

# **Strengthening Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Protection Mechanisms**

**Region: Kumaon Region, Uttarakhand**

**Organizer: STOP (Stop Trafficking and Oppression of Children & Women)**

**Local Partner: SPARDHA**

**Date: 24<sup>th</sup> March 2026**

**Venue: Hotel Sunita Elite Almora**

**Submitted by: Paridhi Negi**



Uttarakhand is highly vulnerable to human trafficking due to its remote terrain, poverty, and migration, which create opportunities for traffickers to exploit women and children. To address these challenges and strengthen collaboration between government bodies and non-governmental organizations, a one-day seminar was organized to foster a coordinated and effective child protection ecosystem. The programme began with participant registration, followed by a welcome tea. **Dr. Vijaya Rani Dondhoiyal (Former Professor and Dean, Faculty of Education, Kumaon University Campus, Almora)** anchor of the seminar formally welcomed all the guests and participants. In her address, she provided a brief introduction to **The Ramola Bhar Charitable (R.B.C) Trust- project STOP (STOP Trafficking and Oppression of Children & Women) and Society for People Action and Rural Development in Himalayan Area (SPARDHA)**, outlining their roles and contributions. She also presented an overview of the seminar's agenda, highlighting the key themes and discussions planned for the day.

The inaugural session began with a short welcome video message by **Prof. Roma Debabrata (Founder, STOP, New Delhi)**, in which she extended her greetings to all participants and dignitaries, and emphasized the importance of collective efforts in strengthening child protection mechanisms, followed by an insightful and thought-provoking address by **Ms. Smritikana Ghosh Paul (Executive director, STOP)** on the grave issue of human trafficking. She defined "human trafficking as an illegal trade involving the exploitation of human beings for financial gain, wherein individuals are coerced, deceived, or forced into exploitative situations that severely undermine their dignity and rights" expanding on the subject, she emphasized that trafficking extends far beyond sexual exploitation and includes various forms such as trafficking for organ trade, forced criminal activities, and forced labour, commonly referred to as labour trafficking. She underscored that these practices constitute serious violations of bodily autonomy and the fundamental right to self-determination.

During her presentation, Ms. Paul highlighted multiple underlying causes that perpetuate trafficking, including poverty, which often manifests in practices such as child labour and child marriage; adverse social and cultural conditions such as domestic violence; and structural factors like migration and natural disasters. She further drew attention to emerging concerns such as cybercrime and the rise of unregulated tourism and the hospitality sector, which can inadvertently facilitate trafficking. Additionally, she pointed out often overlooked dimensions,

including the involvement of international organized criminal networks and the limited capacity of immigration and law enforcement agencies in effectively monitoring and controlling borders.

Focusing on regional vulnerabilities, she elaborated on how Uttarakhand remains particularly susceptible to human trafficking due to a combination of geographic, socio-economic, and institutional challenges. She noted that frequent natural disasters leading to displacement, coupled with weak enforcement mechanisms and gaps in inter-agency coordination, create an enabling environment for traffickers. Concluding her address, she stressed that these interconnected factors collectively heighten vulnerability, thereby underscoring the urgent need for strengthened prevention strategies, increased awareness, and more coordinated and robust interventions. In this context, it is hoped that today's seminar will enable all participants to collectively identify key action points that require immediate and focused attention.

**Keynote Speakers:** *The Chief Guest, Ravi Pandita (DIG, Indo-Tibetan Border Police, Almora), and the Guests of Honour, Yukta Mishra (ADM, Almora), Dr. Naveen Chand Joshi (Manas Khand), Phool Singh Meena (Assistant Commandant, Services Selection Board, Almora), Arun Varma (Hospitality Sector), and Smritikana Ghosh Paul (STOP), were felicitated by Er. Deep Chand Bisht (secretary and chief Functionary, SPARDHA).* Each speaker then provided their expert views on human trafficking and the critical issues concerning child protection in the Kumaon region. The **DIG, ITBP, Almora**, highlighted the critical role of law enforcement in border areas for preventing trafficking, noting the challenges posed by remote and difficult-to-monitor regions. He further emphasized that victims often serve as the first responders, and their accounts must be handled with utmost sensitivity, as they provide crucial leads to identify perpetrators.

