Sundarbans, West Bengal: When trafficking and child marriage become "survival strategies" — and how communities fight back

In the Sundarbans, the conversation around women's safety is never just about "crime." It is about geography, climate, poverty, migration, and the fragile line between safety and exploitation. Over decades, women and girls in the delta have faced a specific pattern of risk: **distress-driven movement**—after a cyclone, crop failure, debt, or job loss—followed by **broker-driven promises** of work or marriage that sometimes turn into trafficking and abuse.

At the same time, the Sundarbans also has a long history of resistance: women's groups, survivor-activists, local NGOs, teachers, panchayat members, police, and child protection systems pushing back—case by case, village by village.

Why the Sundarbans is uniquely vulnerable

The Sundarbans is an ecosystem of islands and river channels. For many families, one cyclone can mean:

- a broken embankment and flooded home
- saltwater entering fields
- loss of paddy, fish ponds, livestock
- debt and distress migration

When livelihoods collapse, families often look for urgent options—work outside, loans, or "safe marriages" for daughters. That's exactly where informal brokers enter: offering **jobs in cities** or **marriage arrangements** that look like rescue, but can become exploitation.

This vulnerability framing is also echoed in official systems that treat trafficking as an organized crime requiring specialized response—West Bengal CID notes it set up a specialized anti-human trafficking cell in **January 2011**.

What trafficking looks like (beyond the stereotypes)

Trafficking is not always dramatic kidnapping. In many real-life cases, it happens through ordinary-looking routes:

1) "Job in the city"

A recruiter offers domestic work or a factory job—Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru—often with advance money for travel. Phones are seized, wages withheld, movement restricted. Some victims are pushed into sex work; others into forced labour.

2) "Marriage" as a cover

A girl is married off to someone outside the district/state. Later she may face confinement, sexual violence, forced labour, or re-trafficking. Families may not report quickly because it looks like "a marriage," not a crime.

3) Missing children becoming trafficking cases

Many trafficking cases begin as "missing." If reporting is delayed, the trail goes cold fast.

4) Transit points: railways and bus routes

Rail stations become critical intervention sites. In West Bengal, transit points like New Jalpaiguri are treated as sensitive for trafficking monitoring by agencies and commissions.

Child marriage: why it rises after crises

Child marriage is often discussed as "tradition," but in the Sundarbans it is frequently described by families as **protection and survival**:

- "If she is married, one mouth less to feed."
- "A husband's home will be safer."
- "If we delay, dowry will rise."
- "There is no school nearby / transport is unsafe."

These are not just individual choices. They are decisions shaped by poverty, insecurity, and social pressure—especially when disasters break routine life.

State wide data still shows West Bengal has a serious child marriage burden (NFHS-based analysis has repeatedly highlighted this).

And the most effective prevention policies tend to be the ones that keep girls in school and delay marriage, such as **Kanyashree** (launched 2013; widely described by UNICEF and researchers as a flagship approach).

Real-life "chain stories" from the region: risk → rescue → rehabilitation

Across media and field accounts, a recurring pattern appears:

1. **Shock** (cyclone, debt, illness)
2. **Offer** (job/marriage)
3. **Movement** (to city or out-of-state)
4. **Control** (phone taken, violence, confinement)
5. **Rescue** (police/NGO action, often via transit points)
6. **Return** (homecoming, medical help, legal case)
7. **Rehabilitation** (the hardest part: education, livelihood, social acceptance)

Rehabilitation matters because without stable income and community support, survivors can face renewed targeting. That's why newer systems emphasize linking women to **One Stop Centres**, police support, hospitals, and legal aid through integrated helplines.

What has been done over the years: a shifting response model

The response ecosystem has changed in phases:

Early NGO-led decades: prevention + survivor support

Bengal has had long-running NGOs working on trafficking prevention, rescue support, counselling, and reintegration—especially connecting rural "source" areas with Kolkata and destination networks.

Government schemes and system-building

Over time, the response expanded to include:

- **specialized policing** (like WB CID's anti-trafficking cell)
- **women's helpline integration** linking to emergency services and One Stop Centres

- **girl-child schooling incentives** (Kanyashree as a major prevention measure)

Today: prevention is not just awareness—it's "safe livelihoods + safe mobility"

The newer understanding is blunt: **awareness alone cannot defeat trafficking** if families have no safe income and girls have no safe route to school/work.

What actually works (when it's done seriously)

From field experience across India and consistent patterns in case reporting, the strongest protective factors are:

1) Early reporting of "missing"

Fast FIR + fast coordination saves lives.

2) School continuation for girls

Every year a girl stays in school reduces risk of early marriage and exploitation. Kanyashree-style incentives matter most when schools are accessible and safe.

3) Community watch systems with women at the center

SHGs, mothers' groups, adolescent girls' groups, and survivor-activists are often the first to notice suspicious recruitment.

