

What is Familial Trafficking

Familial trafficking is a form of human trafficking in which the trafficking is perpetrated by one or more family members such as a parent, guardian, sibling, or other relative. The level of involvement may vary, ranging from isolated incidents to ongoing, systematic exploitation. This form of trafficking is sometimes referred to as 'family-controlled trafficking'.

What is Familial Trafficking?

Familial trafficking occurs when a family member exploits another family member for some form of financial or material benefit, such as exchanging access for money, drugs, shelter, or other goods, or compelling the person to beg, steal, or participate in the creation of exploitative material. In these cases, the family member functions as the trafficker by recruiting, providing, or harboring the other family member for exploitation. What distinguishes familial trafficking from non-commercial abuse is the presence of an economic exchange or other tangible benefit to the perpetrator.

For familial trafficking to occur, the caregiver or family member must receive, or expect to receive, something of value as a result of the other person's exploitation.

Key Facts



While most documented cases involve children due to their particular vulnerability, adults can also be victims of familial trafficking.



Cases of familial trafficking are less likely to be recognized by child welfare systems than those involving non-relatives, because the trafficker is often a trusted caregiver and the abuse is hidden within the family, making disclosure and detection far more difficult.



While data on perpetrators in familial trafficking are still limited, some U.S. studies suggest that mothers or female family members are often identified as the trafficker in familial trafficking cases - with research showing that the child's biological mother was the most common perpetrator in many samples of familial child sexual exploitation.



When a family member is the trafficker, exploitation is often normalized and accepted within the family, sometimes spanning generations. Economic pressures, cultural norms, or family dynamics can reinforce this normalization, and victims often struggle to recognize themselves as victims or relate to standard awareness messages.

Common Forms of Exploitation

Traffickers may begin grooming family members - often children - early in life, exploiting their closeness and the victim's limited ability to recognize or express abuse.



Child Sex Trafficking

Involves children being coerced into sexual acts in exchange for money, drugs, shelter, or other goods. This can include the production of sexual abuse material, such as images or videos, or facilitated prostitution, where the child is trafficked to other individuals for sexual purposes. Research shows that often the biological mother or a female caregiver acts as the facilitator in these cases.



Forced begging / Forced criminality

Involves victims compelled to generate financial/material gain for the trafficker, such as drug trafficking, theft, or fraud, as well as begging in public spaces. Forced begging is often more visible and may be rationalized within the family as a means of survival, whereas forced criminality typically involves hidden, illegal acts. Victims are frequently controlled through threats, intimidation, or psychological manipulation.



Labor Trafficking

Involves forcing children to perform involuntary labor or services for economic gain. In some cases, family members compel children into bonded labor, for example in agriculture to repay debts. Not all child labor within families qualifies as trafficking, as cultural norms - such as expectations of filial duty - may influence family work practices. Victims' labor primarily benefits the trafficker, and coercion or control is a key factor distinguishing trafficking from ordinary family labor.



Forced Marriage

Occurs when a child is married off and the family receives money or other benefits in return. This can constitute familial trafficking, particularly when the child is subjected to involuntary servitude or sexual contact to which they cannot consent (ILO, 2017; Sidun & Dryjanska, 2024).

Detection



Familial trafficking is difficult to detect because it occurs within family networks. Children may not recognize themselves as victims, and the trusted family relationship can serve both as a tool of control and a barrier to disclosure.

Key Data

- In analyses of global trafficking data, approximately **41% of identified child trafficking cases involve family members** or caregivers in the recruitment or exploitation process (IOM, 2017).
- Research indicates that **adolescents (roughly ages 10-17) often represent a large share of identified child trafficking victims** in many studies, though precise figures vary by context. (Allert, 2022).
- Migrant, displaced, or refugee children** face heightened vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation, including within familial contexts, due to disruption of protective frameworks.
- Younger children** (including those under 12) are considered particularly vulnerable to familial trafficking due to grooming, dependency, and limited ability to recognize or report abuse.

Victims' Demographics

- Research suggests that families are more likely to traffic boys into labor and girls into sex trafficking (IOM, 2023; Reid et al., 2016).
- In the U.S., children trafficked by family members are often significantly younger than those trafficked by non-family members. **Research shows that familial trafficking can begin at a very young age, sometimes as early as three, and may continue for years.** In those cases, it was not uncommon for the father to sexually abuse their children (Raphael, 2020).
- Familial trafficking of adults** does occur, but the rate of family involvement is much lower than in child trafficking: global data indicate family members are involved in roughly 9% of adult cases compared with ~40% of child cases.
- Persons with disabilities or older family members**, may be exploited for labor, caregiving, sexual purposes, or financial gain. These cases are far less commonly studied and documented so reliable demographic data are limited.

The Reasons Behind Familial Trafficking

- Financial Gain
- Addiction
- Social and Cultural Norms
- Poverty
- Intergenerational patterns

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