Policy Coordination in Combating Human Trafficking: A Systematic Review of Institutional Frameworks and Multi-Agency Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

Human trafficking remains one of the most pressing global challenges, violating fundamental human rights and undermining social, legal, and political systems worldwide. Despite the establishment of international instruments such as the Palermo Protocol, responses to trafficking continue to suffer from fragmented policy implementation, weak institutional capacity, and inconsistent collaboration among agencies. These gaps highlight the urgent need to examine how institutional frameworks and multi-agency collaborations can be more effectively aligned to combat trafficking. This study aims to analyse the research landscape on policy coordination in combating human trafficking, with particular emphasis on institutional frameworks and collaborative governance mechanisms. Using a systematic review approach supported by Scopus AI Analytics, the study employed a structured search strategy and advanced bibliometric tools to identify, categorize, and synthesize literature published up to September 2025. The analysis generated summaries, expanded summaries, concept maps, topic expert profiles, and emerging themes, offering a comprehensive overview of the field. The findings reveal consistent themes emphasizing the importance of international and national policy coordination, rising themes such as the role of healthcare professionals and collaborative governance in prevention, and novel themes including social rehabilitation, economic empowerment of survivors, and the prevention of organ trafficking. Prominent scholars were identified as shaping the discourse on cross-sector collaboration and systemic change. Theoretically, the study contributes to governance and human rights perspectives by situating trafficking within multidimensional frameworks, while practically, it underscores the importance of resource allocation, inter-agency trust, and survivor-centred interventions. Limitations include reliance on Scopus-indexed publications and abstract-based analysis, but these are offset by the study's broad coverage and analytical depth. The review concludes that future research should expand empirical evaluations of collaborative practices and explore interdisciplinary approaches to address emerging challenges.

Keywords— Human Trafficking, Policy Coordination, Institutional Frameworks, Multi-Agency Collaboration, Governance and Human Rights

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking represents one of the most pressing global challenges of the twenty-first century, threatening human security, undermining the rule of law, and generating severe social, political, and economic consequences. The International Labour Organization estimates that millions of individuals are subjected to trafficking annually, making it a highly complex, transnational issue that transcends borders, jurisdictions, and institutions. Addressing this multifaceted problem requires more than isolated legal measures or enforcement efforts; it demands cohesive governance strategies, strong institutional frameworks, and effective coordination among diverse stakeholders.

While governments worldwide have implemented anti-trafficking policies, fragmented responses and lack of policy coherence often undermine progress. Effective multi-agency collaboration—among law enforcement, judicial institutions, civil society organizations, and international actors—has been identified as central to developing comprehensive responses (Rinaldi-Semione & Brewster, 2023; Pajón & Walsh, 2023). Yet,

disparities in resources, organizational mandates, and institutional cultures frequently generate barriers to cooperation, limiting the impact of existing frameworks (Foot, 2019). Furthermore, human trafficking's transnational nature necessitates cross-border policy alignment and international cooperation, an area that remains underdeveloped in many jurisdictions (Oğuz, 2012; Fekry et al., 2023).

Existing scholarship has highlighted valuable practices, such as local problem profiling in the UK and the U.S. (Rinaldi-Semione & Brewster, 2023), the role of multi-agency task forces in facilitating arrests (Huff-Corzine et al., 2017), and the importance of integrating civil society organizations into policy design and implementation (Castellano, 2023). However, significant challenges persist: power asymmetries between actors (Foot, 2019), weak institutional capacity in developing states (Saffanah et al., 2024), and gaps in substantive implementation despite robust legal frameworks (Slamkov, 2025). These findings suggest a critical research gap in systematically synthesizing knowledge on how institutional frameworks and policy coordination mechanisms have been employed across contexts, as well as identifying emerging themes and best practices.

The present study aims to conduct a systematic review of institutional frameworks and multi-agency collaboration in combating human trafficking, with a particular focus on analysing research areas, mapping conceptual developments, identifying topic experts, and capturing emerging themes in the literature. By synthesizing past studies and organizing findings into a concept map, this review seeks to clarify how coordination has been theorized, operationalized, and evaluated across multiple jurisdictions.

