

Geographies of stigma: Post-trafficking experiences

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This paper explores the relationship between human trafficking and geographies of stigma. We introduce post-trafficking contexts as important settings for understanding how geographical imaginaries underpin the everyday occurrence of stigma for those who have experienced human trafficking. We show how a focus on trafficking can speak back to some of the core migration literatures in Geography, highlighting new agendas with a particular focus on the how, where, and why of stigma. The paper draws on qualitative research in Nepal and interviews with 46 women who have experienced trafficking, to explain how geographies of stigma circumscribe the agency of returnees and affect their livelihoods and mobilities. It examines themes of spatial differentiation, territorialisation, and scalar processes in relation to the production and navigation of stigma. It shows how post-trafficking is given meaning and expressed through spatial form and relations, which become manifest in scalar hierarchies of stigma. The argument highlights how these hierarchies are anchored through trafficking routes and destinations. It contrasts village and city settings as potential sites of return, bringing centre stage the role of the city in mediating returnees' experiences. The analysis indicates how the categories of migrant and trafficked women are co-produced through bureaucratisation processes. The documents and identificatory practices at the heart of state and non-state interventions help produce the terms of in/visibility and social recognition for migrant women who often want to remain hidden. At the same time, they also reproduce some of the practices and mechanisms that underpin trafficking, thereby shaping the rejection, harassment, and abuse that comes with geographies of stigma for returnee women.

KEYWORDS

human trafficking, Nepal, post-trafficking, return migration, returnee, stigma

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on research on post-trafficking to interrogate the relationship between trafficking and geographies of stigma. In policy settings, the term post-trafficking has been used to refer to a targeted category of interventions, often with a health agenda in mind (see, DFID, 2018; Zimmerman, 2007) and as a “stage [where] activities focusing on both

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community integration and fostering social independence are required” (Hennick & Simkhada, n.d., p. 2). This use of the term, however, implies a stability and coherence to the category that our own work belies. We see post-trafficking more broadly as referring to the processes and practices associated with leaving trafficking situations, whether these be as a result of internal trafficking in one’s own country or because of trafficking experiences that involved crossing international borders (Laurie et al., 2015a). We have therefore sought to extend the conceptual understandings of post-trafficking to recognise that the experience of trafficking can be distinct at different points of return; it can involve returning “home” or not, embracing a range of scenarios where state and non-state interventions mean that “return” to countries and places of origin are sometimes not an option (Richardson & Laurie, 2019).

Using such a conceptualisation of post-trafficking provides a lens through which to examine how geographies of stigma shape the everyday and focuses attention on settings where people are often attempting to make new lives and livelihoods in circumstances where it is usually difficult to re-establish old ones. It prioritises understanding their agency and asks some hard questions about what shapes the possibilities for them to make viable lives.

We draw on empirical research in Nepal with women who have returned from experiencing trafficking situations to identify and interrogate the geographies of stigma associated with trafficking. Our research question: “How do geographies of stigma operate and what strategies do returnee women mobilise to navigate them?,” enables us to pinpoint the “how,” “where,” and “why” of stigma in a specific setting. Thus, our analysis sheds light on what it means to be a returnee trafficked person, including indicating how and why stigma becomes attached to specific bodies, people, groups, and places. It explains how geographical imaginaries and hierarchies shape the experience of return and how specific understandings of trafficking routes and destinations help do the work of cementing the attachments mentioned above, which in turn, have implications for human agency, collective and individual.

Estimating the number of people who have experienced trafficking is notoriously difficult as by its very nature trafficking is typically a hidden activity. Nevertheless, a number of organisations seek to aggregate data from different sources using a variety of methods. One of the most widely cited sources, the Global Report on Human Trafficking produced by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2016, p. 23), uses a common questionnaire and set of indicators to survey governments and gather global data on “the victims of trafficking”. Using this process and engaging with 108 national governments, they identified 63,251 “victims of trafficking” globally for the period 2012–14. Terms such as “victims” and “survivors,” however, are contested forms of labelling (Yea, 2015), including for some people who themselves “have experienced trafficking” – a phrase which is preferred by the partner organisation in our research (see below and Laurie et al., 2015a). The UNODC reports highlight regional trends annually and capture changes in trafficking flows over time. In 2016 it described South Asia as a “(d)estination for intraregional and origin for transregional trafficking” and also identified a new emerging trend for increased trafficking from the region to the Middle East (UNODC, 2016, p. 109). In the South Asia context, intraregional trafficking includes countries that share a border, with 8% of those trafficked going into India from Nepal and Bangladesh during the period 2012–14. Such figures, however, need to be treated with caution as the report also highlights that the “available information for South Asia is very poor” (UNODC, 2016, p. 109). These caveats aside, based on information from NGO sources, it is widely accepted that Nepal is a major source of trafficking into India and onto Southeast Asia, as well as the Middle East (Laurie et al., 2015b; Nepal’s Human Rights Commission [NHRC], 2017). This regional context informs the arguments in our paper.

