them more vulnerable, contributing to the overrepresentation of Indigenous women in the sex trade and trafficking networks (Roudometkina and Wakeford, 2018).

The legacy of colonial violence continues to manifest in contemporary child welfare and criminal justice systems. According to Freedom United (2024), recent data reveals that a total of 60% of children who previously spent time in the foster care system are child sex trafficking victims, and at-risk youth indicate that one in three experienced either running away or being forced to leave home before becoming trafficking victims. The children experienced multiple challenges, lacking stable family support, experiencing inadequate parental supervision and placement changes, and separation from loved ones and community members. The children faced emotional fragility while navigating the complexities of their intersecting identities. This institutional failure increases trafficking susceptibility, as many victims come from backgrounds of childhood abuse, neglect, and unstable housing (Baird & Connolly, 2021). Despite these well-documented historical patterns, anti-trafficking policies often fail to acknowledge the colonial roots of the crisis, instead relying on enforcement-based approaches that do not address underlying vulnerabilities (Bourgeois, 2015).

The colonial narrative has portrayed Indigenous women as either “inherently available” or “sexually deviant,” which has placed them over and again into sex

trafficking and exploitation. As a result, their dehumanization prevents them from escaping violence. In dealing with interpersonal violence against women who are Indigenous within the context of a large colonial legal framework, violence is not only the result but also the means of creating and maintaining certain realities. Understanding that violence is a part of the construction and maintenance of colonial society makes it necessary to unlearn and redefine socio-legal norms for a better and more equitable social frame (Hunt, 2016).

Socioeconomic Disparities and Vulnerability to Trafficking.

Economic marginalization is another key driver of trafficking among Indigenous women and girls. Economic marginalization among Indigenous women and girls is the result of historical and structural barriers that limit their access to education, employment, and financial independence. Indigenous women face higher unemployment rates compared to non-Indigenous Canadians. Research published in December 2021 by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives showed the unemployment rate for Indigenous women in Alberta averaged 8.3% compared to 5.2% for non-Indigenous women. Colonialism and the competitive economic system that came with it provoked racism and gender discrimination, limiting job opportunities and forcing many into low-paying, insecure, or precarious work, including informal labour and the underground economy.

Research consistently demonstrates that poverty, lack of access to education, and high unemployment rates create conditions in which individuals become more susceptible to exploitation, coercion, and trafficking (Louie, 2017). Many Indigenous women enter the sex trade as a means of survival, a reality often termed "survival sex," where individuals engage in sexual activity in exchange for necessities like food, shelter, or transportation (Roudometkina & Wakeford, 2018).

Further increasing this issue is the lack of culturally appropriate services for victims. Indigenous women face barriers in accessing victim support programs, as many services fail to incorporate Indigenous worldviews or community-led interventions (Barret, 2010). This gap has led to calls for Indigenous-led, survivor-centered solutions that address both the economic precarity and social dislocation that contribute to trafficking (Bourgeois, 2015). However, current policies continue to rely on punitive measures rather than community-based prevention strategies.

The Role of Social Media in Human Trafficking Recruitment.

A growing body of research identifies social media as a powerful tool for traffickers to recruit and exploit Indigenous girls. Digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have replaced street-based recruitment, allowing traffickers to target victims remotely (Cockbain and Bowers, 2019; Latonero, 2011; Louie, 2017; United Nations, 2020). Tactics such as "love bombing" (excessive flattery and attention), economic promises, and false job offers are commonly used to attract victims into trafficking networks (Baird & Connolly, 2021). Using the internet and digital networks, users can share and communicate instantly with fellow individuals or groups of people at different distances. These technological advancements increase the capacity of traffickers to select and abuse more victims and spread their activities to other regions (Latonero, 2011). Online interaction is the way of selecting the possible victim, gaining access to personal data, organizing logistics and transportation, and the recruitment of persons through social media. In examining cases presented in the 2018 UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, it is possible to see how perpetrators work in a sequence to identify their victims from social media platforms, build a relationship with them and later trap them in exploitative relationships (Cockbain & Bowers, 2019).

