



HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN ASSAM

MAP THE SYSTEM 2022

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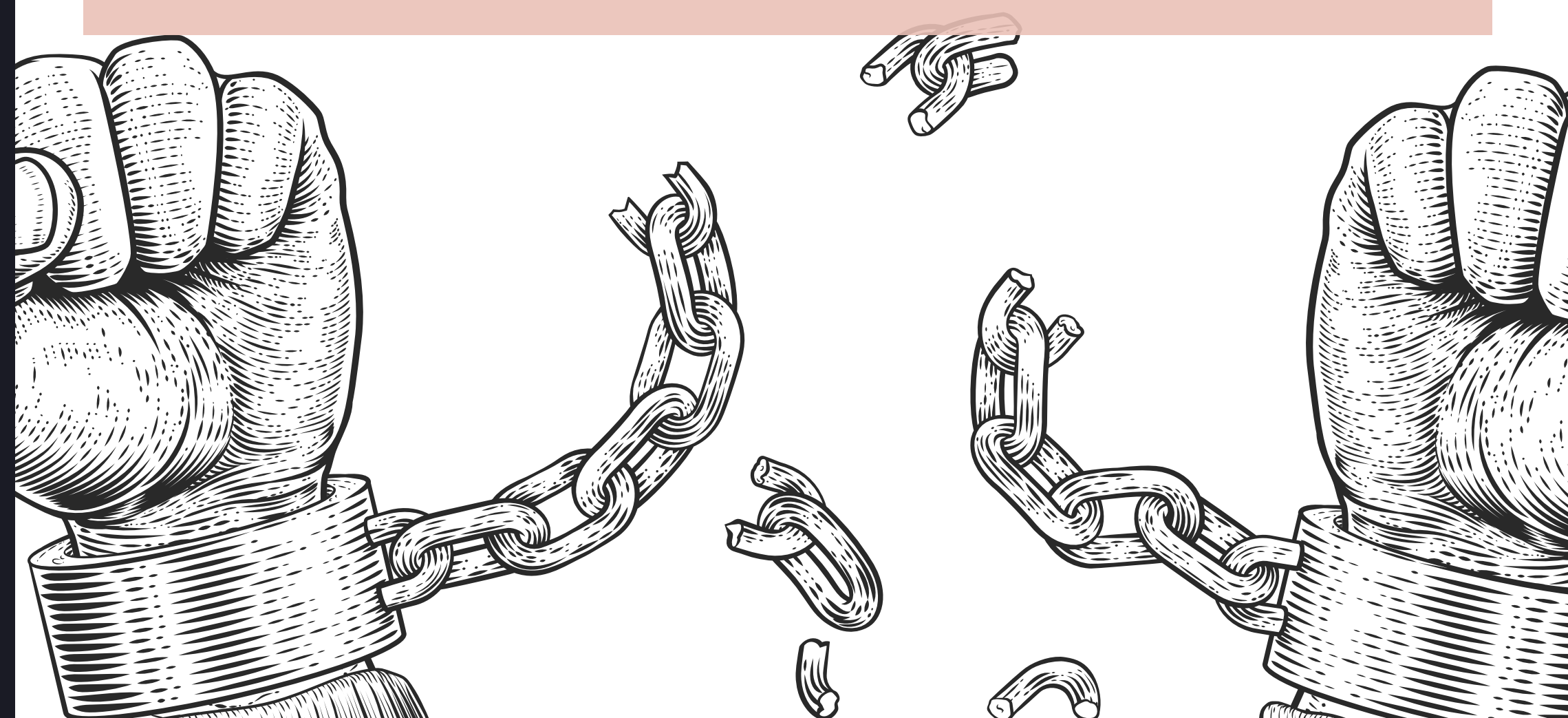
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Assam, India