The paper is organised into five sections. After this introduction, the second section explores the literatures on trafficking and return. It highlights the ways in which agency is conceptualised as relational in different contexts, including debates on immobility and the “failed migrant.” Third, we discuss the study context, introducing the development, migration, and trafficking setting in Nepal and outlining the methodology. Fourth, we turn to our case study material to examine the spaces and mobilities of return and tease out the different elements of territorialisation, spatial differentiation, and scalar hierarchies that contribute to geographies of stigma. We draw attention to the relationship between internal and international migration in post-trafficking scenarios and explore the role of the city as a key node linking trafficking and migration. Contrasts between village and city settings as potential sites of return are highlighted, bringing centre stage the role of the city in mediating returnees’ experiences. We indicate how scalar hierarchies also play a role in determining value for women’s migrations, exploring how stigma is shaped by destinations women are returning from and the circumstances of their return. In the final fifth section before the conclusion we show how returnee identities can become fixed and blurred through state bureaucracy around citizenship and migration. This explores how the documents and identificatory practices at the heart of state and non-state interventions both help produce the terms of in/visibility and social recognition for migrant women who often want to remain hidden, and also, in turn, reproduce some of the practices and mechanisms that underpin trafficking.

2 | TRAFFICKING AND RETURN

The presence and absence of research on trafficking in Geography is open to debate. Some, including us, have argued that trafficking has been largely ignored by geographers (Laurie et al., 2015b; Yea, 2014, 2015). Others have highlighted its absence in specific sub-disciplines. Smith (2017), for example, indicates that while migration has been a longstanding core theme in population geography, trafficking has not featured as a research topic. As a result, he calls for greater engagement in the field. Strauss (2012) frames migration, asylum, and human trafficking more widely as part of contemporary unfree labour. She argues that despite growing interest from academics, it is noteworthy that “‘traditional’ labour geography has been largely silent on the issue” (Strauss, 2012, p. 138). McGrath and Watson (2018) endorse Strauss’s emphasis on the need to mobilise understandings of space and place in analyses of exploitation and “unfreedom” (Strauss, 2012, p. 139). However, they also urge “geographers to be mindful of the body of critical literature” that raises fundamental concerns with the categories of both “unfree labour” and the generic grouping trafficking, forced labour, and “modern slavery” (TFLS) (McGrath & Watson, 2018, p. 23).

We locate our work in the context of feminist geography scholarship on trafficking. Discussions, most notably in *Gender, Place and Culture*, have for some time engaged with research on migration, gender, and trafficking (see, for example, Mai, 2013; Van Liempt, 2011). This work includes a specific focus on post-trafficking returns (Richardson et al., 2009), as well as broader research across Asian contexts on gendered social status relating to migration success and failure (see Ghosh, 2015; Rankin, 2003; Yea, 2012). Nevertheless, this feminist scholarship has also been largely marginal to mainstream research in Geography, including migration research. Aiming to redress this imbalance, we argue that a conceptual focus on post-trafficking, as defined above, brings agency into high relief. We show how it highlights new agendas and illuminates dimensions of human agency that have been less visible in debate until now. This is an important contribution because post-trafficking scenarios represent an extreme end of a wider spectrum of rejection that many and diverse returnees potentially face. In making this claim, we do not intend to conflate trafficking with migration, but rather to use post-trafficking as a critical lens to highlight how agency is framed and interpreted in these literatures. We use this framework in the subsequent sections as a departure point for our analysis of trafficking and geographies of stigma in Nepal.

2.1 | Return migration and the failed migrant

Since Russell King first identified return migration as a neglected aspect of population geography (King, 1978), it has grown into a wide-ranging field of study. In recent years, interest in transnationalism together with geographies of the home has given much of this work a strong social-cultural and international flavour, with a significant body of work addressing later life (Hunter, 2011; Percival, 2013; Walsh & Näve, 2016). Scholars’ enduring interest in the permanent, temporary, and circular nature of migration has also included a focus on the “failed migrant.” Here DeVanso’s 1976 work, which framed return migration largely as failed labour migration, has had a long-lasting influence. There are echoes of his emphasis on labour migration in research on the migration–development nexus, where out-migration and remittance regimes are associated with economic development. In this context gender analyses have provided a critical voice (see Bailey, 2010; Bastia, 2009, 2013). Researching foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, for example, Constable points to the significance of gender, arguing that “it is important to consider examples of so-called “failed migration” (not only migratory successes) in order to fully understand the costs of migration, including the gendered risks and gendered inequalities” (2015, p. 135).

Such work on the costs of migration is also explored as part of an emerging wider body of research in migration studies on “emotions on the move” (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015, p. 73). This research helps shed light on the emotional costs of return migration and the emotional labour that is tied up with explaining away certain “facts” and creating believable narratives about journeys past, present, and potentially in the future. An excellent example of such work is that of Ho (2014) on the emotional economy of permanent and temporary migration. She frames these mobilities as part of transnational journeys among Mainland Chinese migrants, comparing the experience of migrants based in Canada with those of migrants who have returned from there to China, with the expectation that they will go back again at some point. Returnees, she argues, “deploy emotional management to reconcile their return migration decision with the conflicting view that successful emigration should result in permanent settlement elsewhere” (Ho, 2014, p. 2,223). Her analysis emphasises how migrants manage their emotions as a way to secure wider economic and social integration. They “explain away” experiences of deskilling by emphasising the emotional benefits of gaining new life experiences.

Writing about a different context, Hiemstra’s (2012) *Ensure* on the deportation of migrants from the USA emphasises the role of family commitments and obligations in leaving and returning to Ecuador. Her account gives attention to the

psychological cost of return, including the economic cost to families in Ecuador as they await the failed migrant, detained in the USA before repatriation. The loss of remittances and the financial price of obtaining information about the legal process are often significant in these settings.