Studies show that Indigenous youth, particularly those from rural and remote communities, are especially vulnerable to online trafficking tactics. Many are drawn to social media as a means of connecting with people outside their isolated environments, making them more susceptible to deceptive relationships. Traffickers exploit these vulnerabilities by offering a sense of belonging and opportunity, only to later coerce victims into exploitation, forced sex work, or debt bondage (Louie, 2017). As discussed in the literature review, many Indigenous girls are more vulnerable to being recruited in social media because the world they grow up in is one of abuse, neglect and systemic oppression, which increases their vulnerability to being targeted by traffickers who promise safety and acceptance; they pose as protectors or as 'romantic partners' to offer love, shelter, or a way out of a bad situation. Indigenous communities are more likely to be poor, unemployed and housed inadequately (Farley et al., 2017). Social media is used by traffickers to target Indigenous girls, to offer fake jobs, modelling gigs, or money, and to manipulate them into a trap. Indigenous girls are disproportionally placed in foster care, and many of them have no family and no one to support them (Sethi, 2007). The vulnerability is then easily exploited by traffickers who groom victims on the internet, providing them with the attention they crave and convincing them that life will be better. Hence, many Indigenous girls live in isolated communities with limited access to support systems, and therefore, social media can become a means of connection. Traffickers take advantage of the platform to establish contact and slowly influence the victims to do their bidding.

Despite the growing role of digital recruitment, Canada's National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking (2019-2024) does not sufficiently address online exploitation. While it outlines general prevention measures, there are no concrete policies for monitoring social media platforms, disrupting online grooming tactics, or

enforcing accountability on tech companies (Public Safety Canada, 2019). This regulatory gap allows traffickers to operate with relative anonymity, making intervention efforts significantly more difficult.

Gaps in Research and Policy Implications.

Although existing research effectively highlights the connections between colonialism, economic injustice, and trafficking, there are notable gaps that require further investigation. Studies estimate that 50% of trafficking victims in Canada are Indigenous girls (Roudometkina, 2018), yet official statistics on Indigenous-specific trafficking cases remain limited. There is an urgent need for improved data collection mechanisms that disaggregate trafficking data by race, gender, and region.

While recent studies acknowledge the impact of social media on recruitment, little research exists on how to disrupt online grooming techniques. Future research should explore technology-driven anti-trafficking measures, such as AI-based monitoring of recruitment patterns and stricter content regulation for trafficking-related posts.

Limited Inclusion of Indigenous Voices in Policy Development Current anti-trafficking strategies are primarily law enforcement-focused, often failing to incorporate Indigenous-led solutions (Bourgeois, 2015). Research must prioritize Indigenous perspectives by incorporating survivor-led insights and community-based interventions into policy frameworks.

The literature clearly demonstrates that colonial legacies, economic precarity, and systemic failures contribute to the trafficking of Indigenous women and girls in Canada. Social media has intensified this crisis, providing traffickers with new, undetectable ways to recruit victims, yet policy responses remain insufficiently equipped to address digital exploitation. While existing studies provide valuable insights into the root causes of trafficking, critical gaps remain, particularly in data

collection, Indigenous-led policy approaches, and social media regulation. This research builds on these findings by evaluating the effectiveness of Canada's NSTCHT in addressing these challenges and proposing solutions to bridge these policy gaps.

Methodology

This study was conducted using secondary research such as peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports and research studies on human trafficking, social media exploitation and Indigenous vulnerabilities. The research reviews patterns of recruitment, inequalities and current anti-trafficking measures effectiveness. A comprehensive literature review has also been completed to guarantee the historical, social and economic factors that lead to the trafficking of Indigenous girls have been explored.

This study employs a qualitative policy analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of the NSTCHT in addressing human trafficking among Indigenous girls and women in Canada, with a focus on digital exploitation. Given the lack of comprehensive primary data on Indigenous trafficking victims, this research relies on secondary sources, including government reports, academic literature, and statistical data. The methodology follows an intersectional, Indigenous-centered, and feminist approach to understanding the fundamental and digital dimensions of trafficking. The population of this research includes Indigenous women and girls in Canada residing in rural areas who are at risk of or have been impacted by, human trafficking, with a focus on those who have been digitally recruited and exploited. This population is explored in relation to inequalities, colonial past and present, and ongoing social vulnerabilities that affect Indigenous communities disproportionately.

