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## Antecedent and Sequalae Issues of Nepalese Women Trafficked into Prostitution<sup>1</sup>

By Chandra Kant Jha<sup>2</sup> & Jeanne Madison<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

Using a qualitative descriptive methodology, this study explored the experiences of Nepalese women trafficked into prostitution in India. The study found that poverty and lack of awareness about being at risk for trafficking are the major precursors for their trafficking experience. Abduction, fake marriages and the seduction of a better job were the major approaches adopted by pimps to traffic the women. The study also showed that after returning from the Indian brothel(s), they were rejected by their family and community. Such rejections occurred as family and community perceived these young women as at high risk for HIV infection. Strategies should be put in place to assist the women to reintegrate into their family and community.

*Keywords:* Nepal, trafficking, women, prostitution, reintegration, humiliation, HIV

### Introduction

Trafficking into the sex trade has been a global phenomenon (Miller, 2006; Murphy, 2001; Wilson, 1997). It is reported that 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across borders around the world of which two-thirds are found to be compelled into prostitution or sex-slavery (Miller, 2006). A large number of women are trafficked in South-Asia and are forced into prostitution. Nepal has one of the highest incidence of trafficking of women into sex trade in the South-Asia region (Wilson, 1997).

Trafficking of women into prostitution is a serious form of violence and exploitation against women. Trafficking is “the recruitment and transportation of a person within and across national borders by means of deceit, violence or threat of violence, abuses of authority or dominant position for work or authority, that may result in forced labour or slavery-like practices” (ABC/Nepal, 2003:1). The trafficking of women is primarily for the purpose of sex trade (ABC/Nepal, 2003:1; Paudel & Carryer, 2000). Prostitution or any activity involving women for sexual exploitation is illegal in Nepal (KC, Subedi, Gurung, & Adhikari, 2001; Sanghera & Kapur, 2001). However, socio-cultural, economic and political factors are related with the sexual exploitation of women (ABC/Nepal, 2003; Ghimire, 1994; Singh, 1994).

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Nepal is a landlocked country nestled between two Asian giants; India to the South, East and West, and Tibet, part of China to the North. All borders with both neighbouring countries are open, and a visa is not required by the citizens of India and Nepal to cross the borders between Nepal, and some parts of Tibet. Nepal has been governed by a monarchical system for over two hundred years, and during that period, The Rana system of government ruled over the nation by keeping the monarch under 'house arrest' for nearly a century and sexual exploitation of women was very apparent during this period (Ghimire, 1994:5). Democracy in Nepal came into effect nearly two decades ago, however the people led government was politically unstable and change slow in evolving. In the first decade of democracy, most of the universal declarations, including the elimination of all forms of discriminations against women were signed into law. However, the enforcement of the declarations into action was largely ineffective. As a consequence, sexual exploitation against women, including their trafficking into prostitution remained and is still high in Nepal.

It is projected that around 200,000 Nepalese girls (Ghimire, 1997:6; Gurung, 2003:2; Pradhan, 1994:38) and women have been sold into prostitution into various cities of India. Around 5000 girls are sold annually (ABC/Nepal, 2003:3; Ghimire, 1994:5; Thapa, 1997). The trafficking of girls to brothels in India has received much attention since *The Times of India* identified that 100,000 Nepali women were working in Indian brothels in 1989 (Ghimire, 1997:7). Also a significant number of girls have been trafficked to work in Indian circuses where they face sexual exploitation and torture (Ghimire, 2004:25).

Poverty and destitution are the major precursors to trafficking (Chhetri, 2004:90; Pradhan, 1994:38; U. Tamang, 2004:86-87). The major indicators related to national development remains very low in Nepal. For instance, according to 2007 statistics, the gross development product (GDP) per capita is reported to be US\$1,550 and life expectancy 62.6 years. Nepal's population growth is 2.3% with a total population of 27.5 million (UNDP, 2007/2008). Due to the lack of employment opportunities in rural areas, many girls go to work in the carpet factories in Kathmandu. From carpet factories they are trafficked to brothels in India (Ghimire, 1994:6; 2004:1; Rai, 2004:54; S. Tamang, 2004:27; UNDP/Nepal, 2004:54). In most cases, pimps lure the young women, sometimes marrying them, and then abduct them to India. The women are given false assurances that better jobs are available there. Eventually, they are sold into Indian brothels (Ghimire, 1994:5; Paudel & Carryer, 2000; Puri, 2004:43; Roka, 2004:3; U. Tamang, 2004:87). In some cases, close relatives, parents and husbands in Nepal are involved in trafficking of girls for financial reward (Ghimire, 1997:9; Paudel & Carryer, 2000).