Capital: Dispur

Districts: 27

Population: 31 million

Rural population: 26.8 million

Sex Ratio: 1012/1000

Literacy Rate: 72.19%

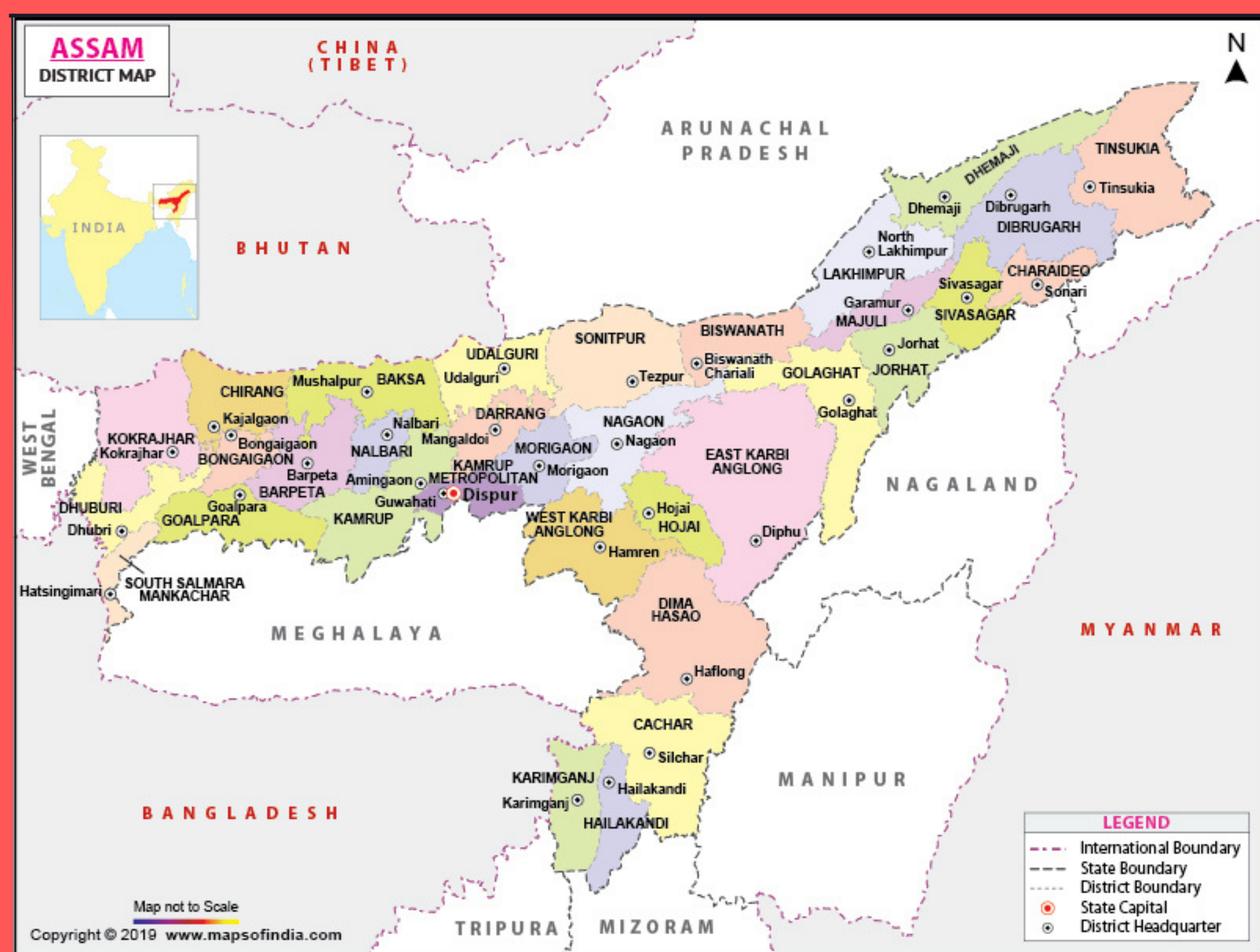
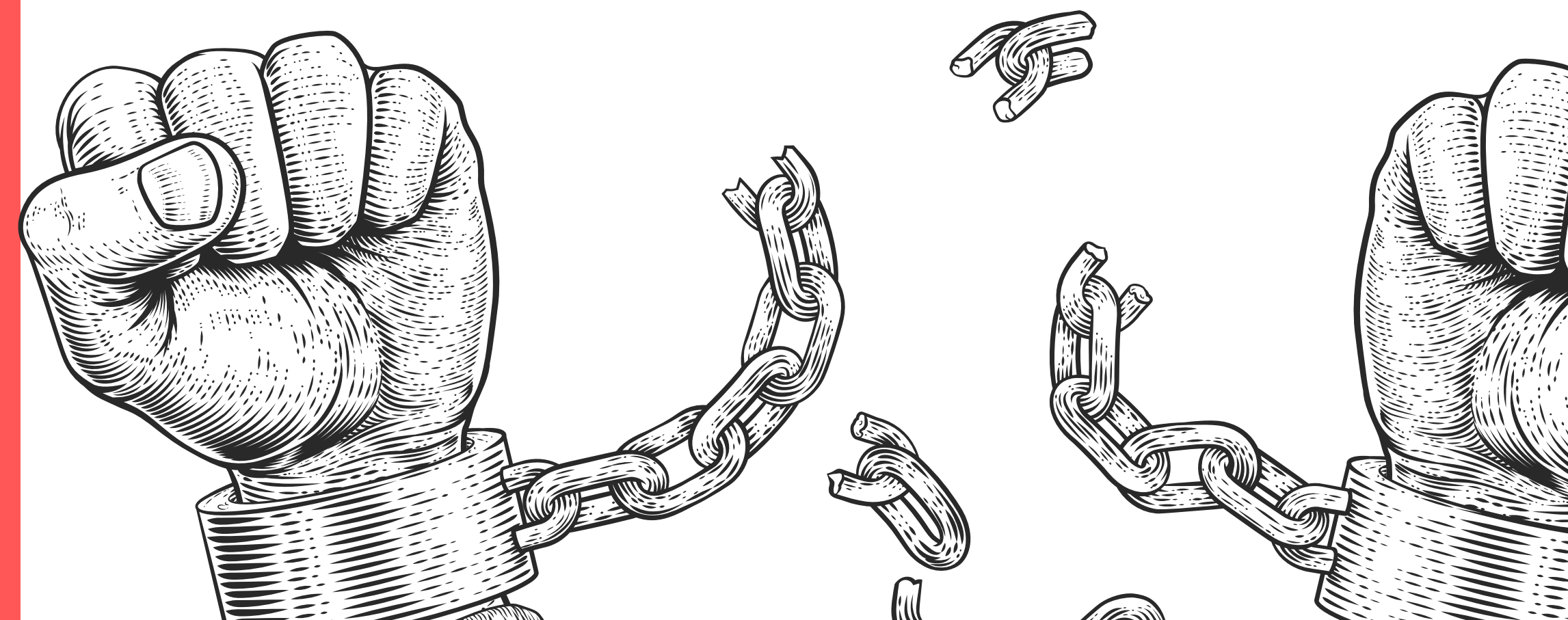


Figure 1: Map of Assam, with a reference to its geographic positionality in terms of other Indian states and neighbouring countries.

THE "PROBLEM" OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN ASSAM

Situated in Northeast India, the state of Assam presents a distinct case study in human trafficking due to its close proximity to international borders, rampant insurgency, ethnic conflict, natural disasters, and high rates of out-migration (Islary 2012; Ray 2015; Boruah and Roy 2021; Rai 2018; Bhattacharya 2012; Dutta 2013; Bhowmik 2021). In 2018, Assam officially recorded 308 cases of human trafficking, the second-highest figure in the country (Parashar 2022). However, scholars and activists indicate that such figures vastly underreport the extent of human trafficking prevalent in Assam, which has also been exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.



POSITIONALITY AND SYSTEMS THINKING APPROACH

Our team consists of three undergraduate students, two of Indian descent and one white American, and a field expert. The students’ lack of lived experiences related to trafficking is balanced by the field expert, who runs an NGO that works on the issue of bride trafficking in Assam. Nonetheless, our interpretation of human trafficking in Assam and the processes involved may be limited since none of us are Assamese residents or trafficking survivors.

Using a systems-thinking approach, we aim to trace the systematic and causal relations that make populations vulnerable to human trafficking and facilitate it in Assam. Since most victims of human trafficking are women and children, our analysis also delves into the gender inequality that underlies this practice.

To evaluate vulnerability to human trafficking in Assam, we conducted detailed secondary research through books, reports by state and non-state entities, journal articles, press articles, and government databases and websites. To identify ethical and culturally appropriate lenses, we interviewed trafficking survivors through key informants who work with our team member’s NGO. As a result, our challenge landscape and identified gaps in the solution landscape are grounded in lived experiences. We considered this to be an integral first-step in recognizing and including the agency and knowledge of survivors in the larger discussion around trafficking in Assam.



A SYSTEMS VIEW OF THE PROBLEM

The systematic process of mapping vulnerability to human trafficking in Assam unveiled a nexus between the secondary social position of vulnerable groups that leads to their economic, cultural, physical, and emotional exploitation, daily and during conflicts, and inadequate government interventions. Through systems-thinking, we identified that there are multiple drivers within each system – social, economic, political, environmental, and institutional – that contribute to an ecosystem of trafficking in Assam while facilitating and reinforcing each other to trap survivors in cycles of powerlessness. Utilizing a bottom-up approach to establish the boundary of our systems map, we realized that instead of being a sudden act of violence, trafficking is a product of daily practices, cultural norms, and historical events that outwardly seem disconnected.

2.8 million

people in Assam were affected by floods in 2020

267,203 ha

of crops destroyed during floods

450 camps

could only shelter 45,000 displaced people

55%

increase in child trafficking cases in 2019

0

convictions in human trafficking cases in 2020

Figure 2: Vulnerability to human trafficking in Assam: For each individual in the vulnerable community, a different intersection of these factors are at play.

