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Sex for Sale: An Investigation into the Status of Nepali Women as a Root Cause of Sex-Trafficking

Michelle R. Kaufman

Mary Crawford

University of Connecticut

Trafficking is a major part of the social and economic structure of Nepal. Currently, very high numbers of young girls are taken from Nepal into India as trafficked sex workers. It is estimated that 5,000 to 7,000 girls are trafficked to India each year (Poudel & Carryer, 2000).

There are many factors contributing to the continued practice of sex trafficking in Nepal, including poverty, migration (due to both high levels of poverty in rural areas and the Maoist insurgency), and the low status of women in Nepali society. The current research is focused on the status of women as a contributing factor to trafficking. Nepali women are encouraged to accept their submissive position in life without complaint and are discouraged from trying to control men. Even though 50 percent of rural Nepali children are enrolled in primary school, only 23 percent of girls attend secondary school. Girls are often sent off to find work to supplement family income, denying them a chance to receive a full education. Even today, an educated Nepali woman is seen as a potential threat to her husband (Asian Development Bank, 2003).

There has been virtually no quantitative work conducted in Nepal looking at sexism and attitudes towards women to date; however, qualitative work on Nepali cultural customs clearly demonstrates the oppressive attitudes toward women. For example, a woman is required to sit away from the table during a meal until her family and any guests have eaten. It is only after everyone is finished that she may dine. Also, a majority of girls do not receive education beyond primary school, and women are expected to care for their families and the family of their husbands without pursuing their own career interests.

In the current study, anonymous surveys were administered to 243 Nepalis living in Kathmandu. The survey was comprised of demographics, HIV/AIDS knowledge questions, attitudes towards girls who are trafficked or perform sex work, and the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996; 1997; 2001), a psychological measure used to measure two forms of sexism. Both male and female participants were recruited (52% female), and all participants received a box of chocolate for their

participation. The average age of participants was 29 years old. All participants were literate and the survey was self-administered in either Nepali or English, depending on the participants' preference.

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory measures mixed sexist feelings towards women, including hostile sexism, which consists of overt dominative beliefs and sexual hostility, and benevolent sexism, which is subjectively positive to the prejudiced individual in that it is very protective and paternalistic in nature. A hostile sexist would be likely to endorse statements such as, "Women seek to gain power by getting control over men," while a benevolent sexist would endorse statements such as, "Women should be cherished and protected by men." It was hypothesized in this study that high levels of sexism, particularly hostile sexism, would be related to negative attitudes towards girls and women who have been trafficked or who perform sex work.

Results showed that approximately 87 percent of participants surveyed believe sex trafficking is a problem in Nepal, and about 49 percent agreed that trafficking is a problem in their communities. In addition, 44 percent of participants thought girls who go into sex work are "bad girls," and about 50 percent agreed that "Girls and women who go into sex work are just greedy for money and nice things." Finally, about 47 percent of those surveyed felt that organizations who are helping survivors of sex trafficking are bringing AIDS into the country.

All items regarding trafficking survivors and sex workers were averaged to create one score for a variable we refer to as *hostility towards survivors*. Correlation analyses showed that scores on both subscales of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory were significantly correlated with hostility towards survivors, such that high levels of both hostile and benevolent sexism were related to hostile attitudes towards girls who have survived trafficking. ANOVA tests showed that there was no gender difference among participants for level of hostility towards survivors ($F=2.674, p=.103$). Men, however, showed higher levels of hostile sexism than did women ($F=48.846, p<.01$). Women, on the other hand, showed higher levels of benevolent sexism than did men ($F=10.811, p<.01$). These results are consistent with previous cross-cultural testing of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, which showed that men in patriarchal societies tend to highly endorse both hostile and benevolent sexism, whereas women tend to endorse benevolent sexist beliefs, sometimes at a greater rate than men (Glick et al., 2000). The results for this study provide great implications, including the need to address sexist attitudes in

Nepali society in order to address root causes of social issues such as sex trafficking.

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