Politics, police and trafficking are interrelated. Pimps ensure that they maintain good relations with and provide bribes to police and politicians in connection with their trafficking activities. (Ghimire, 1997:9; Pradhan, 1994:39). A report from ABC/Nepal (2003:2) has claimed that the expansion of tourism is also associated with trafficking and prostitution as tourists seek to engage in sex with prostitutes.

Compared to other women in Nepalese society, women involved in prostitution are regarded as 'soiled' and are never considered acceptable. One of the women participants in Hennink and Simkhada's (2004:25) research who returned from an Indian brothel related that a prostitute's value is something like a "broken egg", which never can

be repaired. In the Nepalese community, prostitution is considered shameful behaviour and the women involved are often rejected from society (Hennink & Simkhada, 2004:25).

Women who return after having been trafficked face lifelong marginalisation, mental distress and other psychological consequences (ABC/Nepal, 2003:7; Ghimire, 2004:28). They are often regarded as a carrier of HIV, resulting in rejection and ostracism by families and communities (Ghimire, 2004:19&28). Many women who return from being trafficked have lost their identities. Being disconnected from their nuclear family or having been displaced during childhood from parents, these women face difficulties in obtaining citizenship cards (Puri, 2004:41; Shakya, 2004:46).

Women working in a brothel as prostitutes are compelled to face the risk of HIV infection (Paudel & Carryer, 2000; Rai, 2004:56). It is estimated that between 65% to 70% of girls in Nepal who have been involved in prostitution are infected with HIV (Ghimire, 2004:16). Women who return after being trafficked are often referred to as a “returnee from Bombay” and, as pointed out above, are believed to have HIV (Mahato, 2004:79). High levels of humiliation are common experiences for a person with, or perceived as at risk for HIV primarily due to a fear that HIV could be transmitted by casual contact, for instance, through every day interactions (Bhatta, 1994:57). Hence, trafficked women experience high levels of isolation (S. Tamang, 2004:32). In one instance a woman was banned from walking along a road in her village (Bhatta, 1994:58). Women who have been trafficked and have, or are perceived as at risk for HIV, feel isolated. They tend to have suicidal ideation. In addition they lack financial and emotional support (Bhatta, 1994:58-62).

## **Methodology**

By using qualitative descriptive methodology, this study explored the factors that led to trafficking of Nepalese young women into prostitution, and then, their coping strategies with family and community after their return to home from brothel. This paper included the lived experiences of 5 women who had been abducted in to Indian brothels were diagnosed with HIV and had returned to Nepal. The participants were recruited through local NGOs and self-help groups for people with HIV. In-depth interviews were conducted to gather participants’ experiences. The interviews lasted for one to two hours.

### *Ethical consideration*

The researcher acquired ethics approval from the University of New England, Armidale, Australia before commencing fieldwork or data collection in Nepal. Before interviewing participants, a participant information sheet was provided to them, which described the study in detail. The interview process did not include the name or address or any other identifiable information of the participants. The confidentiality and privacy of the participants was strictly maintained. The Participant Information Sheet explained to participants that access to the transcripts and data were limited to research supervisors. The researcher asked whether the participants had any questions or concerns regarding this research or their participation. If potential participants had questions, the researcher discussed them thoroughly; participants who agreed to participate voluntarily were included in the research. Either a verbal or written consent was taken before proceeding with interviews.