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ROOT CAUSES

Gender Discrimination

Discouraged from participating in male-dominated spheres like the political, administrative, and public domains while being forced to comply with gendered norms, women in a patriarchal system occupy secondary social positions and are often viewed as bastions of ‘family honor’ (Goswami et. al 2005; Mahanta 1991; Behal 2004; Das 2013; R. Bhattacharya 2009). As a result, women face gender discrimination and domestic violence, which makes them more vulnerable to trafficking (Ray 2015; Changmai and Boruah 2021). From 2016 to 2018, Assam ranked second in India in the rate of total crimes against women (NCRB 2018). Since women and young girls are largely targeted, gender-based domination becomes both a cause and an effect of trafficking as it makes gendered violence or subjugation profitable (Ray 2015). Furthermore, with lack of awareness on the methods utilized by traffickers, women and their families become increasingly vulnerable to coercion or deception (Ray 2015).

Economic Insecurity

With poverty being a leading factor in increasing the vulnerability of individuals to trafficking, survivors often hail from poor rural families consisting of daily-wage laborers, small farmers, or landless agricultural laborers, most of whom lack sustainable incomes (Islary 2015; Bagchi and Sinha 2016; Bhaumik 2007; Ray 2015). Traditional and alternative livelihood options in Assam have also broken down due to rapid industrialization, globalization, and infrastructure development projects (Dutta 2013; Ray 2015). With economic opportunities lacking, especially for unskilled workers, many seek to migrate out of Assam for employment, increasing their vulnerability to fraud or coercion by traffickers who lure individuals with fake promises and monetary incentives (Bhowmik 2021; Deka 2021; Paul 2019; Ray 2015; Interviewee 2 2022).

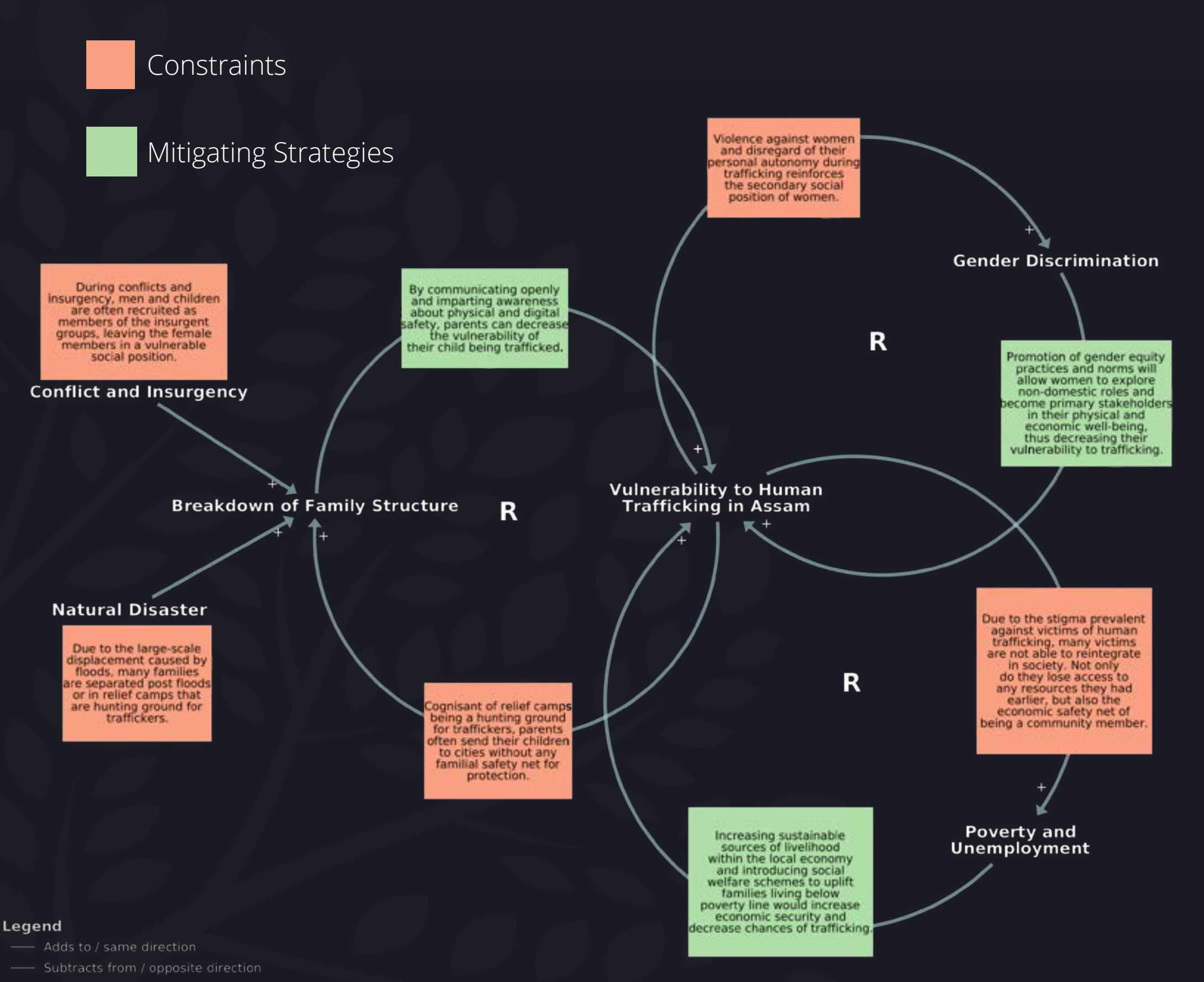


Figure 3: Root Causes Map: Relations between the root causes for vulnerability to Human Trafficking in Assam

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5th
poorest state in India
by per capita income
(Bhardwaj 2021)

31.98%
of people in Assam live
below the poverty line,
about 10% more than
the national average
(RBI 2021)

ROOT CAUSES

Conflict & Insurgency

Ethnic conflict and violence in Assam have contributed to widespread displacement, high rates of insurgency, killings, kidnapping, theft, alcoholism, and rapes, factors that make residents more vulnerable to trafficking (Dutta 2013; Islary 2012). Displacement causes families to leave properties behind and shift to relief camps, which commonly function as hunting grounds for traffickers who lure or coerce economically insecure individuals with promises of employment (Islary 2012; Ray 2015; India Human Rights Report 2006; Begum 2012). The threat of sexual violence during conflict forces families in relief camps to send away adolescent girls to cities, which also makes them vulnerable to predatory traffickers. Furthermore, conflict reinforces the power imbalance between men and women, as absence of the former, who provides social and economic security to families, exposes the latter to sexual and non-sexual violence (Ray 2015; Moser and Clark 2001; El Jack 2003).