The contribution of this review lies in offering a structured, comparative synthesis that advances both academic and policy debates. For scholars, it consolidates dispersed literature into a comprehensive knowledge base, highlights conceptual blind spots, and points to future research trajectories. For policymakers and practitioners, it provides actionable insights into promising practices, institutional weaknesses, and strategies for strengthening governance through multi-sectoral collaboration.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodological approach adopted for the systematic review. Section 3 synthesizes existing literature on institutional frameworks, multi-agency collaboration, and international cooperation in anti-trafficking efforts. Section 4 identifies emerging themes and constructs a concept map to visualize the intellectual landscape. Section 5 discusses theoretical and practical contributions, while Section 6 concludes with recommendations for future research and policy innovation.
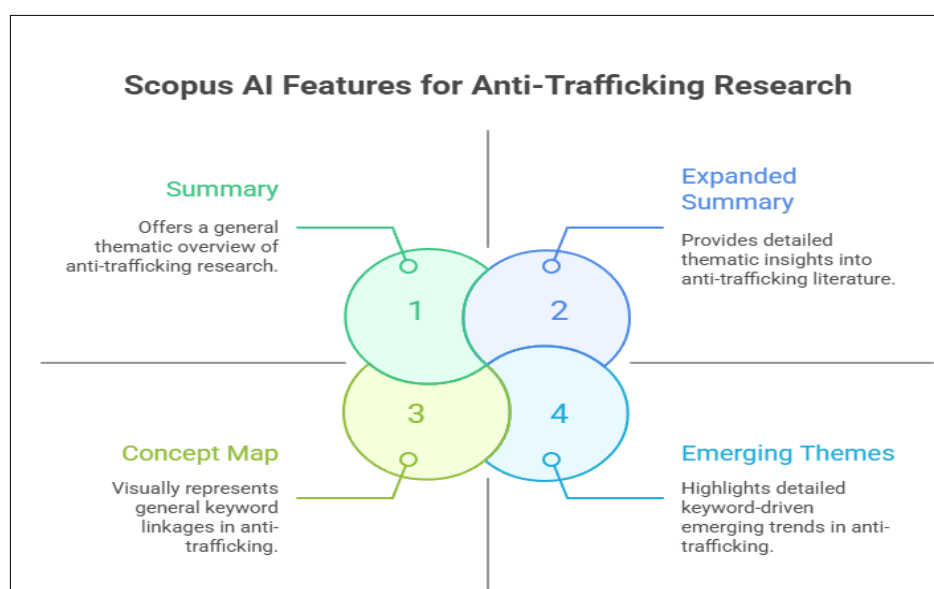
METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a systematic review approach supported by Scopus AI Analytics to explore the research landscape on policy coordination in combating human trafficking. The analysis was conducted during the Scopus AI on 11 September 2025, marking the dataset from which the review was extracted and analysed. The integration of Scopus AI into the process allowed not only the retrieval of bibliometric data but also the generation of advanced insights through thematic mapping, identification of key topic experts, and detection of emerging research clusters—features that significantly extend beyond traditional database searches (Elsevier, 2024).

To ensure comprehensive coverage, the review was guided by a structured search strategy that employed Boolean operators designed to capture intersections of policy coordination, multi-agency collaboration, and human trafficking governance. The final search query applied in Scopus was: ("policy" OR "strategy" OR "framework" OR "guideline") AND ("coordination" OR "collaboration" OR "cooperation" OR "partnership") AND ("human trafficking" OR "trafficking" OR "modern slavery" OR "exploitation") AND ("combating" OR "fighting" OR "addressing" OR "preventing") AND ("law enforcement" OR "justice" OR "government" OR "NGO") AND ("victim support" OR "rehabilitation" OR "protection" OR "assistance"). This formulation ensured the retrieval of publications that addressed institutional frameworks, governance strategies, victim support measures, and multi-sectoral interventions. To maintain scholarly rigor, only peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings indexed in Scopus were included in the dataset (Moher et al., 2015).