### *Data analysis*

The analysis process was consistent with grounded theory. Firstly, the audiotapes were transcribed from Nepali to English. After reading and rereading the transcripts, the researcher provided appropriate 'open codes' as per the meaning captured in data. The open codes were clustered under specific categories. Then, themes were developed from major categories. The themes generated higher-level concepts, which helped to clarify the basic social processes involved in trafficking and the coping mechanisms used by the women. In this paper, 'women as a sex commodity' and 'prostitutes the reservoir and promiscuous the carriers' appeared as major themes and are discussed below.

### **Results**

#### *'Women as a sex commodity'*

'Women as a sex commodity' was found to be a prominent theme behind Nepalese women's trafficking into prostitution. As the literature review revealed many young Nepalese girls have been trafficked to work in brothels in India as a prostitute. Taylor and Jamieson (1999) state that sex industries work on the basis of the same principles of supply and demand as other industries. Kant (2006) reports that Nepalese girls with a 'fair-complexion' have been in high demand in Indian brothels over a long period of time. Such a demand has encouraged the sex industry to pay the trafficker up to 200,000 Indian rupees for a single fair looking Nepalese girl.

This study has explored the issue that pimps use various approaches to traffic Nepalese girls into prostitution. For many respondents, poverty has directly or indirectly increased their chances of being trafficked into prostitution. Poverty has enabled the pimp to attract poorer young women into prostitution by holding out the hope of better employment elsewhere. For example, Babita is a breadwinner for her family. She usually engages in a variety of activities to earn a living. She described that on one occasion she was selling firewood in a town where she met a woman who was involved in trafficking girls to India. The woman convinced Babita to go with her to Birgunj, a border town in Nepal where she would find a better job for Babita that would earn her more money. She agreed to go with the woman and was then taken on into India, where she eventually reached Bombay. Being uneducated and living in the rural areas, Babita did not know the women's intention and where she was being taken.

*While I came to sell firewood, I met a woman on the way; she asked me why I am doing such a difficult work. She asked me to go to Birgunj (a Southern town in Nepal) with her. She would find a good job for me there. I didn't know anything about Birgunj. She took me from there. I didn't know where she took me. After all she sent me to Bombay. [Babita, p4]*

In the case of Babita, her innocence, hardworking ethic and hope for a well-paying job left her open to being trafficked to a brothel. In Babita's case as well as other participants', the pimp gave a false assurance of employment. The intention of the pimp is to take women towards India, to a bordering town such as Birgunj. Citizens of both countries (Nepal and India) do not need to show a visa to cross the border, crossing the border openly and at will. Mumbai is a major destination where many Nepalese women are trafficked into prostitution.

Some traffickers marry young women and then traffic them into prostitution. For Ranju, a pimp acted as a prospective groom. During his interaction with Ranju he told her of his intention to marry her. This impressed Ranju and later, she accepted his proposal and went with him. They planned to marry elsewhere. They eventually arrived in Mumbai.

*There was a guy who took me with an assurance that he would marry me. Later he took me to Bombay. It took 2-3 days to get to there. Later he skipped. [Ranju, p1]*

In traditional rural Nepalese culture, an interaction between an unknown man and a young girl is usually rejected. Therefore, this pimp used his social networks to introduce him as a *lahure* to Ranju. In Nepal's rural communities, especially in hilly regions, a *lahure* is a colloquial term for someone in the army who is highly acceptable as a groom. The pimp pretended to be a *lahure*. According to Ranju the pimp seems to have had some friends or links with boys in her community. The boys told Ranju that the pimp was a *lahure* and confirming his status. The pimp went on to trick her, saying that they would marry elsewhere, subsequently taking Ranju to India. In some cases, an unmarried girl may go with a boy or her lover and marry elsewhere. When she returns with her husband after a few days or weeks or months to her parents' home, the parents can welcome them back into the family and community. For Ranju, the pimp gave her a false promises regarding marriage.

*The man who took me to a brothel had friends in my village. His friends told me that he is a lahure [army] and stays at Butwal. If he was a lahure, he could take me to his home. Whatever he said we believed. [Ranju, p3]*

Ranju's narratives suggest that the trafficking of girls is a well-organized business. It appears that the traffickers can develop informal networks at the community level, which helps a stranger to introduce himself to Ranju, developing an environment for further socially acceptable interactions. If there had been no network for the pimp, he could not have been successful, in either meeting Ranju or having further interactions with her. If the pimp had proposed marriage to Ranju prior to being introduced by the required informal youthful contacts, she could have verified his identity. If his identity was not forthcoming, villagers and importantly family, would have viewed him with suspicion.