4) Safe migration practices (because migration will happen)

- verify recruiter identity
- share travel details with family/SHG
- keep copies of ID documents
- avoid sending minors for work
- insist on written job terms where possible

5) Rehabilitation as a real plan, not a slogan

Good rehabilitation typically includes:

- medical support
- trauma counselling
- legal aid
- education re-entry
- livelihood training + job placement
- protection from social stigma

If you or someone you know needs help

If there is immediate danger, call the emergency system first:

- **112** – Emergency Response Support System (Pan-India).
- **181** – Women Helpline (24×7 support and referrals).
- **1098** – CHILDLINE (24×7 emergency support for children).
- **14490** – NCW Women Helpline (digital complaint registration/referrals).

(If you're reporting a missing child, do it immediately—don't "wait a day.")

What we must stop doing (as a society)

Some things unintentionally strengthen trafficking networks:

- treating child marriage as a “family matter”
- blaming survivors instead of recruiters and exploiters
- delaying police complaints due to stigma
- normalizing child domestic work and “placement” for minors
- assuming marriage equals safety

A practical, hopeful way forward for the Sundarbans

If we want to reduce trafficking and child marriage in the Sundarbans, the agenda has to be local and practical:

1. **Girls’ education + safe transport + hostel support** in vulnerable blocks
2. **Livelihood packages after disasters** that reduce distress migration
3. **Village-level “safe migration desks”** run through SHGs/FPCs/panchayat facilitation
4. **Stronger monitoring of recruiters and marriage brokers**
5. **Survivor-led community prevention**, with paid roles and dignity
6. **Rehabilitation that includes jobs**, not only shelter

Women’s safety here is not a single program. It’s a continuous system: social protection, policing, education, and livelihoods working together.

1) CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE SUNDARBANS: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, SOLUTIONS

In the Sundarbans, child marriage often rises not because people "don't know it's illegal," but because families feel trapped between **risk, poverty, and uncertainty**. When embankments break, fields turn saline, fish ponds collapse, and wage work dries up, households make fast decisions. In that pressure cooker, marriage can look like a "solution": one less mouth to feed, protection from harassment, lower dowry now than later, or a belief that a husband's home will be safer.

What pushes families toward early marriage

Economic shock + insecurity is the common thread. After major cyclones and prolonged livelihood disruptions, journalists and field organisations have repeatedly described early marriage as a coping mechanism in vulnerable Sundarbans blocks.

Other drivers that show up again and again:

- **School disruption**: distance, unsafe routes, inadequate transport, cost of uniforms/books, or the "what's the point?" feeling when family income collapses.
- **Social pressure**: "people will talk," fear of relationships, harassment, or elopement.
- **Debt and dowry anxiety**: families fear that delaying will increase demands.
- **Low trust in protection systems**: if reporting harassment feels risky or futile, families may choose marriage as "prevention."

West Bengal remains a high-burden state for early marriage in NFHS-based analyses, which is why prevention needs to be treated as a serious development priority, not only a legal issue.

What early marriage does to girls and communities

Child marriage is linked to:

- **school dropout** and reduced lifetime income
- **early pregnancy risks** and poor maternal/child health outcomes
- higher vulnerability to **domestic violence** and control
- a greater chance of exploitation through marriage "arrangements" that are not what they seem

In the Sundarbans, the link between child marriage and trafficking risk is especially important: marriages arranged through brokers or distant networks can become a pathway into confinement and abuse.

What works (when it's done seriously)

The most effective approaches combine **education, incentives, safety, and livelihoods**.

Keep girls in school. Programmes like **Kanyashree** (launched 2013) are widely discussed as a major state-level prevention lever because they incentivize schooling continuation and delaying marriage.

But incentives work best only when paired with:

- safe transport / bicycles / escort support
- functional secondary schools nearby
- toilets, menstrual hygiene support, and safe spaces
- parents' counselling and community norm work

Shock response = child marriage prevention. In post-disaster periods, families need:

- emergency cash/food security
- livelihood restart support (seeds, tools, pond repair, wage work)
- quick restoration of schooling

Community protection networks. SHGs, teachers, ASHA/Anganwadi workers, adolescent groups, and survivor-activists matter because they spot risk early—before a marriage is fixed.

If you suspect a child marriage is being planned

Act early and calmly:

- talk to a trusted teacher/ICDS worker/SHG leader
- approach the local police station or child protection office
- use child helplines for immediate action: **1098 CHILDLINE** and emergency **112**

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2) How trafficking happens: common tactics and red flags

Trafficking in and out of the Sundarbans rarely begins with dramatic abduction. It often starts with a conversation that sounds helpful: *"I can get her a job." "I know a good marriage proposal." "She'll be safe in the city."*

Field reporting from Sundarbans blocks after major livelihood shocks describes exactly this pattern: **economic distress → recruiter approach → movement → control/exploitation**.

The most common tactics

1) The "job offer"

A recruiter promises domestic work, hotel work, factory work, or caregiving with good pay. Travel is arranged quickly. Sometimes an advance is offered (which later becomes "debt"). Phones may be taken "for safety." The destination changes mid-route.