The data extraction and analysis process relied on the multiple dimensions offered by Scopus AI. The Summary feature generated a general overview of the scope and breadth of the field, highlighting the recurring use of terms such as coordination, collaboration, and multi-agency frameworks in anti-trafficking research. The Expanded Summary provided deeper insights by categorizing the literature into thematic areas, including law enforcement partnerships, judicial cooperation, civil society engagement, and victim rehabilitation, thereby establishing a broader contextual understanding of the field. The Concept Map produced by Scopus AI visually represented linkages between keywords and research clusters, revealing central nodes such as multi-agency collaboration, victim protection, policy frameworks, and international cooperation, while also identifying peripheral clusters such as gendered perspectives in trafficking and regional frameworks in Southeast Asia. Additionally, the Topic Experts feature identified frequently cited scholars who have made significant contributions in areas such as law enforcement collaboration, comparative governance structures, and human rights–based approaches, thereby situating this review within established scholarly debates. Finally, the Emerging Themes function highlighted evolving areas of interest, including the integration of digital intelligence sharing, the nexus between migration governance and trafficking, and the expansion of victim-centred approaches in national and international frameworks (Rinaldi-Semione & Brewster, 2023; Pajón & Walsh, 2023).

Figure 1: Elements for Anti-Trafficking Research

Overall, this methodological approach was designed to achieve the study's aim of providing a systematic analysis of the research landscape while simultaneously mapping conceptual developments and identifying emerging directions in the field. The combination of structured database searching and AI-enhanced analytics offered not only a synthesis of existing scholarship but also valuable insights into the evolution of research priorities and practical applications in addressing human trafficking.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this systematic review, derived from Scopus AI Analytics, provide a comprehensive overview of how policy coordination and multi-agency collaboration in combating human trafficking have been conceptualized and studied. Drawing on the Summary and Expanded Summary outputs, the analysis reveals both the breadth and depth of existing scholarship, while the Concept Map highlights the structural linkages across themes and research clusters. Further, the identification of Topic Experts provides insight into leading scholarly contributions shaping the field, and the detection of Emerging Themes underscores evolving areas of inquiry and practice that warrant further attention.

Summary and Expanded Summary

The findings from the Summary and Expanded Summary of the Scopus AI analysis reveal that policy coordination and multi-agency collaboration are central to global anti-trafficking efforts. The international

legal and policy framework has been anchored by the adoption of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (commonly known as the Palermo Protocol), supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. This framework established the so-called "3P paradigm"—prosecution, prevention, and protection—serving as the cornerstone of institutional responses to trafficking (Martin & Callaway, 2011). However, the effectiveness of these instruments depends largely on how they are operationalized at national and local levels, with implementation varying significantly across contexts.

At the national and community levels, multi-agency collaboration has been highlighted as an indispensable strategy in tackling the multidimensional aspects of human trafficking. In countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, partnership-based approaches that combine law enforcement with social services, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and intelligence-sharing networks have shown promising results in problem diagnosis and coordinated action (Rinaldi-Semione & Brewster, 2023). Similarly, Castellano (2023) emphasizes that civil society organizations, when consulted by policymakers, play a critical role in strengthening both prosecution and prevention efforts. These findings underline the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders in building resilient and adaptive institutional frameworks.

Nevertheless, the review also identifies significant challenges in sustaining multi-sectoral collaboration. Foot (2019) notes that differences in power, status, and financial capacity among organizations often hinder effective cooperation, while cultural and value-based tensions can exacerbate these divisions. Moreover, power dynamics shaped by gender, ethnicity, and race create additional obstacles in collaborative processes. Hounmenou and Toepp (2023) highlight that while partnerships between private investigation agencies and law enforcement can yield positive outcomes in trafficking investigations, they are frequently undermined by institutional mistrust and differing professional norms. Such challenges suggest that while collaboration is essential, it must be supported by mechanisms that promote equality, transparency, and trust among actors.

The role of NGOs and faith-based organizations emerges as another critical dimension of the anti-trafficking landscape. Globally, NGOs have expanded rapidly to address prevention, prosecution, and victim support, often filling gaps left by limited state capacity (Ford & Lyons, 2012). Knight and Kagotho (2023) further illustrate how faith-based organizations in sub-Saharan Africa contribute to anti-trafficking interventions by leveraging local legitimacy and community-based networks. These organizations provide not only humanitarian assistance but also advocacy and awareness-raising, thereby complementing state-led initiatives. However, their contributions are often constrained by limited resources and inconsistent engagement with formal policy processes, underscoring the need for stronger institutional integration.

At the transnational level, collaboration between states and international actors is increasingly recognized as vital for combating trafficking networks that operate across borders. Pittaro (2015) argues that police leadership in establishing transnational collaborations remains pivotal, particularly in aligning enforcement priorities and intelligence-sharing mechanisms. Such collaboration not only enhances operational capacities but also strengthens victim assistance by ensuring continuity of care across jurisdictions. Yet, the persistence of fragmented legal systems and uneven political commitment continues to undermine the coherence of these efforts.