The popular form of marriage in Nepal is by arrangement, organized by parents and relatives of bride and groom. At the conclusion of a marriage ceremony, the bride's mother and father give their blessing allowing the groom and his party take the bride to his family home. In this type of marriage, the bride's parents always support the groom. An alternative form of marriage occurs without the consent of either parents (Pyakuryal & Suvedi, 2000). In this situation, if the prospective bride and groom like each other they can escape their community and get married. After a few days or few weeks or months they may return to the bride's parents home to receive a blessing. In this kind of a situation, usually the brides' parents as well as the nearby community accept them and bless them. Ranju describes this kind of situation as she decided to flee with the

fraudulent pimp. Unfortunately, she was taken to a brothel in India. Her dream to marry this supposed *lahure* was unrealised and she was unable to return with her husband to her parents' home to receive a blessing.

Ranju's story is linked to a period of British colonization over India; Nepalese men from hilly regions were recruited into the British armed force and known as *Gurkha* soldiers. A large number of *Gurkha* soldiers were deployed in Britain and India (Adhikary & Brunton, 2002). They earned a good salary which they spent in Nepal to purchase housing, obtain luxury goods and generally have a better life. They enjoyed a high social standing as a *lahure* with more than adequate earnings; *identifying them as a highly reputable groom, especially in rural areas of Nepal* (Koirala & Acharya, 2005:35,74&79).

Another approach to trafficking a young woman is abduction. For example, Ashmita was engaged in cattle grazing in a forest a few kilometres away from her home in Southern Nepal which is close to the India border. A gang of traffickers abducted her and sedated her so that she slept disabling her from calling for help. It was then easier for the traffickers to take her, sleeping, to Raxual, a border town in India. From Raxual, she was taken to a brothel by train.

*I was grazing my cattle in a forest which is few kilometres away from my village. A group of boys came and trapped my mouth and then took me away. I didn't know where they took me. Once I became conscious in a train. I was so confused where they had taken me. I asked where I am being taken because I didn't know anything about the train. At the same time I felt nauseated and started to vomit. They again gave me sour water. Again I became unconscious. Finally, they took me to a brothel. [Ashmita, p1]*

The case of Ashmita further supports that there is a network of traffickers at the village level. If that were not the case, the traffickers would not have reached Ashmita. The traffickers must have closely monitored her day-to-day activities, knowing that she went to a forest for cattle grazing, a fairly safe place to abduct her.

Anita's narrative reveals another way that young women are abducted and sold into prostitution. Anita's story reveals a context of poverty similar to that of Ashmita and Babita. She engaged in hard work for the family, carrying grass and fodder for the cattle everyday; and unfortunately she was not appreciated by her parents. Anita's case also reveals the involvement of relatives in the trafficking of women into prostitution. Anita describes how her aunt attempted to sell her by convincing Anita to marry a pimp. Marriage was the socially preferred option and the aunt would then be able to claim Anita had married a young man and left the community. When this approach failed Anita was offered 'cigarettes' containing a sedative. When Anita became drowsy after smoking the 'cigarette' her aunt left her in the company of the pimps. They took her to Kathmandu for several days and then to the Indian border. She describes how she finally realized she had been sold into a brothel when the pimp did not return for her after several days.

*We were poor. My parents used to send me to the forest to bring grass and fodder for my cattle. They used to beat me telling that grass and fodder is*

*not sufficient. Once my aunt [maiju] asked me to go with her to watch a movie in a town. I went with her but she took me to a house in the town. She was insisting on me to marry a young man who was her friend. I persistently denied. In the meantime, that man's friend brought a cigarette and gave it to my aunt and me. I used to smoke cigarette from my childhood. After smoking I became a bit drowsy, and was taken to Kathmandu. I didn't know anything about Kathmandu that time, and then to a brothel in India. After 2-3 days I knew those boys sold me and other girl there. [Anita, p1]*

In Anita's case, poverty and familial conflicts had contributed to her vulnerability to being trafficked into prostitution. The traffickers took a tactical approach to traffic her spending a few days interacting with her to increase her trust in their friendship. At that time, instead of taking her towards India they took her to Kathmandu which is in the opposite direction. She was still not aware of the intention of traffickers who were busy abducting other young girls to traffic with Anita, so that they could make more money.

