**[Flesh trade](https://www.dawn.com/news/1424661/flesh-trade)**

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IN 2016 two young girls in their teens were snatched by their stepbrother from their home in a squatter settlement of Karachi and have not been seen since then by their widowed mother. More than a month ago, I wrote about her futile search for her daughters.

Many readers expressed their shock and sorrow at a heinous crime which is hardly recognised by society. An email from a doctor, who has been reading my columns and corresponding with me for long, shattered me. No identities are disclosed for obvious reasons.

He wrote, “O Sister, You have touched a very sore point of my being. Prudes, hypocrites and idiots may deny the existence of brothels in any sizable town in Pakistan. This flesh industry cannot run for a single day without the knowledge and protection of the local police who get rewarded handsomely both in cash as well as in kind. I had a long and painful experience of this flesh trade after my nine-year-old niece was kidnapped in the 1980s. She was sold through a chain of agents to a pimp who operated brothels in Sukkur, Rawalpindi and Dubai. The kidnappers, the intermediaries, the pimps and the cops were, incidentally, all honourable men.”

He writes about the symbiotic relationships of these partners in crime and how futile it would have been to ask his friends in the police to recover his niece. She was recovered eventually several years later when a friend became the martial law sub-administrator in the Zia regime and used his powers to order the police to do the job.

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Those were different times. Have things changed? One wishes they had. It is worth reading the 2018 report of the US Secretary of State on Trafficking in Persons (TIP), to learn how little has changed. I looked up the section on Pakistan which has been upgraded to ‘Tier 2’ from ‘Tier 2 on Watch List’ as it has “demonstrated increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period”. Before we start patting ourselves on the back a careful study is essential to get a complete picture of the slave trade as human trafficking is also termed.

By lumping together trafficking for sex and trafficking for labour under the broad heading of ‘trafficking’, TIP has blurred the gravity of the sex trade. True, trafficking for labour is in terms of numbers a bigger problem — more than half of those trafficked are for forced labour and beggary. But trafficking of girls and women for sex calls for our urgent attention because of the secrecy that shrouds it. Moreover, it is a bigger human problem considering that it affects the disadvantaged — minors and women.

The media regularly publicises police raids to recover bonded labour and their success rate in releasing persons trafficked for forced labour is relatively higher. But one doesn’t hear of the media reporting police raids on brothels or the prosecution of souteneurs.

I have learnt more about this issue of trafficking for sex in Pakistan from the US report than from indigenous sources. TIP states, “Convictions for sex trafficking decreased and the government’s overall convictions remained small compared with the extent of trafficking in Pakistan. Official complicity in trafficking crimes remained a pervasive problem, yet the government did not report new law-enforcement efforts to hold such officials accountable.”

No law has been adopted to criminalise sex trafficking within the country. The Pakistan Penal Code has been amended to criminalise sex trafficking of women and children but it is inconsistent with international law. Section 369-A of the PPC requires a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute child sex trafficking as an offence. Thus all cases of child sex trafficking are not criminalised.

According to the TIP document, Pakistan reported investigating 6,376 alleged sex traffickers and prosecuting 6,232 people during 2017 — an increase over 2016 from 2,979 alleged sex traffickers investigated and 2,021 prosecuted. But it is shocking that the overall conviction of sex traffickers decreased from 111 to 72. Punjab’s record was the most active with the province reporting over 90 per cent of the investigations, prosecutions and convictions.

Worse still is the disclosure that only 286 victims out of the 14,571 the police identified (without indicating the category of the trafficking they were victims of) were entrusted to rehabilitative care. It was not revealed what happened to the other 14,285 victims. One can ask how many of them were girls who were sent back to the brothels?

Unsurprisingly, there is a general complaint of officials found to be complicit in trafficking cases not being stringently prosecuted and punished.

“Some police reportedly acted against trafficking only when pressured by media and activists, and other reports indicated that police accepted bribes to ignore prostitution crimes, some of which may have included sex trafficking.”

This confirms what we unofficially know but cannot produce as proof to take the custodian of the law to court.

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