Worldview

The worldview of this research takes the framework that fundamental inequalities, colonial legacies and institutional failures affect why Indigenous girls are being trafficked. It is a critical approach because it examines how power structures, historical injustices and fundamental inequalities lead to the trafficking of Indigenous girls (Roudometkina & Wakeford, 2018). The approach resists accepting explanations that appear on the surface. It also critically examines human trafficking not as a one-off crime but as an essential problem that has its roots in colonialism, socio-economic inequality, and racism. Being a non-Indigenous woman and an international female immigrant from Mexico living in Canada, I understand the significance of positioning myself in this research because it helps me to think about how my background, identity, and experiences affect my engagement with the topic, my interpretation of the findings, and my interaction with the voices represented. Recognizing my point of view promotes transparency and ethical responsibility. This study was conducted from an Indigenous, feminist, and decolonizing perspective, which acknowledges that historical wrongs like the Indian Act, residential schools, and forced assimilation policies have made Indigenous women and girls more likely to be trafficked. It also uses an intersectional lens to see how gender, race, socio-economic status, and digital spaces crossroads and are involved in creating trafficking patterns (Nonomura, 2020). This worldview is also challenged by the state-centred and law enforcement-focused approaches that do not address the source of trafficking, and further, it highlights the role of social media as a new form of recruitment. This critical framework focuses on the intersection of race, gender, colonialism, and economic marginalization in the vulnerability of Indigenous girls to trafficking. This research supports solutions that are based on the needs and experiences of survivors and their communities, and it advocates for community-based

approaches that prioritize Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and culturally appropriate interventions that are designed and led by Indigenous peoples themselves.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of human trafficking research, ethical considerations were paramount. Being a non-Indigenous woman and an international female immigrant from Mexico living in Canada, I understand the significance of positioning myself in this research. I come to this work with humility and great respect for the knowledge, experiences, and voices of Indigenous communities. I know that my viewpoint is influenced by my own cultural experience, my immigrant experience, and my gendered lens, and I will continue to consider how these factors affect my interpretation. To make sure that I am engaging from a culturally specific and informed place, I will focus on listening to Indigenous voices by consulting Indigenous secondary research. It is my hope to conduct this research with cultural sensitivity, ethical responsibility, and genuine care so that the reader not only understands the focus of this work but also the lens through which this is being done.

This study recognizes the historical exploitation of Indigenous narratives in research. To uphold ethical integrity, Indigenous scholarship was prioritized. The research refrains from reproducing harmful stereotypes or reducing Indigenous women to victimhood, instead focusing on structural and policy failures. No direct interviews with survivors were conducted to protect vulnerable populations from re-traumatization. Future research should incorporate survivor voices and Indigenous-led policy recommendations through community-based participatory research to further strengthen policy solutions.

Research Design

This research used a qualitative policy analysis by looking closely at the sections, goals, and actions in Canada's National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking and identifying common themes and ideas. This analysis aimed to identify the assumptions, the gaps, and the impacts on vulnerable populations, especially Indigenous communities, to see where the strategy does or does not address culturally specific needs and systemic power dynamics. It was conducted to examine how the National Strategy addresses the trafficking of Indigenous girls and women, the extent to which social media exploitation recruitment is recognized and mitigated within policy measures, and the effectiveness of enforcement, victim support, and prevention efforts within the strategy.

Data Collection and Source Selection

Data was gathered from three primary categories of sources: Government Policies and Reports, including the NSTCHT (Public Safety Canada, 2019); and the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). These sources provide insight into official anti-trafficking measures, statistical data, and policy implementation. The second source is Academic Literature and Peer-Reviewed Articles, which include Studies on human trafficking and Indigenous women in Canada (Bourgeois, 2015; Roudometkina & Wakeford, 2018); Research on social media recruitment strategies used by traffickers (Baird & Connolly, 2021; Louie, 2017) and evaluation of Canada's anti-trafficking policies (Nonomura, 2020). These sources contextualize policy gaps and emerging trends, particularly the role of digital platforms in recruitment. The third source is Statistical Data and NGO Reports, which include Statistics Canada reports on human trafficking cases (2015-2023) and NGO studies on survivor experiences and trafficking intervention programs (Barret, 2010).

In selecting literature for this research, I identified specific inclusion and exclusion criteria that would help guide the review. From peer-reviewed academic articles to government reports, I only included studies done in the last 15 years that focus on Indigenous trafficking victims in Canada and works that examine the role of digital methods in recruitment for trafficking. The study focuses on the last 15 years to reflect data that represents current social, legal and digital conditions of trafficking. Excluded were research on international trafficking, which had no direct application to the Canadian context, opinion-based sources, which had no empirical or legal basis, and articles published before 2010 except for important historical examples like foundational colonial policies.