Taken together, the results highlight a dual reality in the field of anti-trafficking governance: on the one hand, robust legal frameworks and multi-agency partnerships have generated promising practices in certain contexts; on the other, persistent structural and institutional barriers limit their full potential. The findings suggest that the future of effective anti-trafficking efforts depends on deepening cross-sectoral trust, addressing power imbalances, and integrating civil society and faith-based actors more systematically into institutional frameworks. By doing so, policy coordination can move beyond formal alignment toward genuine, collaborative problem-solving that is responsive to the complex realities of human trafficking.
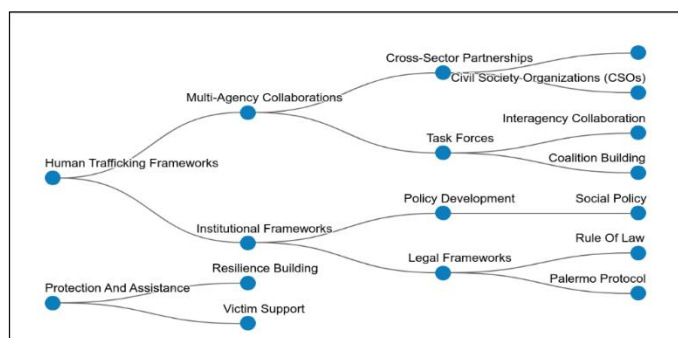
Concept Map

The concept map generated by Scopus AI (trial conducted on 11 September 2025) provides a visual synthesis of the intellectual landscape on policy coordination and multi-agency collaboration in combating human

trafficking. At the core, the map connects Human Trafficking Frameworks with key dimensions of governance, collaboration, and victim protection, highlighting how institutional and practical responses are interlinked across multiple levels.

Figure 2: Concept Map of Human Trafficking Frameworks

A Review of Human Trafficking Frameworks

Human trafficking frameworks provide the structural foundation through which states, international organizations, and civil society actors respond to the multifaceted nature of trafficking. At the international level, a human rights framework has been particularly influential in shaping both legal and normative approaches. As Obokata (2006) explains, a rights-based framework emphasizes the obligations of states to prohibit trafficking, punish traffickers, protect victims, and address the root causes of exploitation. This perspective is critical because it shifts the focus from solely criminalizing traffickers to ensuring survivor-centred justice, thereby aligning anti-trafficking measures with broader international human rights obligations.

Despite the adoption of these frameworks, the effectiveness of national institutional structures remains uneven across jurisdictions. Slamkov (2025), for example, highlights weaknesses in North Macedonia's legal and institutional arrangements, pointing to issues such as resource allocation, limited inter-agency coordination, and insufficient victim assistance. Such findings reflect broader challenges faced by many states, where the existence of legal frameworks does not necessarily translate into effective implementation. This gap between normative commitments and practical outcomes underscores the need for stronger institutional capacity and better resource mobilization to operationalize anti-trafficking commitments.

A critical dimension of trafficking frameworks involves the assessment of harms experienced by victims. Greenfield, Paoli, and Zoutendijk (2016) propose an empirical framework that integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence to measure the severity and incidence of harms caused by trafficking. Their findings demonstrate the catastrophic consequences that victims endure, including physical violence, psychological trauma, and socio-economic marginalization. Such assessments are essential for policymakers, as they provide a systematic basis for tailoring interventions to the lived realities of victims and for prioritizing resources in prevention, protection, and rehabilitation programs.

Moreover, trafficking cannot be understood in isolation from broader structures of systemic oppression, such as sexism, racism, and classism. Malebranche, Hopper, and Corey (2021) emphasize that human trafficking intersects with these systemic inequalities, producing layers of vulnerability that perpetuate cycles of exploitation. Addressing these intersections requires a multidisciplinary and ecological approach that incorporates trauma-informed care, social justice advocacy, and inclusive policymaking. This perspective reinforces the notion that anti-trafficking frameworks must go beyond criminal justice measures to address structural inequalities that increase individuals' susceptibility to trafficking.