When Babita and the other girls realised they had been brought to a brothel for the purposes of prostitution, they became extremely upset. Several failed attempts to escape were unsuccessful and left them with no options. Babita's continuing refusal to prostitute herself resulted in the brothel owner physically abused and brutalized her. This finally convinced Babita that she had no alternative at all, but to engage in prostitution.

*Brothel owner started to beat me and pass electric current on me as I denied having sex with clients. Later I felt my luck is like that and thought engaging in prostitution is better than dying there. [Babita, p5]*

The above cases represent how innocent girls and young women were abused and violated by pimps, relatives, clients and brothel owners. In the following example, Babita is worried about the transmission of HIV through her forced prostitution. In response to the villager's query about her HIV transmission, she relates how the pimps were responsible for that.

*I didn't get HIV by myself. Someone compelled me into prostitution to get HIV. It is my bad luck to get this disease. [Babita, p4]*

The opportunity to escape from the brothel rarely presented itself. After continuous attempts over several years Babita finally was able to escape the brothel. As she states:

*I told I have fever and pain in the stomach. I have to go to doctor for a check up. They didn't let me go to doctor alone. There was another woman with me. I told her I go to a toilet. In the meantime, I skipped from there. [Babita, p5]*



*'Prostitutes the reservoir and promiscuous the carriers'*

This theme emerged from the narratives of the participants. The notion that prostitutes harbour HIV was a prevalent perception amongst Nepalese family and society, leading them to humiliate and isolate women who returned from Indian brothels. It was also thus common to perceive that men who have sex with prostitutes contract HIV from them. These issues are discussed and follow.

When Babita returned from the brothel she was afraid about the possible reactions from her Nepalese community. Two years after her return, community people began to make unhelpful and negative comments about her and to mistreat her. She reveals how the community behaved towards her:

*Once I became able to skip from the brothel and returned to Nepal. I stayed with my parents for about two years with some fears that people wouldn't behave in a nice way with me. Later on, they started to humiliate me in several ways, feeling that I would have AIDS, and might transmit it to others. They decided not to keep me in the village. [Babita, p1]*

The above narratives reflect the Nepalese social context of rigid values surrounding sexuality linked with prostitution as well as the misinformation surrounding HIV. Babita's social context strongly highlights a prevalent negative connotation and belief around brothels, prostitution and sexual relationships. Babita's history of working in a brothel, permanently stamped as "damaged". She is perceived in her community as a 'damaged other' whose presence would harm the entire community, because her sexual integrity had been destroyed. In addition, a perception around having someone with HIV is a major concern for all villagers. They perceive that Babita's supposed HIV will put them at risk of serious threat. The lack of knowledge and the persistent rumours seem to have shaped their perception of the deadly HIV image and heighten their fear of transmission. Another possible reason to fear Babita is the villagers might have thought that Babita would have sex with men in the village increasing the incidence of HIV transmission.

While facilitating a public health training session in Far-West Nepal, some local community participant's revealed that they believed prostitutes have HIV, and then pass it to young men through sexual contact. Their solution to this dilemma was to oust prostitutes from the village to protect the male members from acquiring HIV (researcher's personal interaction with training participants, 2000). This supports why villagers decided to keep Babita outside of their village; keeping her out of the village removed a common evil.

To avoid such treatment, Ranju, who returned from a *kothi*, (a Nepali colloquialism for a brothel), decided not to reveal her association with a brothel and her HIV diagnosis to anyone. She keeps her own counsel, mentioning her fears as:

*If people know that I came from a kothi and have HIV it will harm my ijjat [reputation]. The best thing is not to let others know. If I tell someone, he or she would tell others; they will say to their friends. In such a way, everybody will know about it. Then, people will not let me stay here; they will chase me to another place. [Ranju, p6]*

Ranju has analysed and internalised her risks if she reveals her *kothi* background and HIV diagnosis. She is worried, with reason, that the consequences of disclosure will find her ejected from society. Keeping all information secret, she is feeling somehow safe from any possible negative consequences. Babita also feels that there will be no one to support her, including her family, if her prostitution and HIV related information is known to others. As with Ranju, she also worries about possible exclusion from her society.