2.2 | Agency and (im)mobility

Many of the long-held assumptions about human agency and what the full picture of migration over time looks like are being challenged by a growing interest in immobility in different contexts (Black, 2013; Blazek et al., 2019; Champion & Falkingham, 2016; Skeldon, 2016). This work calls attention to the diverse reasons why people do and do not move in different contexts, as well as to the dynamic, complex web of social, economic, and political circumstances under which immobility takes place. In this growing literature, research is also highlighting the need to understand the relationship between return migration, mobility, and immobility over the life course. This includes in diverse settings, from Scottish coastal communities (Duffy, 2019) to Mainland China (as discussed above, Ho, 2014), and hostels for North African men in France (Hunter, 2011). Research on the latter in southern France reveals a growing desire among residents to “stay put” later on in life, remaking in-between temporary hostel spaces as permanent homes. Such research contributes to the growing body of work that takes an increasingly critical view of return migrants and diasporas as agents of economic and social change in wider migration and development literatures (Akensson & Eriksson, 2015; Constable, 2015).

The motivation to return at different stages in life and the mobilities associated with these desires are complex. Here research on anti-trafficking advocacy has a contribution to make. Many of those who experience trafficking often wish to remain where they are rather than return to their countries of origin (Jobe, 2010, 2020). Whether for negative reasons associated with perceived rejection and ostracisms (see later sections) or because they see better opportunities where they are, archival research on secondary documentation indicates a desire in many cases for immobility post-trafficking. Russell’s (2014) work on the trafficking of women for sexual purposes into Israel, for example, highlights how, when applying for Right to Remain Visas, women tell complex accounts of agency and choice in attempts to stay in their destination.

[T]here is some conformity within the letters with the ‘dominant narrative’ of victimhood and a reduction in the expression of ‘choice’, but not necessarily of agency. Yet, agency is not completely obscured in the narratives; rather, it emerges as a negotiated part of the integration of gendered commitments to the home, familial obligations and other types of choice, which are located within the parameters of limited options. (Russell, 2014, p. 543)

Despite expressed desires to remain, Agustín’s (2007) landmark book on the rescue industry indicates that many people who have experienced trafficking are forcibly returned. As we have shown elsewhere for the context of Nepal, this leaves little room for those who have experienced trafficking to have much say over the manner in which they return. They are often “outed” as having been trafficked in the process, despite the fact that many wish to conceal this “fact” (Laurie et al., 2015a, 2015b; Richardson & Laurie, 2019). Such findings underline those of Dhakal Adhikari and Turton (2019), also working in a Nepal setting, who argue that trafficking vulnerabilities need to be understood as part of a continuum rather than a one-off event. In a similar vein, Blazek et al. (2019) also make the case for disrupting the spatial categorisation of trafficking into different temporal phases. They argue that “viewing processes such as recruitment, transit, and exploitation as distinct and sequential phases of the human trafficking process is reductive” (Blazek et al., 2019, p. 63). Here our contribution emphasises the role of a post-trafficking perspective in bringing to the fore the relational ways in which geographies of stigma circumscribe the return experience.

3 | STUDY CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Geographical trends in trafficking are often associated with wider patterns of mobility relating to migration and development. The relationship between migration and development and the extent to which migration can be “[m]anipulated or ‘managed’ to achieve development goals” (Skeldon, 2008, p. 3) has been the source of much debate. These debates are especially pertinent in Nepal, where the national development model has relied heavily on remittance-focused out-migration in recent years. The numbers leaving for foreign employment are large. In the context of a total population currently estimated to be just under 30 million,¹ the figure of 500,000 leaving for the period 2015–16, quoted by the Nepal Human Rights Commission Report on Trafficking (NHRC, 2017), is significant. Foreign employment, however, does not capture

the full picture, because crossing Nepal's open border with India does not count as foreign migration. This context of widespread mobility provides an important backdrop to trafficking in Nepal.

Our research examined *how* and *why* some returning women are automatically stigmatised as sexually trafficked, whether or not this had been their experience.² Our approach focuses on how processes of sexual stigmatisation work to structure discrimination, rejection, and abuse in complex ways. In this article we explore this as a geographical process, focusing on the relational geographies that produce geographies of stigma encountered on return from trafficking situations. We focus specifically on territorialisation, spatial differentiation, and scalar hierarchies. Elsewhere, in a companion piece, we examine sexual stigma sociologically, drawing on Goffman (1990) and more recent work on the sociology of stigma (e.g., Link & Phelan, 2001; Scambler, 2009; Tyler & Slater, 2018) to examine the modalities of sexualised stigma in these settings (Richardson & Laurie, 2019). Recent sociological work has sought to reconceptualise stigma by critiquing the individualistic frameworks that have dominated much of the literature since Goffman's classic work. This represents an analytical shift away from understanding stigma at the level of social interaction between individuals and groups, to a new focus on the wider social, economic, cultural, and political contexts in which stigma occurs. Our theoretical approach contributes to and extends contemporary critiques of stigma research. We provide a critical rethink of the concept of sexual stigma in developing a social, cultural, and political analysis of how intersecting modalities of stigma are reproduced in the process of returning from trafficking situations (Richardson & Laurie, 2019). In our analysis of "markers of doubt" which place women at risk of being stigmatised, we identify four key aspects: family and community response, the "rescue process," the role of marriage, and embodied stigma connected to national border politics.

Research comprised a 30-month qualitative study³ based on an activist-academic collaboration with Shakti Samuha,⁴ a leading anti-trafficking organisation in Nepal and one of the first organisations globally to be founded and run by returnee trafficked women (Laurie et al., 2015a). In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 46 women who had returned from trafficking situations and an analysis of discourses and policies on trafficking in Nepal undertaken. Additionally, 23 stakeholder interviews were carried out with national and international actors to track policy evolution.