Finally, research on policy development and diffusion reveals how anti-trafficking frameworks evolve over time, often reflecting political priorities and institutional path dependencies. Bouché et al. (2025) find that in the United States, policy diffusion over two decades has disproportionately emphasized prosecution over protection and prevention. This imbalance illustrates how frameworks are shaped not only by normative principles but also by political dynamics that privilege certain responses while sidelining others. Consequently, future efforts must aim to rebalance anti-trafficking frameworks by integrating protection and prevention more

systematically, ensuring a holistic approach that aligns with both human rights obligations and empirical evidence of victim needs.

A Relationship Between Human Trafficking Frameworks and Multi-Agency Collaborations

The relationship between human trafficking frameworks and multi-agency collaborations is foundational to effective governance in combating trafficking. Human trafficking frameworks provide the structural and normative basis—such as legal mandates, policy directives, and institutional guidelines—that define roles and responsibilities for stakeholders. However, without collaboration across agencies, the implementation of these frameworks' risks remaining fragmented and ineffective. Evidence from the UK and US demonstrates how multi-agency partnership work, particularly through local problem diagnosis and collaborative intelligence analysis, enhances the operationalization of legal frameworks by mobilizing collective resources and galvanizing local action (Rinaldi-Semione & Brewster, 2023). These collaborations translate abstract policy commitments into concrete strategies that target trafficking at both systemic and local levels.

At the same time, the integration of multi-agency collaboration within trafficking frameworks is not without challenges. Foot (2019) highlights that differences in power, resources, and sectoral values often hinder collaborative effectiveness. Gendered, ethnic, and racial power dynamics can also exacerbate tensions, creating barriers to trust and equality among agencies. These issues indicate that while legal and institutional frameworks may prescribe cooperation, structural inequalities embedded within and between institutions can limit the depth of collaboration. Thus, the relationship between frameworks and collaboration must be understood as dynamic—where frameworks provide direction but where power asymmetries must be actively addressed to sustain meaningful partnerships.

The importance of multi-agency collaboration is particularly evident in the area of victim support and operational planning. Pajón and Walsh (2023) argue that law enforcement agencies require consistent collaboration with partner organizations to provide comprehensive victim support, gather intelligence, and coordinate operations. This interdependence demonstrates that frameworks cannot function effectively in isolation; they depend on robust networks of actors, including police, social services, and NGOs, to address the diverse needs of victims and ensure successful enforcement. By embedding collaboration into institutional frameworks, policymakers can ensure that victim-centred responses are not marginalized but integrated into mainstream anti-trafficking strategies.

Evidence also demonstrates that multi-agency task forces play a critical role in strengthening the effectiveness of trafficking frameworks. Huff-Corzine, Sacra, Corzine, and Rados (2017) show that such task forces significantly increase trafficking-related arrests and enforcement outcomes by combining the efforts of law enforcement, NGOs, and social services. These findings suggest that task forces operationalize frameworks by creating platforms for coordination, accountability, and joint action. The institutionalization of such collaborations within formal frameworks ensures that anti-trafficking measures are not episodic but part of a sustained, systematized response.

Despite these strengths, research indicates that current multi-agency collaborations embedded within trafficking frameworks are often limited in scope and under-researched. Jones and Lutze (2016) find that interagency collaborations in Michigan are hindered by the absence of clear strategies for building and sustaining partnerships. This points to a significant research and practice gap: while frameworks and collaborations are acknowledged as mutually reinforcing, little empirical work has detailed the mechanisms for cultivating long-term, equitable, and effective partnerships. Future research must therefore focus on developing evidence-based strategies that integrate collaboration as a central component of trafficking frameworks, ensuring both policy coherence and operational sustainability.

A Relationship Between Human Trafficking Frameworks and Institutional Frameworks

Institutional frameworks form the backbone of global and national efforts to combat human trafficking, linking international agreements to domestic implementation. Human trafficking, defined as a severe violation of human rights and freedoms, encompasses exploitation in multiple forms, including forced labour, sexual

exploitation, slavery, and violations of bodily integrity (Malebranche et al., 2021). At the global level, the adoption of the Palermo Protocol under the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime has been a milestone in shaping international responses, promoting the "3P" approach of prosecution, prevention, and protection (Martin & Callaway, 2011). While this framework has provided a strong foundation for coordinated action, gaps remain in addressing internal trafficking within states, particularly in relation to systemic vulnerabilities and localized exploitation that require tailored institutional responses.