Natural Disasters

Plagued by monsoon-season flash floods and landslides, while many communities in the Assam valley migrate out of the flood-prone region, others temporally settle across the riverbank due to lack of economically viable alternatives (Sharma 2012; Coelho 2013). With 95% of the Assamese population dependent on land resources and the main livelihood option restricted to agriculture, the risk of economic and social insecurity looms large as 23% of the state's cultivable land has become vulnerable to floods or droughts (Directorate of Economics and Statistics Assam 2011). Faced with the risk of these natural disasters, individuals often seek alternate means of livelihoods or try to migrate to other states through unsafe channels (Pisharoty 2011, Dasgupta 2011). Their economic powerlessness increases their vulnerability to traffickers who lure individuals with the promise of employment in other states (Dasgupta 2001). Further, due to large-scale displacement caused by natural disasters, many families are separated and cannot account for missing children or women who often become prey to trafficking (Coelho 2013).

Refer to the Appendix for more information on this section

PERPETUATING FACTORS

Within our broader systems map, we narrowed our lens through feedback loops to identify underlying structural issues that perpetuate and reinforce root causes of trafficking in Assam. This system thinking methodology helped us understand Assam’s unique vulnerability to human trafficking networks that operate nationally.

Alienation of Northeast India on a National level

Since national political actors and the media have neglected Northeast India, its issues are often excluded from the national policy agenda and despite efforts, the region has failed to attract enough private investment, except in the tea cultivation industry (Baruah 2007; Sonwalkar 2004; Mukherjee 2021; Hebbar 2014). This leaves the government as the central investor in the region and, as described below, government policies fail to foster long-term growth. Furthermore, Northeast Indians also suffer from racial profiling and discrimination by other Indians, which furthers their perceived alienation (Mukherjee 2021; Hebbar 2014).

Politicization of Ethnicities within Assam

Due to politics on immigration, Assam has become a hotbed of contention between the indigenous tribal population and Bengali-speaking Muslim groups believed to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh (Coelho 2012). These Muslim communities are frequently excluded from mainland towns and live in temporary settlements in char (riverine) areas, low-lying flood-prone regions of the Brahmaputra valley that are not densely inhabited by indigenous populations, which increases their exposure to natural disasters like flooding (Singh 2008; Shrivastava and Heinen 2005; Dasgupta 2001). Stigma against Muslim migrant communities extends beyond Assam to national policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that provides a pathway to Indian citizenship for all persecuted religious minorities except Muslims, rendering them stateless (Vishwanath and Kaunain 2019).



Figure 4: Perpetuating Factors Map: Alienation of Northeast India on a national level and politicization of ethnicities influence the three-way interaction between inequitable government policies, economic insecurity, and conflict and disaster.

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PERPETUATING FACTORS

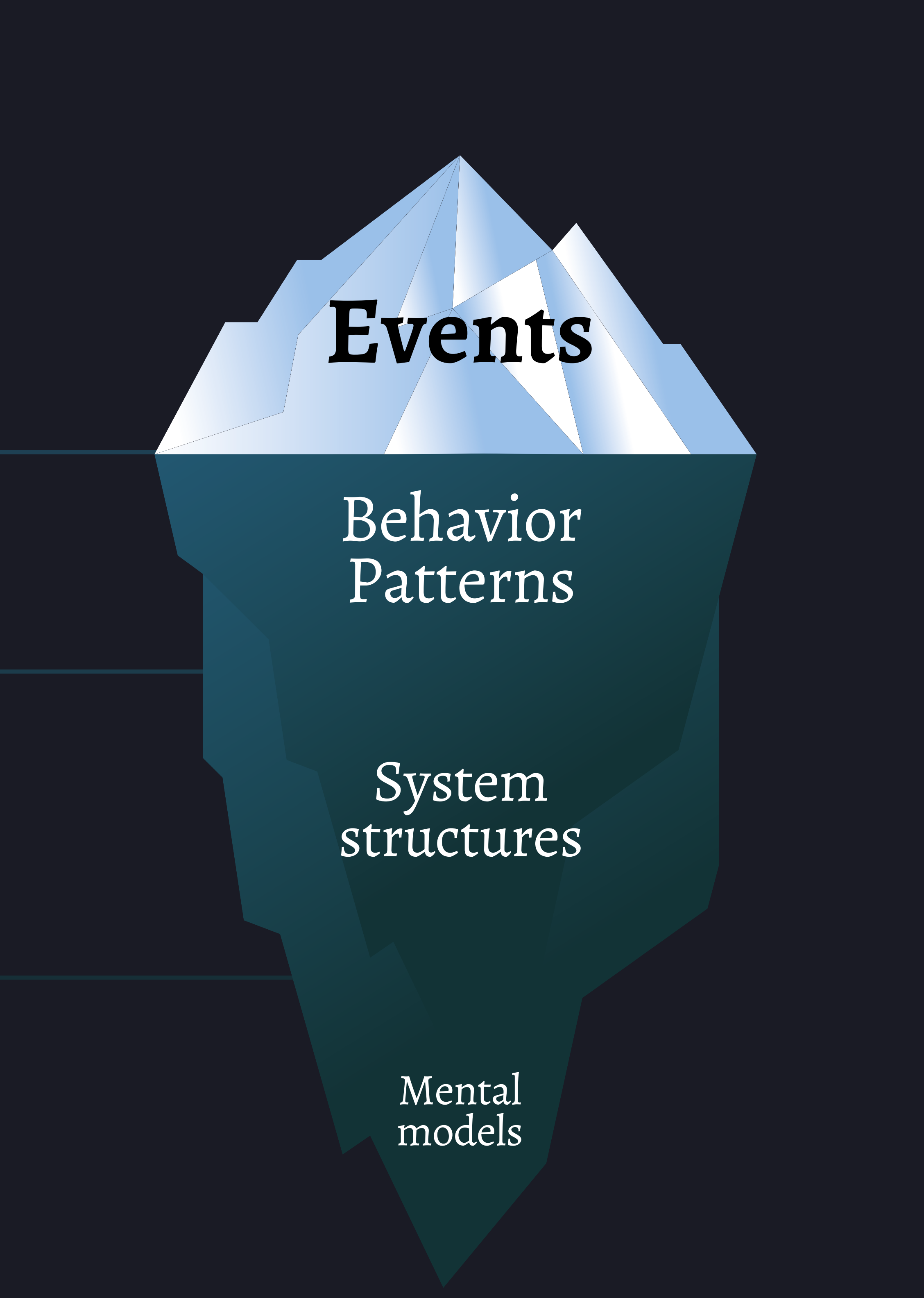
Inequitable and Lacking Government Policies

As the central actor for maintaining security, investing resources, and distributing welfare measures in Assam, the government has enacted ineffective policies like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 (AFSPA) and the two-children policy. AFSPA has enabled the government to undertake resource extraction under the guise of development in a militarized setting, leading Assamese residents to suffer from displacement, pollution, and lack of trust in government (Kakati 2021). Under the two-child policy, the state government has mandated that individuals with more than two children be ineligible for government jobs and has plans to extend this policy to welfare schemes, measures which penalize weaker sections of the population, including women, whose reproductive choices are often subject to patriarchal constraints (Saha 2021; Indian Express 2019). The government also allocates considerable investment and resources for ‘development’ but has neither built nor sustained institutions, failing to address poverty, conflict, and alienation, all of which contribute to long-term economic insecurity (Baruah 2007). For instance, even though Assam is the largest producer of raw bamboo in India, there have been no significant efforts to convert prevalent skills of weaving and bamboo/cane craft into opportunities for rural livelihoods (Gogoi 2020; Banerjee 2003).