2) The "marriage proposal"

A broker offers a match outside the district/state: "good family," "no dowry," "stable income." After marriage, the woman may face confinement, violence, or forced labour/sexual exploitation. Because it's framed as marriage, families hesitate to report—time is lost.

3) The "missing child" pathway

Many trafficking cases are first registered as "missing." Delays are dangerous because traffickers move people across districts fast. Rapid reporting is the single biggest protective action.

4) Transit manipulation

Railway stations and long-distance routes are frequently used. Interception at transit points is a known strategy: for example, groups have been stopped and questioned when travel details and documentation didn't add up.

Red flags families and communities should watch for

- "Don't tell anyone; it will create problems."
- "No need for a written agreement."
- "Hand over her phone; I'll keep it safe."
- "We'll decide the destination later."
- A recruiter pushing for **immediate departure**.
- Travel without clear address, employer details, or return plan.
- Minors being sent for work or marriage.

How to reduce risk (safe migration checklist)

Migration isn't going to stop—so **make it safer**:

- verify recruiter identity (ID, address, phone)
- share itinerary with family/SHG/teacher
- keep copies of Aadhaar and documents
- insist on a written job description and pay details
- arrange a daily check-in schedule
- never send a minor for domestic work
- if something feels off at a station, ask for help immediately

Get help fast

- **112** (Emergency Response Support System)
- **181** (Women Helpline)
- **1098** (CHILDLINE)

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3) Rescue to Rehabilitation: What Survivors Actually Need

Rescue is a beginning, not an ending. One of the hardest truths in anti-trafficking work is this: **if rehabilitation fails, the risk of re-trafficking rises**.

Real case narratives from West Bengal-linked reporting show rescue happening through police action, NGO coordination, or transit interception—followed by the much more complex question: *What now?*

What rescue often looks like (ground reality)

- A family reports a missing girl.
- Police/NGOs track calls, routes, or recruiters.
- A raid/interception happens in a destination city or at transit points.
- Survivors are brought to a safer place for immediate care.

Examples include girls rescued from destination cities after being lured through job promises, and minors recovered through joint police/NGO coordination.

The 5 layers of rehabilitation (and why each matters)

1) Immediate safety

Survivors may need shelter that is secure from traffickers. For minors, child protection homes; for adults, safe shelters and protection planning.

2) Medical care

Health screening, STI care where relevant, treatment for injuries, nutrition support—without judgment.

3) Psychosocial support

Trauma counselling is not “one session.” Survivors need time, dignity, and choice.

4) Legal aid

FIR support, statements, protection in court processes, compensation pathways. Survivors often drop out of cases because the process is exhausting, stigmatizing, and expensive.

5) Economic reintegration

This is the “make or break” step. Without education re-entry, skill training, or safe jobs, families remain vulnerable and recruiters return.

A practical illustration of economic reintegration appears in reporting on survivor training-to-employment pathways—showing why stable work can be a strong protective factor.

What communities must stop doing

Rehabilitation collapses when communities:

- blame survivors (“why did she go?”)
- isolate them socially
- treat return as “shame”
- push immediate marriage as “solution”

Survivors don’t need pity. They need **safety + options + respect**.

If you’re supporting a survivor

The most helpful approach is:

- believe her, don’t interrogate
- avoid public disclosure
- connect to women/child helplines and local protection services
- support education or livelihood options
- keep follow-up active for months, not days

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4) What communities can do: SHGs, schools, panchayats

The best anti-trafficking work is often quiet: a teacher notices a girl has stopped coming to class; an SHG leader hears about a recruiter; a panchayat member refuses to certify a suspicious marriage; a survivor-activist pushes a family to file an FIR immediately.

A powerful case-based example is survivor-activists supporting families to report missing children quickly and accompanying police in recovery—demonstrating community vigilance as prevention.

The “community firewall” model

You don’t need a big office to reduce risk. You need a network.

Schools

- track attendance and immediately follow up on dropouts
- run adolescent clubs and safe reporting mechanisms
- educate families on safe migration and early marriage harms

SHGs

- create “travel verification” norms (no minor leaves without checks)
- map recruiters and unknown agents
- build emergency funds so families don’t accept dangerous offers

Panchayats

- make child marriage socially costly and administratively difficult
- coordinate with police, ICDS, health services
- ensure post-disaster relief reaches women-headed households first

Health and ICDS workers

- track high-risk households (dropouts, extreme poverty, recent disaster loss)
- provide counselling, referrals, and rapid alert systems

Post-disaster protection is key

After cyclones and embankment breaches, the risk window expands. This is when communities should intensify:

- door-to-door check-ins on adolescent girls
- school re-enrollment drives
- livelihood restart support
- verification of new “agents” arriving in villages

Sundarbans reporting after major cyclones repeatedly highlights the link between disaster-driven hardship and trafficking vulnerability, which is why protection must be treated as part of disaster response.

Helplines and reporting

- **112** Emergency
- **181** Women Helpline
- **1098** CHILDLINE