In our sample the majority of the women, over three-quarters of the sample, self-identified as having been sexually trafficked, a few were trafficked for domestic labour in the Middle East through recruitment agencies, and one or two were trafficked for the purpose of marriage. The majority of the women had been trafficked to India, a few were trafficked internally within Nepal, and six were trafficked elsewhere (to the USA, Kuwait, Lebanon, or Saudi Arabia).

In choosing interviewees, a number of factors were taken into account in order to attempt to capture the diverse factors that potentially influence women's access to livelihoods on return. The sample drew in women from different local home regions, ages of being trafficked/returned, ethnicities, castes, religions, length/number of trafficked journeys, returnee routes, and timeframes of return, as well as with differing levels of access to citizenship and contact with intermediaries. While most women in our sample were single when they were trafficked, in part because of their young ages, most sought to marry on return as a way of managing stigma (see Richardson & Laurie, 2019; Richardson et al., 2009). Marriage partnerships did not always last, however, and at the time of the interviews a third of the women in the sample were separated, divorced, or widowed, while a small number had remained single. Just under half the sample had children at the time of the interviews.

In the following two sections (4 and 5) we draw extensively on the interview material⁵ to explore geographies of stigma and return in Nepal. We emphasise how stigmatisation associated with trafficking becomes anchored to place and routes. While these processes structure the experience and meaning of return, we argue that moving to new locations and finding solidarity with other returnee women play important roles in countering some of the negative effects of these experiences. In turn, they produce new patterns of mobility.

4 | GEOGRAPHIES OF STIGMA OF RETURN

Shame is often conceptually paired with stigma in work on gender and sexuality and yet little research has addressed how stigma is geographically constituted and manifested. By exploring these issues through a post-trafficking lens, we seek to show how, while women's agency is curtailed by geographies of stigma, they are also able to make use of geography to manage its effects.

4.1 | Territorialisation of stigma

Wacquant (2007) developed a notion of "territorial stigmatisation" to show how living in a particular place, region, or neighbourhood can lead to stigma in terms of both the material ("bad") conditions of a place and the social ("deviant")

practices ascribed to those living there. Our findings suggest that, in a similar way, certain “deviant practices” are ascribed to women who have experienced trafficking. Reflecting on what women in her situation face, Maya explains:

The society says to her, ‘this woman was sold and now she is back from such [a] situation. Now she is going to spoil the people here in [the village]’.

Here the village is demarcated as a site of exclusion for returnee women, who are cast as potential contaminating influences in these settings. Such a perspective suggests that it is the *territorialisation* of stigma that is at work in the rejection of returnees (because of “makers of doubt” about their potential to spoil others) rather than the *stigmatisation* process itself, which in Wacquant’s (2007) terms, becomes associated with a specific territory. This is a subtle difference in emphasis but makes an important point about where agency lies in the relational geographies being produced around trafficking.

To avoid social rejection, women need to account for the time they have been absent from villages, neighbourhoods, and the daily lives of those closest to them (family members, extended kin, neighbours, etc.). For some, this rests on their ability to create believable narratives for the period when they were away (Richardson & Laurie, 2019). For others, more permanent forms of “hiding” become part of the process of managing stigma. They seek to blend in, aiming not to stand out or perhaps even be seen. Geographies of stigma profoundly shape where and how this can happen.

Nepal is largely a rural country; 81% of the population live in rural areas. The capital, Kathmandu, has 1.4 million inhabitants, while the second largest city, Pokhara, has only 200,000 (World Population Review, 2019). As a result, for many women, return means moving to a new location far from their original home. Some women make such a move after an initial period of trying to re-integrate into village life. Sushila, who is HIV positive and returned to her village from India, experienced so much harassment that she was unable to carry on with the new life and livelihood she was trying to establish.

It was hard living in the village. The people gossiped. I opened one small teashop ... the men used to show me disrespect – trying to grasp me, touch my hands, talking in a stupid way, throwing stones on me. It was very embarrassing.

After eight months she was forced to close her shop and move elsewhere.

The territorialisation of stigma led to Sushila being excluded from village life and the limited livelihood opportunities available to women in rural space. As a result, stigmatisation seems to produce a form of forced internal migration that works against women’s desire for immobility.

The example of Sindhupalchok, where Sushila had her tea shop, is important in this account. Sindhupalchok is an especially stigmatised place because of a complex interweaving of racialisation and historical burdens of stigma. In order to understand the process more fully, in Wacquant’s (2007) terms, we need to examine how constructions of the material (“bad”) conditions of a place come together with the social (“deviant”) practices ascribed to women who have experienced trafficking in this context. Located in the central region of Nepal, the inhabitants are predominately people from the Tamang ethnic group, stigmatised for being among the earliest to be exposed to trafficking. Over time, a stereotype emerged, which implied that families from this region sold their female members – daughters, sisters, and wives – into trafficking on a semi-organised basis, using the profits and any remittances for family welfare (see also Joshi, 2001). Such stigmatised constructions of ethnicity have longer historical roots dating back to the 19th century. At this time the feudal Rana ruling family recruited Tamang girls from Sindhupalchok to serve as court entertainers in Kathmandu (Poudel, 2011; Samarasinghe, 2008). As a result, even if a returnee woman has no links to the sex industry, it is likely that she will be read by many as a prostitute or as having been trafficked for sexual purposes if she returns to Sindhupalchok. In this way, long-standing histories of regional and spatial hierarchies are configured in new ways for those who return, suggesting that geographies of stigma go beyond a bounded understanding of territorial stigmatisation, such as that put forward by Wacquant (2007).