Refer to the Appendix for more information on this section

Trafficking is not a sudden act of violence. Similarly to how systemic structures impact the positionality of vulnerable groups over a long period of time, institutional and systemic factors promote biased power-dynamics, facilitate violent networks and spaces, and discourage social intervention, thus directly and indirectly abetting the traffickers. Through this **iceberg model**, we tried to understand the mental models, structures, and events focusing on the traffickers to answer a critical question: Why traffickers traffic and what power-dynamic enables them?

Traffickers often commit sexual and non-sexual violence against vulnerable groups like women and children while trafficking.		Traffickers commonly utilize tactics of fraud, coercion, and/or deception to lure victims into being trafficked.	Instances of stereotyping and discrimination against at risk groups perpetuate their vulnerability to trafficking.	Traffickers are driven by the motivation to earn economic profit by trafficking individuals to destination states.
The economic power imbalance between vulnerable groups and traffickers enables the latter to lure the former.		Vulnerable sections of the population are often ignored by the status quo.		There is a consistent demand for trafficked individuals for the purposes of marriage, labor, or sex work in rich destination states, and many with low-sex ratios.
Vulnerable groups may suffer from lack of awareness due to illiteracy or early drop-out from schooling.		Traffickers tend to prey on socially and economically vulnerable groups such as the rural poor, those displaced due to disaster or conflict, children, and women.		
High social and environmental cost of rapid industrialization and urbanization leads to loss of traditional livelihood and disasters, increasing the vulnerability to unstable socio-economic and environmental conditions.		The existing anti-trafficking policies, laws, and enforcement efforts are inadequate and inefficient.		There is an imbalance in allocation of resources between rich and traditionally neglected states, especially North-East Indian states like Assam.
Lack of post-disaster or post-conflict rehabilitation policies and infrastructure due which affected groups are often left to fend for themselves.		Poor educational infrastructure in non-urban geographic areas perpetuates the cycle of vulnerability.		A preference for male children in certain communities leads to practices like female feticide, which leads to low-sex ratios in patriarchal communities.
Lack of stringent labor laws and an inadequate social welfare machinery enables populations to remain vulnerable and facilitates the process of trafficking.		Vulnerable groups are viewed and treated as objects for and by dominant groups, who dominate and dehumanize victims of trafficking.		
Vulnerable groups are viewed as politically and socially uninfluentia l since they lack economic and/or cultural power due to historical oppression , which makes it easier to neglect them without any accountability.		Patriarchy is a social and ideological construct that enables men to maintain monopoly on power and control women and children.		
		There is a social dissonance between Northeast-Indian populations and the Indian national identity, due to distinct ethnicities and culture .		



STAKEHOLDERS WHO CAN CREATE CHANGE

Government

The Central and state governments can decrease the vulnerability of the Assamese to human trafficking by addressing its root causes through a unified policy framework and socio-economic initiatives with a focus on prevention and rehabilitation. Building on existing framework, the government must address the legal vacuum in investigation and prosecution by expediting trafficking cases, increasing the number of rehabilitation shelters, strengthening prosecution and boosting the number of convictions, and reducing the chances of the victim being re-trafficked due to lack of access to basic resources and security (Nag 2016; Bhalla 2016). Government intervention must include direct stakeholders like civil society organizations and community members, especially target populations and trafficking survivors, to ensure that policies reflect the on-ground situation.

Civil Society Organizations

Civil society organizations can enact change by advocating for the rights of the vulnerable communities, highlighting the missing narratives of Assamese communities in the national discourse, and bridging gaps between government institutions and communities.

Local Assamese Communities

Parents and teachers play an integral role in addressing factors like familial neglect, domestic instability, absence of strong schooling system, and economic insecurity that make children vulnerable to child trafficking. By creating a social safety net, introducing positive social influences, discarding gender roles and prejudice, and imparting awareness about physical and digital security, these local stakeholders can decrease the chances of children being lured by traffickers (Sattva Consulting 2021).



Figure 5: Stakeholder Map

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SOLUTIONS LANDSCAPE

Central Government Policies and National Legal Framework

The Ministry of Home Affairs has established an Anti-Trafficking cell to assist law enforcement, mandated state governments to set up Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) at district level, and conducted regular coordination meetings with State AHTUs (Anti-Trafficking Cell, MHA; Rao and Kumar 2018; Sanjog 2020). Moreover, the Ministry of Women and Child Development has also initiated the Ujjwala Scheme and the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), now subsumed under Mission Vatsalya (Ibid). The Ujjwala scheme does not exist in all cities and districts, has inconsistent standard operating procedures, and suffers from low participation by NGOs due to the prevalence of risk in terms of high cost and security (Burns et al. 2021; R. Aditi 2018). While ICPS was allocated INR 1500 crore (\$194.92 million) in 2020-21, it is now subsumed under Mission Vatsalya, which was allocated an even lesser amount of INR 900 crore (\$ 116.95 million) in 2021-22, weakening child protection efforts across sectors (Sachdeva 2022). Further, Child Protection Committees planned under the ICPS, while functioning at district level, have not been instituted at the block level and village level, leading to a lack of decentralization in child protection efforts (Islam and Azad 2020). Next, there are various overlapping laws that deal with the crimes involving human trafficking:

Since each law has its own implementation procedures, it often leads to confusion in enforcement bodies, which are commonly plagued by corruption, lack of resources, deficient training, and dearth of coordination between them and other government bodies (Rishi 2021; Ribich 2011; US State Department 2021; Chakraborty 2017).

Refer to the Appendix for more information on this section

OVERLAPPING TRAFFICKING LAWS

Indian Penal Code (IPC) Section
370-370A, 372-373, 366, 374

Immoral Traffic Prevention Act
(ITPA) 1956

Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection
of Children) Act 2015

Bonded Labour System (Abolition)
Act (BLSAA) 1976

Protection of Children from Sexual
Offences Act (POCSO)

Contract Labour (Regulation and
Abolition) Act 1970

Child Labour (Prohibition and
Regulation) Act 1986

Prevention of Begging Act 1952

Goa Children's Act 2003



SOLUTIONS LANDSCAPE

Assam State Government Policies

The state government has created 63 women cells to counsel victims of crimes, set up a task force comprising of senior officers from the Police, Home Department, and Social Welfare Department to study the problem of human trafficking and discern remedial measures, and implemented the National Child Labour Project Scheme (NCLPS) to rehabilitate rescued child laborers (Human Trafficking, Assam Police). Furthermore, it has created a Task Force Coordination Committee to monitor anti-human trafficking measures, placed specially trained commando women police force known as “Virangana” under the Police Commissionerate of Guwahati to respond to crimes against women in public places, designed special police offices to investigate crimes under the ITPA of 1956, and set up a family counseling center at the Criminal Investigation Department Headquarters to assist and counsel individuals, especially women, who are victims of domestic violence, assault, harassment etc. The state government has also established Childline, a 24 hour free emergency phone service for children in need of care and protection (Child Rights and Helpline, Assam Police). Despite these achievements on paper, in recent years, the Assam state government authorities have allegedly ordered the police to register trafficking cases as kidnapping or missing persons to reduce the number of trafficking cases in official statistics, making it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the state government’s anti-trafficking policies (US State Department 2021).

