

Life Histories and Survival Strategies Amongst Sexually Trafficked Girls in Nepal

Padam Simkhada

Department of Public Health, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

Many girls involved in sex work in Asia do so because they are compelled by economic circumstances and social inequality. Some enter sex work voluntarily, others do so by force or deception, sometimes involving migration across international borders. Nepalese girls involved in sex work via trafficking are the focus of this article, which aims at increasing our understanding of the context of sex trafficking, the methods and means of trafficking, living conditions in brothels and survival strategies among trafficked girls. Girls trafficked from Nepal to India are typically unmarried, illiterate and very young. Key routes to sex trafficking include employment-induced migration to urban areas, deception (through false marriage or visits) and abduction. Past initiatives towards their needs have adopted a welfare approach; such initiatives alone are inadequate as they ignore the importance of empowerment of women in the migration process and skill development in community re-integration. Anti-trafficking interventions need to be considered at (i) community level before movement begins; (ii) urban centres which are both source and transitory centres for trafficking; (iii) trafficking level when girls are highly mobile and in brothels; and (iv) return from trafficking as girls to move back into the community. © 2008 The Author(s). Journal compilation © 2008 National Children's Bureau.

Introduction

The United Nations *Protocol on Trafficking in Persons* (UN 2000) recognises human trafficking as a modern form of slavery and forced labour that relies on coercion, fraud or abduction. Trafficking in persons, especially women and children, is globally prevalent and a major international health and human rights concern. Globally, it is estimated that between 700 000 (US Department of State, 2001) and four million (UNFPA 2000) people are trafficked each year, the large differential in estimated numbers reflecting the difficulty in obtaining accurate data. Asia is seen as the most vulnerable region for human trafficking because of its huge population, growing urbanisation, lack of sustainable livelihoods and poverty (Asha-Nepal, 2006; Huda, 2006; Kamala Kampado and others 2005).

India is a major destination country for sex-trafficked girls (Human Rights Watch 1995; US Department of State 2005) with large numbers of Nepalese, Bangladeshi and rural Indian females trafficked to Indian cities, particularly Mumbai (Bombay) (Nair, 2004). There is no accurate figure of the numbers trafficked; the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 12 000 women and children are trafficked every year from Nepal (ILO/IPEC, 2002), whilst some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) give estimates as high as 30 000. Over 200 000 Nepali girls are working in the sex industry in India (O'Dea, 1993).

There is a dearth of quantitative data on trafficking, partly because it is illegal, but also because existing data sources are not fully utilised. Much existing information about sex trafficking in Nepal is collated in NGO publications (viz. ABC Nepal 1998; Ghimire, 2001), presenting anecdotal case studies, newspaper reports and commentary from anti-trafficking agencies. There exist a limited number of unpublished reports on trafficking in the South Asia region (Huntington, 2002; Khatri, 2002) but these focus on policy analysis rather than reporting empirical research. Limited research has been published using data from Nepalese trafficked girls themselves on the characteristics of trafficking including its spatial context, their lives in brothels and the complex issues surrounding community reintegration upon return to Nepal (Asha-Nepal 2006; Hennink and Simkhada, 2004). There is also a worrying gap in information about the transit of girls through Nepal and India, and trading in girls once in India.

Trafficking has been identified as a priority issue in Nepal since the early 1990s and many NGOs, community-based organisations and Government Ministries have developed social, cultural and economic programmes to address it. However, the lack of communication and coordination, duplication and competition amongst NGOs limits opportunities for good practice (Asha-Nepal 2006). Many preventative activities in Nepal are financed by donors willing only to support activities with specific objectives over a limited period of time. The international donor community has increased funding for related social issues, including women's and child welfare issues, bonded labour and human rights. There remains a need for conceptual clarity on the context and process of sex trafficking.

Many girls who become involved in sex work in Nepal do so because they are compelled by economic circumstances and social inequality. Some enter sex work voluntarily, others do so by force or deception, potentially involving migration across international borders. Nepalese girls who become involved in sex work via trafficking are the focus of this article. The overall aim of this study was to increase our understanding of the context of girl trafficking from Nepal to India for sex work. More specific objectives were to investigate: (i) the context of trafficking; (ii) the methods and means of trafficking; (iii) living conditions in brothels; and (iv) survival strategies amongst trafficked girls. In-depth qualitative interviews were used to identify the context and survival strategies of the study population. This was most appropriate given the exploratory nature of this research amongst an understudied population subgroup (Pope and Mays, 2006) and to provide rich, in-depth information about the experiences of individuals (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). Young girls who have been trafficked for sex work are a hidden population, largely due to its illegal nature. Employers of trafficked girls may keep them hidden from public view and limit contacts with outsiders. Trafficked girls may not identify themselves as such through fear of reprisals from their employers, fear of social stigma from involvement in sex work or their HIV-positive status or from their activities being revealed to family members. Therefore, identifying trafficked girls and obtaining access to them for interviews is problematic. It is only once these trafficked girls have been identified through health workers, judicial institutions, NGOs and aid organisations that they can be identified. Any interview with trafficked girls is therefore likely to be 'retrospective', accessing formerly trafficked girls in transit homes, rehabilitation centres or in their communities of origin after return. The target population for this research was therefore girls trafficked to India and subsequently returned to Nepal.