Stigmatised geographical imaginations, including tensions between the rural versus the urban, frame cultural and economic constraints and opportunities in returnees’ everyday lives. While a few women in the research managed to conceal their experiences while living in their village, for most this was not the case and for this reason many women relocated. As Tara explains: “You can hide it by fleeing to a place where no one knows you ... [and] none of your people live around there.” For another woman, Reena, managing stigma through a geographical move was about taking agency and dealing with the emotional cost of return.

Yes, I see myself as a trafficked woman but sometimes I forget the fact that I was trafficked ... Here I live in a place where no one knows me so it's not a problem. I can walk freely and don't have to worry about it ... tension free. But if I go back to my village, everybody knows me as a trafficked woman ... which makes me feel like [one].

Reena's move was part of forgetting. This was her way of navigating the territorialisation of stigma. She desired mobility to avoid being trapped in an identity of a (sexually) trafficked woman or in migrant terms as a "failed heroine" (Bunnell et al., 2012). In her case, as for many others, agency was expressed by relocation to the city as urban and rural spaces are seen to afford different opportunities for avoiding disclosure. Here we see a form of spatial differentiation at work in the navigation of stigma.

We now turn to explore this aspect of the geography of stigma in more detail by examining the role of the city in return. We engage directly with Blunt and Bonnerjee's (2013) notion of the diaspora city, where issues of forgetting and remembering play an important role in understandings of return.

4.2 | Spatial differentiation and city hiding

Kathmandu is the place where the majority of returnee women settle and a more anonymous life can be sought. Apart from the city affording more "protection" through anonymity, some of the women in the research regarded urban spaces as being more informed about trafficking through media and NGO activism and, as a consequence, less rejecting and stigmatising than some rural communities. Maya, for instance, implies that things are very different from when she first returned in 1996. "In good ways. There may not be any changes in the villages but it has changed in the urban areas." Kathmandu is also the key site for anti-trafficking organisations and donors, and therefore of forms of support for trafficked women.

Blunt and Bonnerjee's (2013) research on the diaspora city is helpful in making sense of the ambiguous sense of home that post-trafficking geographies of stigma generate for returnees who have usually grown up in villages but are unable to settle back for the reasons described above. Blunt and Bonnerjee re-frame understandings of return by arguing that the city (in their case, Calcutta⁶) plays a greater role in diaspora understandings of home than more abstract notions of nation and homeland. "[R]eturns to the city are also, in different and sometimes contested ways, returns to the community and are experienced and understood in terms of wider narratives of urban and community continuity and change" (Blunt et al., 2012, p. 25). In this sense, for women returning from trafficking experiences, the collective anonymity of the city is often preferable to that of the individualised stigma of the village. It is somewhere they can potentially find support and solidarity with other women who have experienced trafficking – a form of community continuity that can help them adjust to returning to a Nepal that is not their village. By returning and relocating themselves in the city they can establish friendships with women who have experienced similar circumstances. These are not necessarily the same friendships forged during shared time away, as work by Bunnell et al. (2012) suggests that such individual friendships do not often survive the return process. However, our findings suggest that for the women in our sample, the friendships forged in 1996 through the shared experience of a mass "rescue" from Indian brothels created lasting bonds between women. These circumstances later provided the basis for the founding of Shakti Samuha (Laurie et al., 2015a, 2015b; Shakti Samuha, 2008). These contrasting findings therefore highlight how the convergence between friendship and solidarity is highly contingent and helps frame how a trafficked identity is experienced as a collective and/or individualised process.

We also found in our study that finding a safe place to live in the city is not straightforward. And as a consequence, the provision of hostel accommodation is often a common aspect of anti-trafficking NGO activity. Taking up city and hostel living, however, also carries the collective risk of stigma by association, as Jiuwanti explains:

Another aspect is stigma because when I was in hostel I found it very difficult to go home because they see me as a prostitute and the hostel is a kind of prostitute house. Even if a woman was never trafficked she is considered as trafficked once she was in [the] hostel.

So whether a woman has been sexually trafficked or not, hostel living can run the risk of her being seen in that way. Maya, who is HIV positive and attended Shakti Milan, a sister NGO to Shakti Samuha serving those living with HIV/AIDS, worried about how her association with the organisation would be interpreted by her husband:

A driver who came to know about my affiliation with Shakti Milan inquired my husband the reason why I go there. He mentioned my husband that it was an organisation of survivors of human trafficking. Later on my husband asked me why I go to Shakti Milan. I cleverly answered him that Shakti Milan is an organisation of women having hard lives but not trafficked.

This example points to the ongoing personal cost of negotiating the fear of being “found out” for women like Maya, a single woman who chose to marry after return as a way of managing stigma (see Richardson et al., 2009).

While in trafficking contexts, as sites of return, cities can be places where new collective memories are made; for Reena and Maya above, they are also an opportunity to un-remember. As a point of departure, they are often places where trafficked journeys originate or transit through, to, and from other destinations.

A complex matrix of routes and places make up internal and international trafficking transit points in Nepal. As the largest city, Kathmandu sits at the apex of Nepal’s trafficking routes, while other smaller urban hubs such as Pokhara also play an important role in filtering trafficking. Some of these internal trafficking routes end in Kathmandu but they may also involve re-trafficking to other places as new destinations emerge.

The city is therefore not necessarily an alien concept to a woman with village origins. Even if she does not remember the details of passing through the city due to the hidden nature of being trafficked, she will most likely remember that it was a key node in her journey. Settling in the city after return and drawing in different ways on networks of support with other women who have experienced trafficking, she is therefore making a life in a place that may also have negative memories of her outward journey.