Civil Society Interventions

NGOs in Assam like Nedan Foundation, Empower People, India Child Protection Fund, and Bachpan Bachao Andolan are involved in implementing the Ujjwala scheme, coordinating with AHTUs, carrying out rescue and reintegration by themselves, partnering with Childline implementation, facilitating vocational training and rehabilitation of rescued survivors, and assisting with the implementation of the NCLPS, among other measures (UNICEF 2014). Various NGOs also position themselves at destination points outside of Assam to rescue and reunify children and women trafficked from Assam (Ibid). Apart from NGOs, other civil society organizations like student unions and trade/labor unions are also involved with rescue and advocacy on human trafficking in Assam (Ibid). For instance, in 2019, members of All Assam Tai Ahom Students Union (AATASU) and Tai Ahom Yuva Parishad (TAYP) allegedly busted a human trafficking racket in Moran, and in August 2021, All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) organized an awareness program against human trafficking in Kokrajhar (Insidene 2019; Speed News 2021).

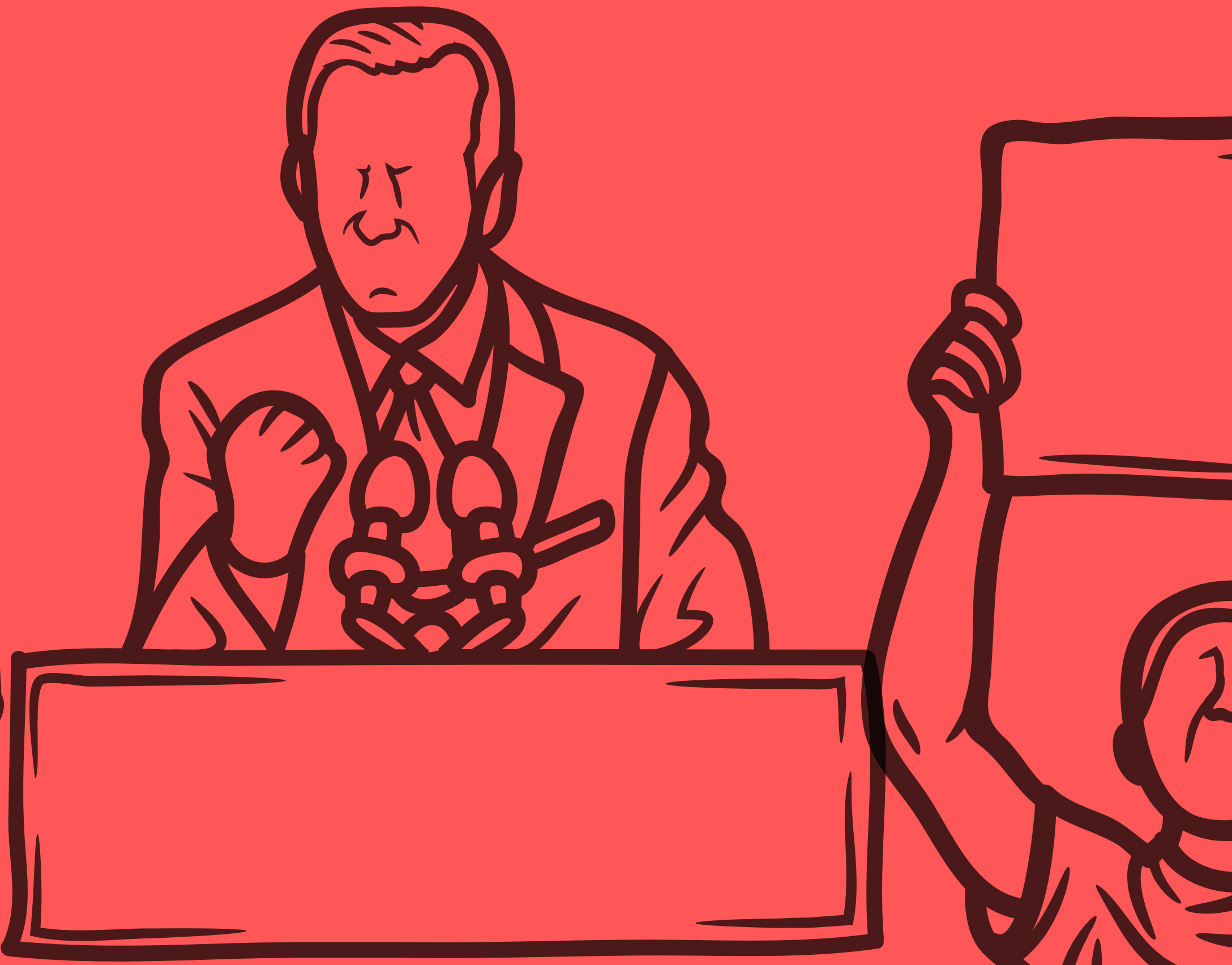
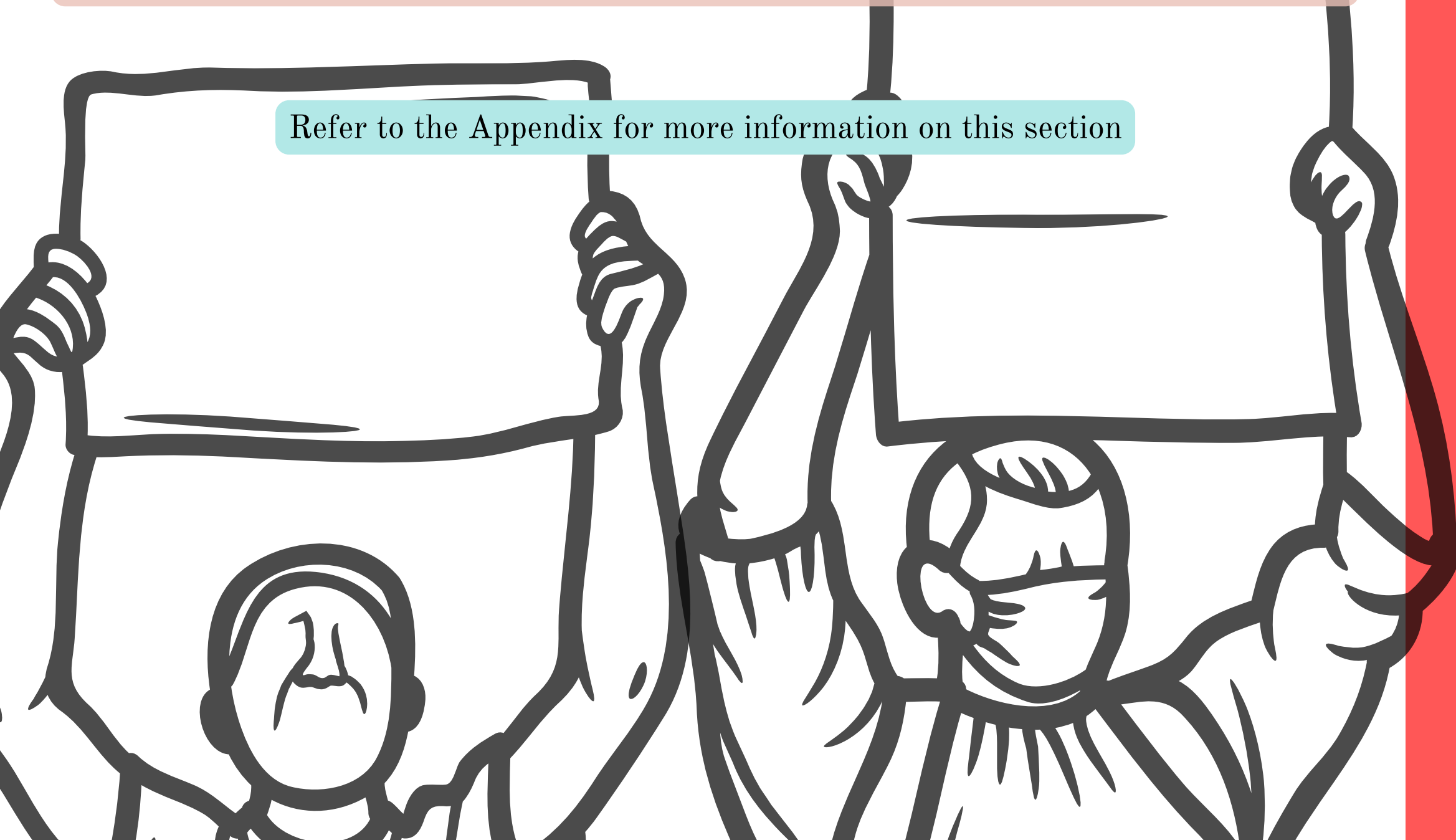
SOLUTIONS LANDSCAPE