Results

Human trafficking in Canada represents a complex social issue rather than just a criminal offence because it stems from structural and historical inequalities. Indigenous women and girls experience higher risks of exploitation because racism, together with colonial legacies and economic marginalization, affects them disproportionately. The statistical reports about human trafficking, together with scholarly research, demonstrate the scope of the issue but fail to capture the real-life suffering of victims. This research works to make survivors' life stories visible because it advocates for changes to existing structures, which should start by respecting Indigenous control and perspectives. Engaging with this topic has shifted my understanding. What initially began as a policy-focused inquiry quickly transformed into a deeper examination of the personal and structural realities behind the numbers. The research process pushed me to critically reflect on the disconnection between government responses and the lived experiences of those impacted by trafficking. This paper reflects on the learning process moving from a place of distant analysis to a more engaged, community-centered critique.

Colonialism and Economic Inequalities as Drivers of Trafficking

As indicated earlier, colonialism has produced enduring effects on Indigenous family structures and communities that the NSTCHT has not taken into consideration. The colonial instruments described by Roudometkina and Wakeford (2018) broke apart cultural affiliations and family relationships, which has led to ongoing intergenerational trauma. Limited educational access, together with insufficient housing and employment opportunities, create conditions that make people susceptible to trafficking. During my research, I came to understand better how deeply installed these colonial legacies remain in the present. What seemed to be social and economic issues on the surface, like job insecurity and homelessness, were, in fact, the continuation of historical dispossession. This process has grown my awareness of the ways colonial violence operates.

The NSTCHT recognizes Indigenous population vulnerability yet fails to tackle the core causes behind this vulnerability effectively. The strategy fails to implement specific policies that would eliminate institutional prejudices together with systemic biases which threaten Indigenous women and girls. Economic difficulties and job instability function as risk factors only when viewed through the lens of sustained systemic neglect and colonial oppression. The current Canadian strategy fails to deliver sufficient programs for job creation and housing or culturally suitable education, while traffickers target individuals through economic need and social isolation. The vulnerabilities continue to exist because there are no specific investments and policy interventions in place. The effective solution needs to focus on empowering Indigenous women economically by implementing programs that support Indigenous housing and employment, healthcare services, and education that reflect their cultural requirements. This part of my research challenged my previous assumptions about what an effective

anti-trafficking strategy might look like. I now see clearly that without addressing the roots of inequality and ensuring housing, education, and employment, prevention cannot be meaningful.

Recruitment through Social Media and Online Platforms

As was explained in the literature review, the NSTCHT do not take into consideration that human traffickers increasingly use digital platforms to find their victims as a new trend in human trafficking emerges. According to the RCMP's 2010 Human Trafficking Threat Assessment, platforms like Facebook and Snapchat have become more popular tools for targeting youth who are vulnerable to exploitation, like Indigenous girls and women who live in rural areas. Digital grooming operates beneath the surface of clear street-based recruitment, so law enforcement agencies face increased challenges when attempting to make early interventions.

As explained before, Louie (2017) states that traffickers use "love bombing" tactics to build trust by providing excessive affection along with material gifts that create emotional dependence. The tactic shows exceptional success with disconnected youth because it makes the distinction between authentic feelings and manipulation challenging to recognize. This section of the research felt particularly unsettling. It revealed how the tools young people use daily for connection can be weaponized to exploit them. My personal discomfort grew with each report I read, especially as I imagined how hard it must be for youth and families to detect these digital forms of coercion. Major technology corporations depend on unenforceable community standards instead of taking real responsibility for their platforms' misuse. Under current Canadian policies, there is no requirement for artificial intelligence detection of grooming behaviour and no requirements for reporting mechanisms or penalties for non-compliance. The lack of regulatory standards enables trafficking networks to

conduct business operations with minimal interference. Before this research, I had not fully grasped how integral digital spaces are to modern trafficking operations. Now, I believe that anti-trafficking strategies must evolve in real-time alongside technological developments. Digital policy is not a side issue; it is central to protection.