Return migration literatures on internal migration highlight the relationship between the rural and urban and, according to Wan and Fan (2006), often adopt a traditional dichotomous failure–success model of migration. Their own work on urban–rural return in China seeks to nuance such an approach by emphasising how experiences in the city influence decisions to return. They argue that the institutional and social inferiority experienced by rural migrants affects their ability to succeed, thereby making them open to return when family needs arise. They also argue that research has tended to overplay the numbers of successful returnees. While later work by scholars such as Ho (2014), discussed earlier, provide a more layered reading of the emotional factors that influence return, indicating how success and failure are negotiated practices, Wang and Fan (2006) nevertheless provide a useful spotlight on the city. In their analysis social differentiation and a sense of social inferiority in the city is a distinctly spatial experience that can be overcome by return. For them the city represents largely negative push factors back to the rural and fits with Wacquant’s (2007) notion of territorial stigmatisation. So, while they question the dichotomous thinking between success and failure, they retain a largely territorially bounded definition of rural and urban space.

For Blunt and Bonnerjee, on the other hand, cities are important relationally as places of both departure and return. They argue that for diasporic communities “[c]ities constitute dense and complex theatres or landscapes of memory, with monuments, memorials, street names and buildings providing important material contexts for personal and collective memory work and the imaginative and embodied practices of ‘re-membering’” (2013, p. 221). A post-trafficking perspective complicates this framing of agency. It brings to the fore the cost of holding together, remembering, and marking important collective moments and making and unmaking personal memories in specific points and places of both departure and arrival. This is captured most poignantly in the words of one of the Shakti Samuha leaders as she reflected on her conflicting emotions at witnessing the celebratory reception that Anu, one of the founding members of Shakti Samuha, received on her return to Kathmandu airport. She was arriving back after having accepted a US State Department award for anti-trafficking, in person, from Hilary Clinton in Washington. The moment reminded the leader of her own return along with Anu in 1996 as one of the large group of Nepali women who were returned to Nepal after the large-scale raid on Indian brothels mentioned above.

We were very happy the day when knew Anu ji got the award. On her return we went to airport to receive her. But that day reminded us the very day in 1996 [when] we were directly brought to the airport and didn’t even have a dress to wear. It reminded me [of] the way we were treated by the media, the government and the society; it reminded us [of] the stigma and rejection [and of] those who were pelting stones [figuratively] at us saying *Bombay ko bhalu* (*bears of Bombay – bhalu is a word used here for prostitute*). The same media was there in the airport to welcome her on her return from US after receiving the award.

For this leader, and perhaps the other women who remember the events of 1996, the city (in this case Kathmandu) is the node that binds experiences both before and after. Changing personal and collective identities over time are made with

reference to it. In this context, internal (rural/urban) and international trafficking are not necessarily distinct experiences, nor are they only linked on the way out, but rather they represent a complex geography of flows and movement outwards, which on return require the careful management of stigma, over time, for returnees to (re)make home. In this sense our findings suggest that social and spatial (im)mobilities sometimes converge but whenever they do they usually require laborious efforts to be produced and managed together. Below, we explore how the destinations that women return from also simultaneously frame these processes and require similar levels of effort from those on the move.

4.3 | Constructing scalar hierarchies: stigma by destination

There has been a huge increase in migrant workers from all over Nepal in recent decades. Formal migrant numbers increased nearly tenfold from 1999 to 2009, according to official statistics (Department of Foreign Employment, 2015). Migrants leaving Nepal with official government permission increased from approximately 35,000 in 1999/2000 to nearly 300,000 in 2009/10. The destinations of choice for most of these migrants were traditionally Malaysia and countries in the Middle East.

Historically there are marked gendered dimensions to outmigration patterns in Nepal. While men migrated to various destinations in the Middle East and Malaysia for construction work, in official statistics women were concentrated in a few countries such as Lebanon and Israel, where they were recruited for domestic work and to look after children or older people. With time, the picture has changed slightly. By 2014/15 Nepalis were obtaining permits to work in 142 different countries and by 2015/16 this number had increased to 152 countries (Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2016, 2018). Malaysia and parts of the Middle East (Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) rose substantially in popularity as the destination of choice between 2008/9 and 2013/14 and continue to receive 85% of all official migrants (Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2018). Lebanon is one of a number of countries that has also remained a popular destination.

Our data highlight that migration circuits, as well as being gendered, are also highly sexualised, affecting how particular people going to and returning from specific destinations are seen. In this way stigma is a differentiated experience. Rupa explains that once the open border with India has been crossed, a hierarchy of destination-based stigma comes into play. The geographical imaginary of countries in the Middle East contrasts sharply with destination cities in India.

The society perceives differently to women trafficked to Delhi, Calcutta and women trafficked abroad such as [to] Lebanon, Kuwait. It is seen that they have nice work in Kuwait or Lebanon.

Although many female migrant workers in the Middle East face situations of sexual exploitation similar to those of trafficked women, they are likely to be read differently. However, because of fears of rejection and stigmatisation, these women are often forced into silence about the negative experiences they encounter while “abroad,” as both Tara and Nita explain.

It is called foreign employment at the time of their departure but in fact they experience trafficking out there. (Tara)

Her outlook [in sukila mukila (neat and clean) dress] also affects positively. People follow her assuming her to have earned good amount in abroad. They may ask her to take them with her and find jobs for them. In this context, a migrant woman would never disclose even if she had bad experience. She would never take anyone to place where she worked because she never wants others to know about her past work. (Nita)

India, and especially Bombay,⁷ is the most stigmatised destination as it is seen to be synonymous with sexual trafficking. Whether or not women returning from India went as informal migrants or were trafficked into the “sex industry,” the circus, or other forms of bonded labour, they are usually stigmatised as prostitutes and/or HIV carriers (Poudel, 2011).