International Interventions

India and Bangladesh have constituted a Task Force to deal with cross border trafficking, address the various issues relating to prevention of trafficking, victim identification, and repatriation, and make the process between the two countries speedy and victim-friendly (UNODC 2017). In terms of non-state actors, UNICEF has developed valuable partnerships with state and non-state stakeholders to provide quality services that aid in the healthy and prosperous growth of children in Assam (UNICEF 2014).

There is a lack of transnational collaboration between India and countries neighboring Assam like Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Nepal. The Bilateral Safety Corridor Coalition (BSSC) and the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings could serve as the basis for formulating biliteral or multilateral agreements and coalitions to combat cross-border trafficking (Reichel 2008; European Commission).

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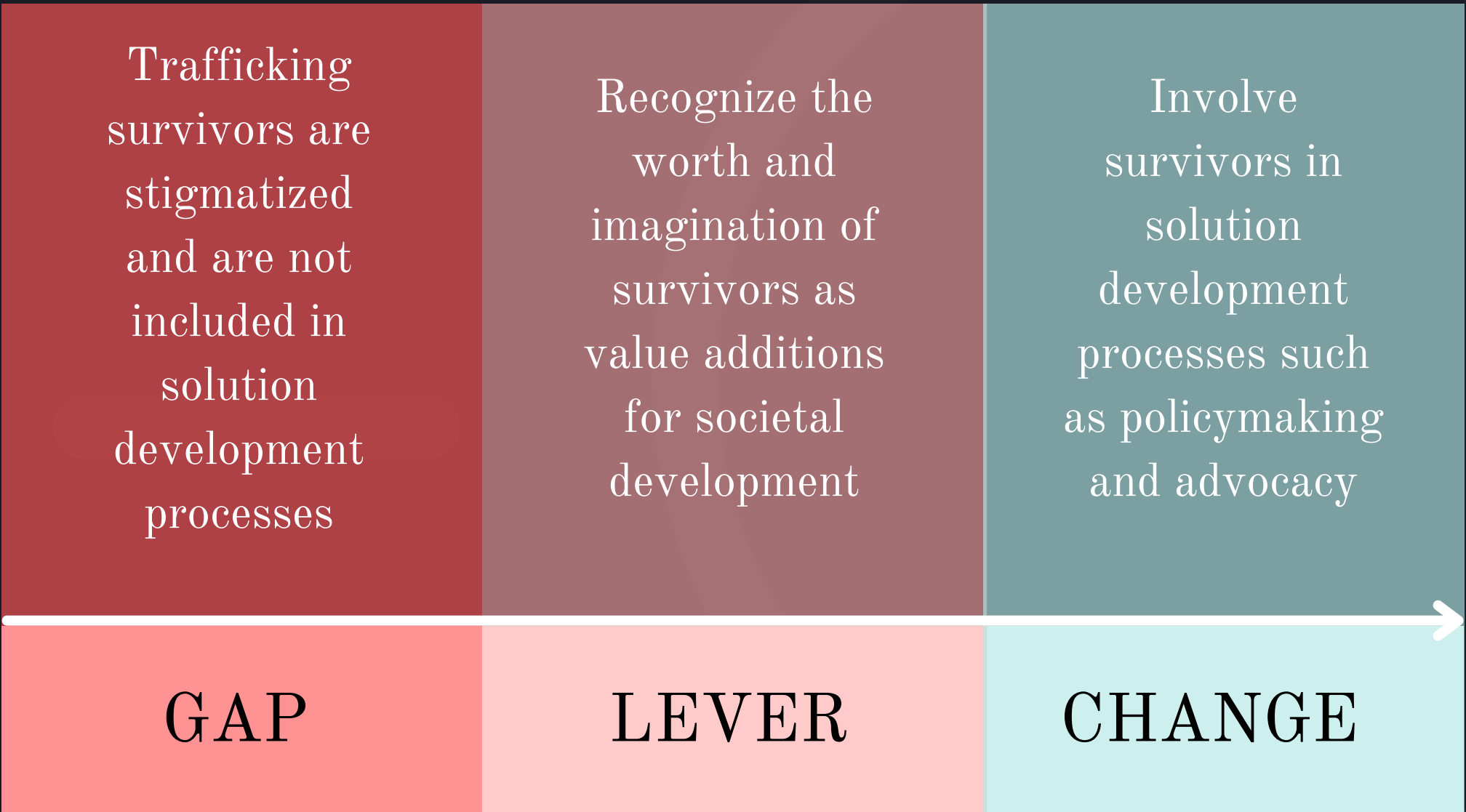
GAPS & LEVERS OF CHANGE

Stigma surrounding human trafficking survivors

Due to social stigma, the identity of trafficking survivors is reduced to the single event and their experiential knowledge is disregarded (Interviewee 2 2022). Instead of perceiving them as individuals aspiring for a different life, others often focus on a singular aspect of the trafficking process and disregard the survivors’ agency. This leads to the exclusion of survivors in the solution development process and discourages the development of survivor-led advocacy groups or unions.