The **ADM** called for administrative measures and the importance of community engagement in safeguarding children. She further noted that while social media has both advantages and disadvantages, it can be effectively utilized to streamline and simplify reporting systems in a structured manner. Additionally, digital platforms can serve as powerful tools to counter misinformation and fake news. However, she stressed the urgent need to raise awareness among youth regarding trafficking and its associated risks. The **Assistant Commandant, SSB**, stated that women are often trafficked under the guise of marriage, and individuals above the age of 18 can be easily trafficked as they may claim to be crossing the border for routine activities

such as shopping. He further highlighted the importance of strengthened border security, vigilant monitoring, and effective inter-agency coordination to address these challenges.

**Dr. Naveen Chand Joshi** (MKSC) informed the audience that animal and human organ trafficking are often interlinked, with instances of animal organs being mixed with human organs. He brought attention to the fact that migration driven by poverty, lack of local employment, and unawareness becomes a key factor enabling traffickers to target vulnerable populations from Uttarakhand. **Arun Varma** (Hospitality Sector) highlighted the need for responsible tourism practices at hotel and emphasized the importance of industry awareness in preventing exploitation and human trafficking. Following the vote of thanks by Er. Deep Bisht, extended to all keynote speakers, the seminar moved forward to Session I.

The panellist for **Session I** were: *Anti-Human Trafficking Unit (AHTU)-Pithoragarh; AHTU- Almora; District Child Protection Unit (DCPU)-Almora; Mahila Kotwali and Cyber cell, with the session being moderated by Paridhi Negi (Project Associate, STOP)*. Session I, begin with an objective of in-depth understanding of the Kumaon region and to review the existing legal and institutional frameworks for child protection. The **AHTUs** in Pithoragarh and Almora are responsible for investigating trafficking cases, coordinating with law enforcement, conducting rescue operations, and analysing data to identify emerging hotspots. The **DCPU, Almora**, implements child protection policies, monitors at-risk children, and ensures legal and social support for rescued minors. **Mahila Kotwali** handles complaints related to women and child exploitation, coordinating with authorities for timely interventions, while the **Cyber Cell** addresses the growing online dimension of trafficking, including fake job or marriage scams, and supports investigations through digital monitoring and awareness campaigns. Lastly the session was effectively summarized for the entire audience by Paridhi Negi, who highlighted the key points and insights, ensuring that all participants gained a clear understanding of the discussions and objectives covered in the session.

### **Key Themes discussed during the session were: -**

- Regional trafficking trends in the Kumaon region are on the rise, driven by vulnerability factors such as migration, poverty, fraudulent marriage promises, and limited community awareness.
- In India, trafficking of anyone under 18 is a very serious crime. If someone is caught, they can go to jail for 10 years or even for life and they may also have to pay a fine,

sometimes up to 5 lakh rupees. Even if no one physically forces the child, trafficking is still a punishable offence. Laws like Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) and the Juvenile Justice Act (JJ Act) make the punishment even stricter if a child is abused or exploited.

- The panellists emphasized that trafficking doesn't happen in isolation it thrives where there are poverty, ignorance, and helplessness. The ones who suffer the most are women and children, our most vulnerable members of society. They fall prey not because they deserve it, but because they lack the awareness, resources, and protection to defend themselves.
- Cybercrime and trafficking are closely linked. Traffickers use social media and the internet to lure, deceive, and exploit victims, often with false promises. What starts online can quickly turn into real-world exploitation, so awareness and safe online practices are essential to protect the vulnerable.