The stigma of having been in India and “not in abroad,” as Tara explains below, is underlined by returning without money.

The migrant women earn lot of money and they again go back to work. Normally they don’t want to stay here once they returned. It is not the case for us. We don’t want to go back there again. We struggle hard to come back to Nepal to save our lives. We don’t earn money either. It is not in abroad.

Tara's quotation above is one of a number of similar descriptions given by women to explain their responses to a direct interview question about whether they thought trafficking was similar or different to migration (foreign employment). Of the 36 women interviewed,⁸ the vast majority (30) very clearly replied that they were not the same thing. The key finding across the sample was that society's perception is different: migrant women are treated better, the perception of them is different (not negative or "bad"); they were seen to have gone with the consent of their family; they are not stigmatised on return; and it is assumed that they are able to bring money back to their families and this, in turn, helps them gain respect. When asked further on in the interview to make a direct comparison with her own circumstances, however, Tara suggested that the migrant and trafficked distinction was perhaps less clear-cut than first implied. She explained that the difference is in the level of rejection and the open or hidden nature of hostility women experience on return.

The society perceives the women return from trafficking with hatred and they are assumed to have returned from Kothi [*slang for prostitution*]. And women returned from abroad works are perceived nicely ... some people also assume them to have encountered similar problem [*referring to trafficking/sexual exploitation*] in abroad. There is a mixed perception of women returned from foreign employment.

Lone female migrants in general it seems carry "markers of doubt" (see Richardson & Laurie, 2019), and even if returning migrants are not hated in the same way as women who have experienced trafficking, they may still be talked about behind their backs. Stigma is potentially still at work but is able to be managed differently because of the circumstances of return and the geography of where women are coming back from.

By distinguishing between "India" and "abroad," scalar hierarchies (including those reflected in state data collection techniques) play a role in determining value for women's migrations, sexualising, and in turn further devaluing those who are already seen as being of less worth because of where they are going to and returning from.

5 | BUREAUCRATISATION AND CO-PRODUCING STIGMA

Elsewhere we have argued that labour arrangements between Nepal and specific countries in the Middle East and parts of Southeast Asia where there are labour deficits make it easier for some women to "pass" as generic migrant workers on return (Richardson et al., 2009). However, our current findings are more ambiguous. On the one hand, we have found that attempts to hide a trafficking past are aided by changing patterns of migration. The decreasing viability of agrarian economies means that more men *and* women, especially from poor households and village communities, are migrating in search of sustainable livelihoods in urban areas and also outside Nepal (Hennick & Simkhada, 2004). In these contexts, mobility and long journeys are not uncommon, yet, on the other hand, when women return from stigmatised destinations after a long period of no contact with family, they typically face rejection and suspicion from their communities, irrespective of how they originally left the country.

We have also found that as more women migrate in search of work there is an increased awareness of what is required for formal migration. In response to our question about women being able to hide their trafficked status by pretending that they left for foreign employment, Tara explained: "it needs evidence like citizenship card, passport with company's stamp which I didn't have, I went with nothing, so lying was ... [not possible]." Here the bureaucracy at the heart of Nepal's support for a migration and remittances-focused approach to development adds a further dimension to the ease or not with which women are able to manage stigma on return.

Aanjan, a woman who experienced internal trafficking within Nepal, describes how family involvement is required to secure documentation for formal international migration.

Going abroad doesn't happen overnight. You have to make your documentation ready, passport, visa etc. with agreement from your family during the whole processes. So, even if she returns, she won't be treated badly.

In this way family involvement helps to produce the category "migrant," whatever circumstances (trafficked or not) women encounter "abroad." Technocratic practices establish a migrant identity through documentation that also serves to sustain the migration and development policy paradigm in Nepal. These practices, together with the geographies of stigma associated with women's home origins and the destinations they return from, police who counts as a migrant. In turn, this combination of factors sets the parameters for how women who have experienced trafficking(-like) circumstances are received and what livelihood options they have on their return.

Highlighting the co-production processes involved in generating the categories of “migrant” and “trafficked” focuses attention on the agency of different actors in these settings. Securing and producing identity documents takes on particular significance for traffickers. Anu, the recipient of the US State Department award mentioned above, describes the complex trickery traffickers engage in to obtain documents.

They [traffickers] make the women have passport and they traffic women to abroad pretending to have sent them for foreign employment. ... There are both fake and original passport cases. Sometimes what they do is they [traffickers] bring the passport of someone else and replace the photograph [with one] of person whom they are planning to send [traffick].

These scenarios have become even more pronounced since the 2015 earthquake. According to the Nepal Human Rights Commission: “It is commonly reported that key modus operandi of trafficking are the fake marriage, luring of girls/women by false promises of good employment, showing the duplicate travel documents, using own relatives as agents of transportation of victims” (NHRC, 2017, p. II) . Their report highlights how children orphaned by the disaster have become particularly vulnerable.

In this section we have highlighted the social production of documented identities in the setting of the now well-established developmentalist intervention in Nepal, summarised more globally as the migration–development nexus. While technocratic practices produce outputs that can be copied, faked, and faithfully reproduced, in line with changing state and non-state interventions, they continue to bolster the restrictive (and often dangerous) terms under which migrants and non-documented migrants are rendered visible. This includes being “outed” as women who have experienced [sexual] trafficking, whether they want to be or not.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored the geographies of post-trafficking stigma. Based on findings from an in-depth empirical case study in Nepal, we have drawn out the separate elements of this geography as distinct processes of territorialisation, spatial differentiation, and the construction of scalar hierarchies. The empirical analysis has also sought to indicate when and where these processes have converged for some women, resulting in a “layering up” of rejection for those who have experienced trafficking. Our argument is that, over time, these processes become part of the sedimentation of stigma in individual post-trafficking lives.