Seven in-depth interviews with key informants were conducted to provide a broader understanding of the context surrounding trafficking in Nepal and to discuss access issues. These informants included directors of NGOs working on trafficking issues, co-ordinators of

rehabilitation centres for trafficked girls and health workers whose clientele include former trafficked girls. The second stage of data collection involved in-depth interviews with 42 girls trafficked to India for sex work but who had since returned to Nepal. Respondents were identified through several methods of purposive (non-random) sampling. Researchers worked through relevant NGOs, women's organisations and health services in Nepal which also legitimised the research, helping to foster trust between researchers and respondents. In addition, respondents were recruited through 'snowballing'. Interviews were conducted between 2001 and 2003, focusing on family background, the process of trafficking, work and conditions in Indian brothels, the process of return to Nepal and survival strategies for the future. All interviews were conducted in Nepali, tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The textual data were analysed using *thematic analysis*, identifying issues, experiences and processes from individual case studies. Themes were then analysed across the whole data set to build a comprehensive picture of collective experience. Ethical approval was obtained from rehabilitation centres and verbal informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

Research findings

Characteristics of trafficked girls

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of interviewed girls. Trafficked girls are thus typically unmarried, non-literate and very young, the majority being trafficked before the age of 18 years. The youngest was 12 years, none older than 25 years. More than one-

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents ($n = 42$)

Grouping	%	<i>n</i>
Ethnicity		
Brahmin/Chhetri	21	9
Mongoloids (Gurung, Magar, Rai, Tamang)	36	15
Dalit (untouchable)	26	11
Others	17	7
Religion		
Hindu	74	31
Buddhist	21	9
Others	5	2
Marital status at the time of trafficking		
Unmarried	62	26
Married	36	15
Other (D/W/S)	2	1
Age at the time of trafficking/leaving home		
Below 15 years	31	13
16–18 years	55	23
Above 19 years	14	6
Education status at the time of trafficking		
Non-literate	86	36
Primary/non-formal education	12	5
Secondary education	2	1
Current education status		
Non-literate	33	14
Primary/non-formal education	50	21
Secondary education	17	7

D, divorced; W, widowed; S, separated

third of respondents were married at the time of trafficking. The predominant ethnic group of girls was Mongoloid or *Dalit* (untouchable) but other ethnic groups were represented.

Ways of trafficking and recruitment tactics

Traffickers used a variety of means to draw girls into the sex trade. The four key tactics of sex trafficking identified included: (i) employment-induced migration via a broker; (ii) deception, through false marriage; (iii) visits offer; and (iv) force, through abduction (Table 2). The majority of respondents (55%) were trafficked through false job promises.

False promises of jobs

Jobs in carpet factories, providing Nepal's most important export, were the most common offer reported. Children from poor rural hill families are recruited from their villages and sold or apprenticed to factory owners. Brokers working within the carpet factories select likely girls, enticing them into leaving the factory with offers of better jobs elsewhere, a relatively easy task since many carpet workers are themselves caught in debt bondage where they receive no wages. The brokers arrange for their transport to India, frequently with friends' and family members' complicity.

When Dolma was 14, her stepfather took her from their village to Kathmandu, where his friend got her a job in a carpet factory. A few months later, a young male co-worker, introduced to Dolma as her 'nephew', suggested they leave the factory and go to Kakarbhitta, a town on the Indian border, where, he claimed, working conditions were better and they could earn more. Dolma agreed, and was taken out of the factory by her stepfather, her stepfather's friend and this young man. After 6 days' travelling by bus and train, they arrived in Mumbai and he sold her there.

In addition to factory recruitment, false offers of employment in other Indian and Nepali cities emerged as common forms of enticement. Sometimes older men promise girls employment in the city. *Sabitri*, another trafficked girl, reported that:

Table 2: Route to sex trafficking, traffickers, destination and mode of exit from Indian brothels ($n = 42$)

	%	<i>n</i>
Major motivating means		
False promises of jobs	54.8	23
Fraudulent marriage	19.0	8
Offer of visit/movie/holiday	14.3	6
Force and other	11.9	5
Trafficker		
Relatives	35.7	15
Known but not relatives	42.9	18
Unknown persons	21.4	9
Destination		
Mumbai	78.6	33
Delhi	11.9	5
Calcutta/other Indian city	9.5	4
Mode of exit		
Rescued	73.8	31
Escaped	16.7	7
Released by owner/self-return	9.5	4

...one day I heard there was another factory nearby, paying higher wages than the factory I was currently working at. I went to the other factory to ask them if they had a job for me. 'You're in luck' said the manager, 'I need someone to accompany me and my wife to Hetauda, to collect wools for weaving. It will pay very well'. I immediately agreed and took this job. I did not think anything strange about it, especially since I would be travelling with his young wife. After a long journey I found myself in Mumbai where I was sold for Rs 40 000 by the manager.