While legal frameworks are in place, gaps in implementation and coordination remain a significant concern. The session also highlighted key challenges, including unemployment, lack of cyber awareness, and underreporting of cases. It was observed that many individuals hesitate to report incidents of fraud or trafficking due to social stigma and concerns about societal perception of their families, which further hinders timely intervention and effective enforcement. These issues underline the urgent need for a more coordinated and proactive approach to effectively address human trafficking and strengthen child protection systems. Session 1 was effectively summarized for the entire audience by Paridhi Negi, who highlighted the key points and insights, ensuring that all participants gained a clear understanding of the discussions and objectives covered in the session.

After the refreshing lunch break, we all got ready for **Session II**, which focused on identifying effective strategies to strengthen prevention and protection mechanisms through community engagement and institutional collaboration. The key speakers for this session were representatives from different Uttarakhand-based NGOs, including *Er. Deep Bist (SPARDHA, Almora)*, *Mrs. Geeta Pandey (Mahila Haat)*, *Mr. V. Mehta (Adi Kailash Foundation, Pithoragarh)*, *Dr. K.K. Pant (ABHILASHA, Pithoragarh)*, *Mr. G.S. Chauhan (GRASS, Almora)*, and *Mrs. Bhagwati (Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti, Almora)* with the session being moderated by *Prof. Ila Sah (former head, Department of Education & Sociology, SSSJ University, Almora)*.

## **Key Themes discussed during the session were: -**

- There is an urgent need to strengthen families by nurturing awareness about the harsh realities and devastating impact of human trafficking. Many families remain silent due to fear and the deep-rooted misconception that approaching the police will bring shame upon them. This silence often costs far more than reputation—it can cost safety, dignity, and even lives. It is crucial to break this barrier of fear and stigma, and help families understand that speaking up is not a disgrace, but an act of courage and protection. Timely reporting can make the difference between loss and rescue, between despair and hope. When families choose to act, they not only safeguard their loved ones but also contribute to building a community that stands united against exploitation and injustice.
- Outreach must be significantly expanded in remote areas so that marginalized and hard-to-reach communities are not left in silence and vulnerability. Awareness is the first line of defence—people need to clearly understand what human trafficking is, recognize its warning signs. Only when communities are informed and empowered with the right knowledge and resources, they can take action. Strengthening outreach, therefore, is not just an intervention—it is a crucial step toward safeguarding lives and restoring dignity in some of the most vulnerable regions.
- “*Devbhoomi mein aisa nahi hota*” — this belief needs to be challenged and changed with honesty and courage. The reality is that human trafficking does exist, even in regions we consider sacred and safe. Denial only allows the problem to grow in silence. It is important to accept the hard truth that trafficking is happening, and at times, even people from within our own communities may be involved. Acknowledging this reality is the first step toward meaningful action. Only when we confront these facts without hesitation, we can begin to protect our communities, support victims, and work collectively to put an end to such exploitation.
- The discussion also highlighted the critical role of NGOs in rescue, rehabilitation, and awareness-building, while emphasizing the urgent need for a strong and well-structured referral system to ensure timely support for victims.

The discussion clearly reflected that meaningful collaboration between government bodies and civil society is essential to create a robust protection mechanism. However, the session also shed light on key challenges inadequate rehabilitation support i.e., many victims do not receive

long-term care, including psychological counselling, vocational training, or reintegration assistance. Even when rescue occurs, insufficient follow-up can lead to re-trafficking or unmet needs.

Following the conclusion of the second session, a tea break was held, followed by an **interactive session** that was a crucial component of the programme. The objective of the session was to identify gaps and formulate action points. Representatives from *Child Welfare Committee (CWC) Almora, CWC Pithoragarh, the Juvenile Justice Board Almora, the Cyber Cell Almora, and Anti-human Trafficking Unit (AHTU)* representatives from across the Kumaon region, along with all seminar participants, actively contributed to the session by presenting their valuable suggestions. The session was moderated by **Ms. Poonam Chaudhary (Field Coordinator, STOP)** and **Paridhi Negi**, ensuring a structured and productive discussion.