The institutionalization of anti-trafficking measures at the national level has been uneven, with significant variation across states. In North Macedonia, Slamkov (2025) finds that while a formal legal and institutional framework exists, it is hindered by inadequate resources, weak coordination mechanisms, and insufficient victim assistance. Similarly, in Croatia, Ofak and Vajda (2019) highlight deficiencies in sanctioning practices and enforcement capacity, noting that despite compliance with EU Directive 2011/36/EU, systemic barriers undermine implementation. These cases demonstrate that the effectiveness of institutional frameworks depends not only on their formal adoption but also on the availability of resources, interagency coordination, and political commitment to enforce anti-trafficking measures consistently.

Beyond compliance with international instruments, the integration of a human rights framework has been proposed to strengthen institutional responses. Obokata (2006) argues that such a framework clarifies state obligations to prohibit trafficking, punish offenders, protect victims, and address underlying causes of exploitation. This perspective enriches institutional frameworks by embedding them within a broader normative order, ensuring that anti-trafficking responses are not solely punitive but also protective and preventive. By linking legal frameworks with rights-based obligations, institutions are better positioned to deliver survivor-centred responses that align with international human rights standards.

In addition, institutional frameworks are evolving to incorporate more holistic approaches that recognize the complexity of trafficking. Rana and Singh (2025) propose a sociotechnical framework that combines social interventions with technological tools to address both the root causes and operational mechanisms of trafficking. This approach reflects a growing recognition that institutions must adapt to modern challenges, including digital platforms used for recruitment and exploitation. By leveraging technology alongside social policy, institutional frameworks can become more adaptive, proactive, and effective in dismantling trafficking networks and preventing victimization.

Despite these advances, significant challenges persist. Many national frameworks remain reactive, focusing primarily on prosecution while neglecting prevention and victim rehabilitation (Symeonidou-Kastanidou, 2016). Furthermore, institutional fragmentation often undermines the coherence of anti-trafficking strategies, as agencies operate in silos without sufficient coordination or resource-sharing. The relationship between human trafficking frameworks and institutional frameworks thus highlights a critical tension: while international instruments and human rights-based approaches provide strong normative guidance, their practical impact depends on the extent to which states develop integrated, well-resourced, and technologically adaptive institutions. Closing this gap will require sustained political will, investment in capacity building, and stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure that institutional frameworks translate into tangible protection and justice for trafficking victims.

Topic Experts

The identification of topic experts through Scopus AI underscores the importance of individual scholarly contributions in shaping the discourse on policy coordination and multi-agency collaboration in combating human trafficking. Among the recognized experts, Elizabeth P. Miller stands out as a leading authority with an extensive academic influence, demonstrated by 9,686 citations and an h-index of 56. Miller's research has consistently advanced the understanding of policy and systems change, particularly in relation to intimate partner violence and human trafficking. Her evaluation of a federal initiative on cross-sector collaboration provides critical insights into how institutions can align their efforts to improve victim protection, enhance prosecution outcomes, and strengthen preventative strategies (Miller, 2019). By emphasizing systemic approaches, her work bridges theoretical frameworks with practical implementation, offering a robust foundation for policymakers and practitioners seeking to strengthen institutional coordination.

Complementing Miller's contributions, Summer S. Miller-Walfish has emerged as an important voice in the field, with 110 citations and an h-index of 5. Although earlier in her academic trajectory, Miller-Walfish has engaged directly with the complexities of policy and systems change in contexts where intimate partner violence intersects with human trafficking. Her evaluation of a federal cross-sector initiative highlights the operational challenges and opportunities of multi-agency collaboration (Miller-Walfish, 2021). Her work underscores the importance of fostering inter-organizational trust, aligning sectoral priorities, and ensuring equitable resource distribution—factors that directly impact the sustainability of institutional frameworks. By advancing these perspectives, Miller-Walfish contributes to the growing recognition that effective anti-trafficking policies must move beyond fragmented interventions toward coherent governance strategies.

In contrast, Jane W. Segebrecht, with 5 citations and an h-index of 1, represents an emerging scholar-practitioner whose contributions are situated at the intersection of academic research and policy implementation. Segebrecht's work on federal initiatives addressing intimate partner violence and human trafficking highlights the value of embedding multi-agency collaboration within broader institutional frameworks (Segebrecht, 2022). While her academic footprint is still developing, her professional role within the Health Resources and Services Administration provides her with unique practical insights into the operationalization of anti-trafficking policies. This practitioner-based perspective is essential for assessing how federal initiatives translate into practice, particularly in health and social service settings that are often critical entry points for identifying and assisting trafficking survivors.