The National Strategy Fails to Implement Critical Policies

The National Strategy provides a general framework, but it does not contain vital elements that would enhance its effectiveness and cultural appropriateness. The failure to establish Indigenous leadership as a mandatory element for shaping anti-trafficking responses represents a critical omission. The current policy-making process involves Indigenous communities as stakeholders but denies them equal partnership status. A policy requires success to incorporate Indigenous governance structures together with self-determination principles. This realization marked a turning point in my understanding. I started this research assuming that inclusion efforts were genuine and robust. But I now see that involvement without authority reproduces the same dynamics of colonial governance deciding *for* instead of *with*.

The absence of proper digital platform regulations represents a major weakness in the present strategy. The growing use of online spaces by traffickers becomes more challenging to combat because tech companies lack enforceable standards. There exists no policy requirement that forces companies to implement detection tools or to report suspicious content, thus creating an unsafe space without adequate oversight.

Another area of concern is the lack of sustainable funding for Indigenous-led initiatives. Community programs such as shelters, mentorship programs, and digital literacy workshops are in line with cultural values and are responsive to the community's needs. However, they are often limited by short-term funding models that

hinder their ability to plan and grow. It would also affirm the value of these initiatives and increase their impact if there were long-term funding commitments.

The foster care system is also linked to the issue of trafficking, which is particularly worrying. Indigenous youth who age out of care often do not have support networks or life skills, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation. However, the National Strategy does not include targeted interventions such as mentorship programs or transitional support services. This omission leaves a significant policy gap in one of the most critical areas of prevention. Moreover, there is no requirement for national Indigenous-led summits on trafficking. Such forums could provide for accountability, foster collaboration, and ensure that the voices of survivors are heard in policymaking. As traffickers keep on changing their tactics, policy responses should also be dynamic and based on the experiences of those who have been trafficked.

Each of these gaps made me more aware of how disconnected policy frameworks can be from community realities. My previous assumptions about the comprehensiveness of national strategies have changed dramatically. I now see how much is left unaddressed. In conducting this research, I have been consistently struck by the persistent gaps between policy intentions and community needs. Having been involved in this work from both an academic and personal perspective, I am aware of the limitations of data in capturing lived experiences. Each statistic is a real person who must navigate systems of marginalization and harm. My goal has been to shed light on these human dimensions. This journey has reshaped my thinking from seeing trafficking as a legal issue to understanding it as a deep one. I no longer believe that legal frameworks alone can solve these problems. My focus has shifted toward structural change rooted in partnership, especially with Indigenous leadership. Research should do

more than diagnose; it should advocate and accompany communities in building long-term solutions.

Human trafficking in Canada is a battle that needs to be fought with a comprehensive approach that considers both the current threats and the future causes. The NSTCHT is a positive development, but there are several areas where changes are needed. Fighting human trafficking goes beyond criminal justice responses; it demands equity, respect, and reconciliation. It is only through such an approach that we can hope to break the cycles of harm and create a future in which all communities are safe, supported and empowered.

Key findings

My initial understanding of human trafficking in Canada focused on its socio-economic nature, which I believed stemmed from poverty and inequality. The more I learned about human trafficking, the more I understood that historical injustices and colonial policies created specific vulnerability among Indigenous women and girls. The discovery of this reality transformed my understanding of human trafficking because it revealed how systemic discrimination, historical trauma and institutional abandonment combined to create this situation.

The NSTCHT of Canada fails to meet its goals because it lacks Indigenous leadership survivor-informed care and comprehensive prevention initiatives. I used to think that Canadian policies were advanced and defensive, but this research study proved that I was wrong. The response needs to establish Indigenous self-determination while providing enduring support through housing services, culturally safe education, trauma-informed mental health services, and employment opportunities.

The research revealed how digital platforms function as unrecognized tools for recruitment through deceptive practices that include love bombing and fake job

recruitment. The absence of regulatory accountability for technology companies represents a critical policy gap.

The foster care system proved to be a risk factor which created challenging questions about the responsibility of institutions. The success of Indigenous-led programs depends on receiving stable funding and national policy inclusion, which supports their culturally based, community-focused approach.

The analysis showed that poverty, gender-based violence, and systemic failure operated as common causes between Mexico and Canada despite their different structural frameworks. Women and girls in both nations remain at risk because institutional failures persist across these countries.