### **The discussion led to the identification of the following critical gaps:**

- Many families and vulnerable groups lack awareness about human trafficking, its warning signs, and available reporting mechanisms, while hard-to-reach communities often remain excluded from awareness programmes and support systems. This situation is further aggravated by social stigma, fear of reputational damage, and mistrust of authorities, which discourage victims and their families from reporting incidents and seeking timely help.
- Economic vulnerabilities and socio-cultural barriers collectively contribute to heightened risks of human trafficking. Factors such as poverty, unemployment, and migration push individuals into precarious situations, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. At the same time, practices like child marriage, domestic violence, and the normalization of exploitation further deepen this vulnerability, creating an environment where individuals, especially women and children, are at increased risk.
- The absence of a well-defined and coordinated referral mechanism hampers timely rescue, care, and rehabilitation of victims. This is further compounded by the lack of long-term support, including psychological counselling, skill development, and livelihood opportunities for survivors.
- In Uttarakhand, cybercrime has become a key route for human trafficking, yet many communities, especially in remote areas, lack awareness about online scams and

traffickers' tactics. Limited cyber knowledge, weak monitoring, poor reporting mechanisms, and inadequate coordination between authorities make victims vulnerable.

An open house was conducted following the conclusion of the third session to encourage active participation, discussion, and the formulation of practical prevention strategies against human trafficking.

### **Prevention and Awareness Strategies Discussed:**

- There is a need for multi-level awareness and prevention measures against human trafficking.
- Schools and colleges should organize regular programmes to educate students about trafficking, cyber fraud, and fake employment advertisements.
- National Cadet Corps (NCC) camps can serve as additional platforms to engage and sensitize youth.
- Parents and families should actively monitor their children's digital activities and create a safe environment for open communication.
- Workshops during parents teaching meetings (PTM) can guide parents on fostering trust, vigilance, and a supportive home environment.
- At the village level, mothers can be empowered with knowledge and tools to supervise their children's online behaviour.
- E-suggestion boxes in schools, linked to relevant authorities while maintaining confidentiality, can provide students a safe channel to report concerns.
- Citizens should apply social pressure on administrators and policymakers to ensure effective implementation of anti-trafficking measures.

At the conclusion of the interactive seminar, Ms. Poonam Chaudhary delivered a heartfelt vote of thanks. She expressed sincere gratitude to all the participants for their active engagement and valuable contributions throughout the sessions. Special appreciation was extended to the panellists for sharing their expertise and insights, which greatly enriched the discussions. She

also acknowledged the support of the organizing team and community representatives for ensuring the smooth conduct of the event. The vote of thanks concluded by highlighting the collective efforts of all the participants that made the seminar a meaningful and impactful experience for everyone involved.

## **Way Forward**

The seminar in Kumaon, Uttarakhand illuminated the harsh realities of human trafficking, exposing vulnerabilities that often lurk in the shadows of our communities—remote villages, digital spaces, and even within homes we consider safe. It became clear that trafficking is not a distant problem; it is a pervasive threat, fueled by poverty, ignorance, and technological loopholes. Yet, amidst this grim reality, the seminar also shone a beacon of hope: collaboration between government bodies, NGOs, families, and communities can turn the tide. From empowering mothers in villages to equipping students with cyber-awareness, from strengthening referral systems to fostering proactive civic engagement, the discussions charted a path toward tangible change.

The voices of participants, policymakers, and experts resonated with a shared urgency—trafficking thrives in silence, but it can be defeated through awareness, vigilance, and courage. If every school, household, and community takes even a small step toward protection, the shadow of exploitation can be challenged, and lives can be safeguarded. The seminar was not merely a dialogue; it was a call to action—a collective pledge to protect the most vulnerable, confront uncomfortable truths, and build a Kumaon region where children and women can grow free from fear. The fight against trafficking is ongoing, but with knowledge as our guide, unity as our strength, and determination in our hearts, we can light the way toward safety and hope.