Taken together, the contributions of these experts illustrate the diversity of perspectives within the field of policy coordination and human trafficking governance. Miller provides a highly influential, theoretically grounded, and empirically tested body of work that shapes academic discourse and guides systemic policy approaches. Miller-Walfish expands this knowledge by interrogating the practical challenges of implementing collaborative strategies, offering a growing evidence base for refining institutional frameworks. Segebrecht brings a practitioner's perspective, emphasizing how federal-level initiatives can be translated into actionable strategies in the field. Collectively, these scholars advance a multi-dimensional understanding of how human trafficking frameworks can be strengthened through coordinated, multi-agency responses.

The prominence of these experts also highlights a broader trend in the literature: the increasing recognition of cross-sector collaboration as indispensable for combating human trafficking. Their combined contributions reveal that effective frameworks require both academic rigor and practical applicability, drawing from theoretical models, empirical evaluations, and on-the-ground policy implementation. This synergy between established scholars, emerging academics, and practitioner voices provides a comprehensive knowledge base for informing institutional reforms and guiding future research on multi-agency collaboration in anti-trafficking efforts.

Emerging Theme

The analysis of emerging themes in the literature on human trafficking reveals a dynamic research landscape, characterized by consistent priorities, rising areas of scholarly and policy attention, and novel issues that are beginning to shape future directions. These themes reflect not only the evolution of academic inquiry but also the practical needs of institutions and policymakers in addressing the complexity of human trafficking.

Consistent Theme: International and National Policy Coordination

One of the most consistent themes in the field is the emphasis on international and national policy coordination. The persistence of this theme reflects the enduring importance of harmonizing efforts across jurisdictions to combat human trafficking effectively. The Palermo Protocol and subsequent international instruments have provided a strong foundation for cooperation, yet their effectiveness depends on how states adapt and implement these commitments domestically (Martin & Callaway, 2011). Studies such as those by Oğuz (2012) and Fekry, Al Qatawneh, Barafi, and Haswa (2023) demonstrate that international harmonization facilitates more effective prosecution of cross-border trafficking cases, while national adaptations improve local implementation of international protocols. This consistent theme underscores that both levels of policy coordination are essential, with international frameworks providing direction and national frameworks

ensuring operational effectiveness.

Rising Theme: Healthcare Sector's Role in Identifying and Supporting Victims

A notable rising theme is the role of the healthcare sector in identifying and supporting victims of human trafficking. Research increasingly recognizes healthcare professionals as critical actors in the early identification of victims and the provision of trauma-informed support (Macias-Konstantopoulos, 2016). The growing emphasis on integrating trafficking awareness into healthcare protocols and medical curricula highlights the sector's potential to intervene at critical points where victims seek care (Miller et al., 2018). Enhanced training for healthcare professionals has been shown to increase identification rates, while systematic inclusion of trafficking awareness in medical education promises long-term improvements in victim support. This rising theme reflects an important shift toward embedding anti-trafficking strategies in sectors beyond law enforcement, thereby broadening the institutional reach of anti-trafficking frameworks.

Rising Theme: Collaborative Governance and Legal Frameworks

Another rising theme is the increasing scholarly and policy interest in collaborative governance and legal frameworks for human trafficking prevention. This trend highlights the growing recognition that effective anti-trafficking strategies must be multi-stakeholder, integrating law enforcement, social services, civil society, and judicial institutions (Foot, 2019). Pajón and Walsh (2023) show that collaborative models enable agencies to share intelligence, improve victim protection, and enhance enforcement outcomes. Similarly, Huff-Corzine, Sacra, Corzine, and Rados (2017) demonstrate the effectiveness of multi-agency task forces in increasing trafficking arrests. The literature indicates that legal frameworks which incorporate diverse stakeholder input are more likely to address the complex realities of trafficking, underscoring the value of collaborative governance as a rising priority in both research and practice.