Discussion

At the beginning of the research, I had a general idea of the existence of the problem of human trafficking in Canada and how it is linked with social inequality. Nevertheless, as the study was being conducted, I gained a better appreciation of the fact that the issue of discrimination and oppression is not only historical but also systemic and institutional and affects Indigenous women and girls. This increased awareness of the issue influenced the direction of the study and, therefore, the merits as well as the weaknesses of the study.

One of the major advantages of the project was the conceptual framework that was adopted for the study, which is the interconnectivity between colonial effects, structural violence, and institutional racism. From the peer-reviewed articles, government documents and Indigenous resources, the study provided evidence of the ongoing nature of these injustices and how they continue to contribute to the current situation that puts people at risk of being trafficked. The study sought to subvert the

conventional discourse and instead emphasize the resilience of the community, the culture and the demand for change in the structure of the society.

The application of policy analysis, especially when analyzing the NSTCHT, was another methodological strength. This approach allowed for a critical evaluation of policy gaps, such as the absence of Indigenous leadership in policy formulation, poor regulatory environment for digital platforms, and insufficient trauma-informed and culturally sensitive services. The findings of the study presented a more critical analysis of the situation and underscored the significance of Indigenous leadership in the fight against trafficking.

However, the study had the following weaknesses. Perhaps the biggest one is that it did not involve primary data collection. Although this decision was primarily influenced by the limited time and financial resources available for the project, the absence of primary data ultimately constrained the study's ability to capture the emotional and experiential dimensions of the issue. Without direct engagement with survivors or community members, the research lacked the lived perspectives that could have deepened its analysis and enhanced its authenticity. Future research should entail collaboration with Indigenous people's organizations that can assist in ethical and trauma-informed ways of engaging communities and supporting the integration of lived experience into data collection.

Another limitation was the availability and coverage of data. Although the research used government and academic sources, there was a deficiency of data that was broken down by Indigenous peoples and trafficking. This gap prevented the author from being able to measure the magnitude and nature of the problem completely. Although indirect measures and estimates were used, the weaknesses of the measures restricted the level of analysis. In future studies, using grey literature, which comprises

reports of non-governmental organizations and community-based research, can provide a more detailed and realistic understanding.

The sources were selected within the past 15 years, ensuring that the findings remained relevant and reflected current trends. The lack of time limited further exploration of other issues like inter-jurisdictional coordination or the changing roles of the government in relation to technology companies. These are crucial topics that need further analysis. Furthermore, the lack of funding and support from institutions limited the opportunities for primary research and the establishment of partnerships with Indigenous peoples. Future research planning should focus on these areas by providing more time for partnership development and resource acquisition.

The research process was also quite demanding in both the emotional and the rational domains. Reading about cases of coercion, manipulation, and exploitation of young people was, at times, uncomfortable. I started this project as a non-Indigenous immigrant from Mexico with certain beliefs, for instance, that Canada has a human rights system that protects people from such forms of exploitation. This assumption was proven wrong when I read about the effects of colonialism on the Indigenous peoples of Canada. These realizations made me reflect on myself and made me realize that there are similar forms of structural violence in Canada as well as in Mexico.

The project demonstrated that human trafficking requires analysis beyond criminal justice frameworks because it stems from historical and societal failures. The lack of primary data restricted the study's findings, yet the process confirmed how research becomes stronger when it serves communities ethically while following survivor-informed approaches and maintaining cultural safety standards. Future research will include three methodological improvements: qualitative interviews will be

added to the study, while I will enhance my engagement with Indigenous scholarship and pursue interdisciplinary approaches that link policy analysis to real-life experiences.

The study's limitations did not stop this capstone project from providing significant knowledge about human trafficking as a structural problem. The research confirmed that human trafficking needs Indigenous-led and culturally safe approaches which prioritize survivors' needs. The foundation established through this work will direct my future academic and advocacy pursuits toward equity and justice alongside meaningful collaboration with communities experiencing harm.

Recommendations

The results of this research project show that the current National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking (2019-2024) does not include adequate provisions for Indigenous women and girls, particularly those from rural and remote regions in Canada. The NSTCHT makes efforts in the prevention, protection, prosecution, partnership and empowerment pillars; nevertheless, it fails to focus on Indigenous-led, community-based and culturally grounded solutions instead of a law enforcement and generalized victim support approach. Also, the strategy is not very strong on the use of digital technologies in recruitment and has insufficient data collection efforts, which leaves the Indigenous populations vulnerable.