*If I tell anyone about myself, people might chase me away from this village. Nobody including my parents would support me. People hate those who have AIDS. If that happened where could I go to shelter?*  
[Babita, p5]

## **Discussion**

An innocence and lack of awareness is a major precursor for women being trafficked into prostitution. Due to lack of information, they do not perceive their risk of abduction. Although there are several incidences of trafficking of young women from rural, hilly regions of Nepal, many of the inhabitants from these areas are unaware of such risks. Also due to poverty and lack of earning opportunities, many young women are involved in arduous, physical labour. Earning money is the major expectation for these women. In such cases, a pimp can easily lure girls and young women by giving assurances of finding a good, well-paying job in nearby cities. As young girls and women are unaware of the malevolent intention of the pimp, young women follow a pimp, eventually reaching brothels in India. Many pimps act as a *lahure*, a colloquial term for reliable and well paid member of the army, is a highly preferred choice for a groom.

The open borders and easy road links to India makes it easier for a pimp to traffic young Nepalese women to India. Good roads and railway links are well established between India and Nepal. It would be reasonable to expect the guards on these borders to play a crucial role in arresting traffickers. However, such arrangements do not exist along all Nepalese borders, resulting in little difficulty in trafficking young Nepalese women. There is a lack of political commitment on this issue. Around 5000 young Nepalese young women are trafficked every year (ABC/Nepal, 2003; Ghimire, 1994; Thapa, 1997), however, this issues has not attracted adequate attention from the Nepalese, or for that matter Indian government. A commitment from government is essential to execute measures, such as activation of law enforcement to stop trafficking of young women in to prostitution.

There are several serious and negative outcomes for the young women being trafficked. Firstly, they are rejected by the family and community believing that they are 'soiled' or 'immoral' because of their involvement with prostitution. Secondly, there is a fear in the general Nepalese community that prostitutes have HIV. Thirdly, the community members suspect that the prostitutes will maintain sexual contact with the young men of the community and transmit HIV to them. The sense of immorality and fear associated with HIV make the family and community isolate those women. The women often face torture, humiliation and rejection from family and society. As a consequence, those young women face cut off from all forms of social and family

support. A diagnosis of HIV (or the high risk of HIV) has led family and community members to intensify negative, punitive and marginalising measures against prostitutes. Due to the mistreatment and lack of support from family and society, prostitutes find themselves facing difficulties in coping with HIV, leading to further degradation in their health.

The Nepalese government needs to develop a packaged programme focussing on assisting these girls and young women in their reintegration in to their family and society. This package should include support and educational measures that will help the family and community to de-stigmatise these women. A support group at community level supported by local leaders will be helpful to minimise the conflicting issues at family and community levels. A rehabilitation programme should be developed, which will help to provide training to those women focussed on income generation. It is also important to provide counselling which will help them to cope with the psychological disturbances that result from their traumatic experiences. Government and rehabilitation programme should be organised to ensure easy access to a periodic health check up or facilitate their health check up in public hospitals as these girls and young women will likely hesitate to seek health care.

Coordination between the government of India and Nepal will be crucial to rescue these girls and young women. A strong, political commitment from both countries will be required and crucial to curbing trafficking as well as to rescue and support those women in their reintegration into society.

The experiences described by the participants in this research indicate that significant effort towards education across Nepal is an essential requirement of all public health care agencies. This research identifies the huge numbers of girls and young women caught up in life-threatening and life-changing experience of trafficking. The lack of education, exposure and vulnerability of a large segment of Nepalese society must be addressed with widespread educational strategies aiming to reduce trafficking. Information about HIV, its transmission and 'universal precautions' should form a significant part of the educational effort. Raising the alarm about the predatory and seductive behaviours of prostitute recruiters is fundamental public health information for Nepal.

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