Novel Theme: Social Rehabilitation and Economic Empowerment of Survivors

A novel theme gaining momentum is the focus on social rehabilitation and economic empowerment of human trafficking survivors. While earlier frameworks prioritized prosecution and prevention, recent scholarship increasingly highlights the importance of long-term recovery and reintegration (Surtees, 2013). Economic empowerment programs, including vocational training and employment initiatives, have been identified as critical in reducing survivors' vulnerability to re-trafficking (Davy, 2016). Moreover, multi-disciplinary rehabilitation initiatives that address psychological, social, and economic needs are linked to improved recovery outcomes (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). This novel theme signals a shift in anti-trafficking research and policy towards survivor-centred approaches that prioritize human dignity, autonomy, and resilience.

Novel Theme: Prevention of Organ, Tissue, and Cell Trafficking

Finally, a particularly novel and emerging theme is the prevention of trafficking in organs, tissues, and cells, which represents a distinct but increasingly urgent challenge. Unlike traditional forms of trafficking, organ trafficking requires specialized legal frameworks and international cooperation due to its highly organized and transnational nature (Ambagtsheer & Weimar, 2016). Scholars argue that existing human trafficking laws are insufficient to address the complexities of organ trafficking, calling for new global standards and enforcement mechanisms (Danovitch et al., 2017). The emergence of this theme underscores the need to expand the scope of anti-trafficking research and policy to encompass biomedical exploitation, ensuring that legal and institutional responses remain adaptive to evolving forms of trafficking.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review has examined the role of institutional frameworks and multi-agency collaborations in combating human trafficking, drawing on insights from Scopus AI analysis that highlighted consistent, rising, and novel themes in the research landscape. The findings demonstrate that while robust international and national frameworks—such as the Palermo Protocol and related domestic adaptations—provide the normative foundation for addressing trafficking, their effectiveness is significantly enhanced by the degree of inter-

agency collaboration. Multi-sectoral partnerships, task forces, and cross-border cooperation emerged as critical components for translating policy commitments into practice. At the same time, the growing recognition of healthcare, social rehabilitation, and survivor empowerment points to a necessary shift toward more holistic and victim-centred approaches.

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the value of viewing human trafficking through multidimensional frameworks that combine legal, human rights, and sociotechnical perspectives. The consistent theme of policy coordination illustrates the centrality of governance theories that emphasize institutional coherence and harmonization across scales, while the rising themes of healthcare engagement and collaborative governance highlight the applicability of systems theory and network governance to the anti-trafficking field. Furthermore, the novel themes of social rehabilitation, economic empowerment, and organ trafficking prevention suggest the need for expanded theoretical approaches that incorporate public health, social justice, and bioethics perspectives into trafficking research.

The practical implications of this study are equally significant. For policymakers, the evidence underscores the necessity of strengthening institutional capacity, ensuring adequate resource allocation, and embedding collaboration within legal frameworks to improve enforcement and victim support. For practitioners, the findings point to the importance of training healthcare professionals, supporting civil society organizations, and implementing multi-disciplinary rehabilitation programs that prioritize survivors' long-term recovery and reintegration. For international organizations, the results highlight the urgency of aligning global protocols with national practices to ensure consistency in prosecution, prevention, and protection.

Despite these contributions, the study is not without limitations. First, reliance on Scopus AI analytics, while robust, may have excluded relevant publications not indexed in Scopus or those published in non-English languages, thereby limiting the comprehensiveness of the dataset. Second, the reliance on abstracts and metadata for some analyses may not capture the full depth of the studies reviewed. Third, empirical gaps in the literature—particularly regarding strategies for sustaining multi-agency collaborations and addressing newer forms of trafficking such as organ trade—restrict the ability to draw definitive conclusions about long-term effectiveness.

Future research should therefore pursue several avenues. Empirical studies are needed to evaluate the implementation of institutional frameworks across different national contexts, with a focus on identifying best practices in coordination and collaboration. Comparative analyses of survivor-centred interventions, including economic empowerment and trauma-informed rehabilitation, would provide critical insights into long-term reintegration strategies. In addition, emerging challenges such as digital-facilitated trafficking and organ trafficking require specialized attention, including the development of tailored legal frameworks and international cooperation mechanisms. Finally, interdisciplinary approaches that bring together law, public health, social work, and technology studies will be essential for developing holistic solutions to the evolving complexities of human trafficking.

In sum, this study demonstrates that effective responses to human trafficking depend on the synergy between institutional frameworks and multi-agency collaboration. While much progress has been made, addressing the persistent gaps and embracing emerging themes will be critical to advancing both scholarship and practice in this vital field.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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