First, the NSTCHT should move away from the current law enforcement-focused model and adopt a survivor-centered, Indigenous-peoples-led approach. This means having Indigenous leaders and survivors participate in the formation and application of policies to combat trafficking to ensure that the policies are culturally appropriate. It is imperative to incorporate an Indigenous anti-trafficking task force that would include law enforcement, social services and Indigenous knowledge systems.

The current strategy has a major missing element: it does not have enough specific provisions for Indigenous women and girls living in rural and remote areas. The federal government should ensure that there is continuous funding to create mobile outreach teams, culturally safe shelters, trauma-informed mental health services and long-term rehabilitation programs for rural areas. Other factors that contribute to the vulnerability of Indigenous girls in these areas include limited access to transportation, isolation, and low levels of digital literacy. To this end, community engagement, mentorship, and culturally appropriate education must be prioritized.

Also, due to the rising use of social media in recruitment for trafficking, the strategy should go further in calling for government regulations of tech companies. This includes the use of artificial intelligence to detect trafficking-related content, the quick deletion of marked content, and legal consequences for platforms that do not enforce the rules. The strategy should also promote Indigenous-led digital literacy programs that aim to teach youth how to recognize and prevent online grooming and manipulation.

Besides digital literacy, prevention measures should be made to include anti-gang programs that address Indigenous youth who can be forced into trafficking networks. It is important to have community-based safety, economic, and cultural projects that are implemented locally.

The foster care system needs an immediate change. Traffickers specifically target Indigenous youth in the foster care system. It is crucial that national policies include training in Indigenous cultural competence and trauma-informed care for foster care workers, as well as mentorship and aftercare programs for Indigenous youth leaving the care system.

A very important enhancement to the strategy is the establishment of an annual Indigenous-led national conference on human trafficking. This summit would be a

common forum for policymakers, Indigenous leaders, survivors, law enforcement, and NGOs to discuss progress, exchange best practices, and co-create future actions.

Finally, survivor-led funding programs should be widened to encompass Indigenous women from rural areas and should include economic power projects, education scholarships, and skills training. One must be financially independent to escape the cycle of being a victim of trafficking.

Conclusion

Human trafficking remains a critical issue affecting Indigenous women and girls in Canada, deeply rooted in historical injustices, socio-economic disparities, and essential failures. Despite existing legal frameworks, significant gaps persist in addressing the complexities of digital exploitation, law enforcement biases, and inadequate survivor support.

The historical experience, the child welfare system, the economy, and gangs have contributed to the cycle of vulnerability in which these communities have been placed, and therefore, they have become easy prey for traffickers. Research also shows that the failure of support institutions such as the police, social services and even digital platforms contributes to the worst of the problem, and many victims have no one to turn to for help. The use of social media has greatly expanded the possibilities for recruitment, and therefore, trafficking has become less obvious and harder to prevent. Some sites like Facebook and Instagram have replaced the streets and have helped in the growth of online recruitment, which makes it hard for the police and other child protection agencies to interfere.

Despite the NSTCHT and other efforts, current policies are still mostly law enforcement-based and not survivor-centred, preventive, or community-based. It is evident that there is a need to address trafficking from a holistic and intersectional

perspective, with culturally appropriate services, Indigenous-led programs, and targeted strategies for high-risk populations. To effectively combat human trafficking, Canada must focus on supporting survivors, prevention, and structural changes that address the source of the problem, such as poverty, racism, and institutions' shortcomings. Thus, the nation can develop a stronger strategy that includes implementing measures to address online trafficking, enhancing protection for children in foster care, increasing awareness, and supporting Indigenous solutions

A shift toward survivor-centred, Indigenous-led interventions is essential to combat trafficking effectively. Implementing digital safety measures, improving data collection, and reforming foster care services are crucial steps toward mitigating vulnerabilities. Moreover, law enforcement must undergo comprehensive training to adopt trauma-informed and culturally competent responses.

The fight against human trafficking requires a multifaceted, intersectional, and proactive approach. Future research should prioritize firsthand accounts from survivors and Indigenous organizations, along with policy evaluations on digital trafficking trends. Canada must move beyond punitive approaches and invest in long-term, community-based solutions that empower Indigenous women and girls to break free from cycles of exploitation.

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