The relational aspects of the return migration process that we have drawn out from a post-trafficking perspective are an important contribution to the geographical work on trafficking. We highlighted how women’s origins, the destinations from which they return, and the places they go to subsequently all shape their experience as returnees. How returnees negotiate their identities is tied up in place-based expressions where the multi-layered nature of stigmatisation is anchored to place and through the actions of diverse actors. These actors range from the aid industry, the state and anti-trafficking NGOs to local communities kinship networks, families, and bureaucracies. In pointing to the sharp end of return migration experiences, our focus on post-trafficking pushes home the point that not all returnees have the same level of freedom of movement within the return destination or choice over return in the first place. For some this may change with time and returns may become different experiences, albeit ones where memories, collective and individual, cast shadows over individual and collective migrant identities even as they are re-made.

Our findings challenge wider migration scholarship to further re-think the processes that frame return migration in a number of ways. First, further exploration on how stigma is generated by both places of departure and return is required in order to understand how they influence constructions of the “failed migrant.” Second, we need to pay greater attention to the diversity of borders and movements in question. What does the distinction between internal and international migration serve in a context such as Nepal, where the open border means that going “to work” or “being trafficked” to India does not count as “going abroad”? Third, our post-trafficking lens makes a case for broadening out the study of immobility. Making visible the experiences of those who have lived through trafficking emphasises how a lack of freedom of choice and movement profoundly impacts who can move and who can choose to stay put. In these contexts, immobility is more than a shifting pattern in migration behaviour over the life course, studied in particular places and/or among specific communities. It needs to be conceptualised as an active desire, as a right to be recognised by state bureaucracies, along all points of both departure and return.

We argue that the frequently extreme experiences that women face, and the ways in which they respond to them, have lessons for wider literatures that seek to understand return. For women who have experienced trafficking or are

assumed to have done so because of how and where they are returning from, stigma and the need for concealment profoundly affect their lives. Two things are at play here. First, the stigma of being assumed to have been trafficked (because of the routes and destinations they are associated with, as well as whether they are able to return with funds) and second, the assumption (also, and especially, because of the destinations they return from) that they have been trafficked for sexual purposes. While these have distinct implications for women's lives, these also overlap and intersect, shaping how they are able to manage (sexualised) stigma. In this context our findings are important for how we think about the links between international and internal migration and the role of cities in this relationship as points of both departure and return. More work is needed on the place of the city as a key node where these experiences come together. One conclusion is that those women who find supportive urban communities with fellow returnees seem to fare better. But for many this is not easy or straightforward. It comes at personal cost and stigma is rarely once and for all "managed away." It re-emerges at different points and in new guises, including sometimes through anti-trafficking support, meaning that women need to remain vigilant about where they go and how they are seen and act. In this context it is crucial to remember, and to bring centre stage in any analysis, that there are often significant psychological costs to this emotional effort (Shakti Samuha, 2008).

As wider debates on unfree labour are gaining a voice, our approach highlights the continued relevance of a feminist perspective on gender and migration as a sexualised process. Strauss has argued that "the literature and evidence base on the forms, extent and context of unfree labour remains small, and policy debates have tended to focus on emotive areas of trafficking (especially related to prostitution)" (2014, p. 138). It is nevertheless politically important that "the emotive" in this context remains a legitimate and urgent subject of research.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in UK Data Archive at <https://www.data-archive.ac.uk>. Reference: Economic and Social Research Council RES-062-23-1490.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Based on projections from the 2011 census, which recorded a population of 26,620,809 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

² Although showing a decline in relation to other forms of trafficking, especially forced labour in recent years, sex trafficking (a term used by the IOM) remains a significant factor in the trafficking landscape (IOM Data Portal, 2018), globally making up 54% of all cases of trafficking in 2014 (UNODC, 2016, p. 6).

³ Research was conducted by Nina Laurie, Meena Poudel, Diane Richardson, and Janet Townsend as part of the ESRC "Post Trafficking Livelihoods in Nepal: Women, Sexuality and Citizenship" (RES-062-23-1490), which ran from November 2009 to April 2012. Poudel conducted the majority of interviews with returnee women in Nepali and local dialects. With the support of a translator, Laurie and Richardson conducted interviews with ten members of the Shakti Samuha leadership, who are themselves returnees. Laurie, Poudel, and Richardson undertook participant observation and interviews with policy stakeholders and together with Townsend analysed the qualitative material collectively (see https://research.ncl.ac.uk/posttraffickingnepal/how_we_work/data_analysis/ – last accessed 29/04/2020). Other data and analysis were also co-produced with the research partner Shakti Samuha (see Laurie et al., 2015a).

⁴ See <http://shaktisamuha.org.np> (Accessed July 2020).

- ⁵ Quotations are presented verbatim as transcribed in Nepali English in order to recognise this as one of the many spoken forms of global English.
- ⁶ They use Calcutta in the original as they speak of historical attachments.
- ⁷ We have reproduced the place names used by the women when they spoke, in this case they referred to Bombay and not Mumbai.
- ⁸ This question was not asked in the same manner in the remaining interviews with the members of the Shakti Samuha leadership. Instead, interviews explored the ways in which the categories of migrant and trafficked woman were mobilised by their organisation.

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