Stakeholder Action: Government, Civil Society Organization, and Educational Institutions

- To combat social stigma, civil society organizations need to recognize the worth and imagination of trafficked individuals as value additions for societal development.
- Integrate survivors of different social backgrounds and ethnicities in the policymaking and advocacy process to account for their experiential knowledge.
- Media reports need to focus on the socio-political factors driving human trafficking in Assam instead of focusing on isolated occurrences of rescue.
- State governments need to recognize and fund support groups led by human trafficking survivors as an integral part of the rehabilitation and solution development process.



GAPS & LEVERS OF CHANGE

Insufficient manpower and redressal mechanism

Shortage of police officers and the lack of training and insufficient understanding of trafficking laws leads officials even in AHTUs to often register the crime under other legal sections, including dowry, missing persons, kidnapping, and domestic violence (Interviewee 2 2022). This leads to weaker prosecution arguments and thus, low rates of conviction. Further, lacking sensitivity, local police officials sometimes refuse to register First Information Reports as they misconstrue trafficking cases as incidents of elopement or consensual migration to avoid a prolonged investigation (Parashar 2022).

Stakeholder Action: Enforcement Agencies and Government

- Ensure legal services to survivors and their families through district legal services authority.
- Conduct capacity building and training of prosecution officials and police deputed in anti-human trafficking cells in law enforcement, trafficking laws, and sensitive conduct with survivors and their families.
- Ensure that anti-human trafficking cells in source districts are operational with better funding from the government.
- Expand the district-level child protection units to village and block levels. They can submit quarterly reports about police conduct and legal services available for community members.
- Create inter-state response mechanisms with a police representative from each state present in other states as a response support team for bridging cultural and social biases.
- Conduct internal audits to investigate allegations of police complicity in human trafficking syndicates in the state (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Person 2021).

Insufficient manpower, lacking redressal mechanism, and a deficiency in sensitivity training	Recognize the flaws in the existing system and prioritize organizational building	Engage in capacity building and training, ensure funding and services to survivors, and develop improved redressal mechanisms
GAP	LEVER	CHANGE

GAPS & LEVERS OF CHANGE

Lack of collaboration between state and non-state actors

While enforcement agencies and NGOs undertake most trafficking rescue operations, systematic interventions fall short due to limited logistical planning and lack of coordination between rescue and post-rescue support (Toast Advisory 2019). Even the Ujjwala scheme fails to provide a secure home for survivors due to lack of maintenance and poor funding (Access to Justice (NEK) Project 2016). With different actors involved in different aspects of counter-trafficking, victims are often reduced to statistics or triumph case studies to further organizational goals due to lack of collaboration and short-term vision.

Stakeholder Action: Civil Society Organizations, Educational Institutions, and Government

- Conduct regular audits of government run and funded rehabilitation homes (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Person 2021).
- Reduce focus on preventative measures that limit interstate migration and force individuals to reside in areas without economic security.
- Enhance transparency of NCRB’s human trafficking database with non-state actors.
- Mandate NGOs to follow state imposed structure for rescue and rehabilitation of survivors to ensure that the latter receive their entitlement from the state.
- Collaboration between civil society organizations, media, and research institutions to address the gaps in Trafficking in Persons Bill 2021.
- Integrate mental health advocates and professionals in the rehabilitation process to provide trauma-sensitive rehabilitation.
- Media, civil society organizations, and state agencies need to collaborate and enhance public awareness regarding post-rescue support available in Assam.

Lack of collaboration between state and non-state actors	Identify that comprehensive actions cannot be taken without collaboration and coordination	Engage in data sharing and increase transparency amongst state and non-state actors while defining specialized roles for each
GAP	LEVER	CHANGE

GAPS & LEVERS OF CHANGE

Lack of comprehensive post-disaster rehabilitation efforts

With most post-disaster relief camps run by the Assam government comprising of displaced populations from Muslim communities and marginalized tribes, their resettlement raises questions regarding land ownership and social legitimacy that heighten the ethnic tensions in the state (Dasgupta 2001). Due to lack of sensitivity training and limited manpower in the state’s disaster response force, they are unable to formulate significant interventions, limit the use of violence and dispossession in flood-prone regions, or rehabilitate a significant percentage of the displaced population, leaving minority communities more vulnerable to trafficking (International Federation of Red Cross 2012; Dasgupta 2001).

Stakeholder Action: Government, Civil Society Organization, and Educational Institutions

- Focus efforts of anti-human trafficking units in and around rehabilitation camps.
- Introduce social welfare programs to address the economic insecurity faced by minority populations post-displacement which leaves them vulnerable to trafficking.
- Legal recognition of internally displaced populations and their rights (Dasgupta 2001).
- Rescue and relief teams need to be adequately trained to address ethnic tensions between the displaced communities.
- Raise awareness through concentrated research and media campaigns about extent of displacement post-floods and its link to human trafficking.

Lack of comprehensive post-disaster rehabilitation efforts	Recognize that displaced populations are one of the main victims of trafficking and identify their unmitigated needs	Establish efficient disaster management programs that collaborate with AHTUs to address the insecurity faced by displaced populations
GAP	LEVER	CHANGE

KEY INSIGHTS

Being undergraduate students who have never experienced the impact of human trafficking, we acknowledge our limited understanding of the process and its consequences. To bridge this gap, our team member, Shafiq, guided our research and provided inputs from his experience of working directly with trafficking survivors and other stakeholders. Recognizing the declining trafficking statistics reported by the NCRB, we initially supposed that trafficking in Assam has subsided in the last two years.

Our research, however, indicated that while these statistics already paint a dim picture of human trafficking in Assam, they underestimate the on-ground reality due to unmaintained criminal records, underreporting by local police, and lack of case registrations due to complex or inactive legal machinery. We also discovered that while most human trafficking cases involve women and children, there is negligible coverage on the trafficking of men and young boys in Assam. This has led to one-sided policies and interventions that do not sufficiently address human trafficking for bonded labor.

Lastly, we recognized that there are no state or non-state entities that take into consideration the experiential knowledge of trafficking survivors to address the existing vulnerabilities, power dynamics, or gaps in rehabilitation. While they are not recognized as agents of change, the social burden of being trafficked often falls onto them as they combat misconceptions and discrimination in their native communities. In light of this, a negligible and often delayed compensation offered by government institutions does not account for the emotional, economic, physical, or social trauma of the survivors. Thus, true systemic change requires all involved agents, including us as researchers, to recognize the worth and knowledge of the survivors, co-create programs, policies, and future research along with them, and utilize a long-term approach for systemic change that focuses more on histories, narratives, and vision than statistics.