In many cases the broker works from inside the factory, selects a girl, convinces her to go with him and then takes her to the border and sells her. When *Tara* was 12 years old she was taken to Kathmandu to weave carpets in a carpet factory. She worked in two carpet factories for 5 years.

... I met a boy while I was working in factory and we became very close ... He told me that he would get me a good job. When he mentioned that I could earn a lot more money I instantly agreed to go with him. After 3 days we reached a big hotel in a new city. 'Why am I here?' I asked. 'You are going to do some cooking and cleaning work', he replied. A little while later they told me he had sold me.

Some girls, wanting to be independent, went to urban city for jobs and also ended up in Indian brothels.

Fraudulent marriage

Fraudulent marriage offers are another common ruse employed by recruiters. In some cases, traffickers actually go through a marriage ceremony. In others, the marriage offer itself is enough to lure a woman away from home. The girl is either given a false promise of marrying the *dalal* (broker) who pretends to have settled down in India or she is told about a wealthy future husband, whom the *dalal* provides. *Radha* was one such victim. She readily agreed to marry an unknown person because of her family problem.

When I was fifteen ... I was married to a farmer. I lived with my husband for about one year and then returned to my mother's home. My husband came to collect me and my mother insisted I went with him. I had become pregnant. I could not work well, my husband did not treat me kindly, so again I returned back to my mother, where I gave birth to a son. My husband did not come to find me even though he knew that he had a son, so I stayed with my mother. When my son was four years old I heard that my husband had remarried. On the day of Shivaratri (Hindu festival) I went to the river to light a candle, where I met one of my relatives from my village who was with a few other men. My relatives introduced me to one and asked me if I would marry him. I didn't take the offer seriously. 'I can't get married', I replied, 'I have a son. Besides, I hardly know that man'. But my relative kept insisting. 'Come on' she replied. 'At least think about it. He lives in Hetauda and is a great person. You should not worry about your son'. I did think about it and the idea of remarrying gave me hope that perhaps happy days would come again. I agreed and I went with him. He took me to the restaurant and after this I cannot remember anything. When I awoke I found myself in the world of brothels. I had been sold for Rs 30 000 [about \$450].

Visit offer

In many cases a girl is lured by the trafficker or his agent, often a local young man who works in Kathmandu. After enough trust is established she is then offered a lucrative job in Mumbai as a maidservant, even as an actress, or she is told about an opportunity to set up a small business. In most people's minds, Mumbai stands for glamour, movies and prosperity,

golden chances and escape from miserable lives. *Priya's* story is typical of this kind of trafficking. It indicates that not only poor girls, but also middle class girls are trafficked.

... My brothers used to worry about me and I used to quarrel with them. All my family would scold me, telling me to study harder but I did not listen. Even when they yelled at me I would just ignore them because I did not want to be a teacher, I was interested to be an actress ... To be a good actress, you don't need to study and you don't need to go to school ... One day, my friend Sita, her husband and I went to watch the movies together. After, they asked me if I would go to India with them. I couldn't refuse their request, as I wanted to be an actress. I also felt indebted to them for always welcoming me into their house. We spent three days travelling. Eventually we reached our destination—Bombay. At first we stayed at the Amar hotel but were soon taken to another place, where the women were decorated with expensive jewellery, clothes and scents. There we met a fat lady who Sita's husband introduced to us as a film director. She seemed very kind and generous ... Sita's husband told the 'film director' to let us rest and said that he would come back after he had been shopping. He never returned. Later we were told that it was a brothel and we had been sold for Rs 60 000.

Recruiters sometime seduce young girls by posing as potential boyfriends, pretending they are interested in the young girl, wanting to know her better. Recruiters ask the girl's names, addresses and people they know. When the girls become comfortable with the poseurs, the recruiters offer to treat them at restaurants nearby. As the recruiters gain the girls' trust, they ask the girls to accompany them on a visit to a relative in another town, or attend a party in towns nearby. In many cases the girl elopes with her new 'friend' without even telling her parents. Twenty-one-year old *Ujeli* told us that:

... my parents are agricultural labourers in the hills. I was able to attend school up to class 4, but then had to join my parents working on the fields, so I left school. At the age of 15, I went with a friend to watch a movie and met a young man called Kancha Lama with whom I became friendly. After some time he suggested going to a bigger southern town to buy cheap cloth with which to start my own small business. I went with him without asking my parents. Instead, he took me to India.

Abductions

Simple abductions also occur, although they are less common than cases of deceit. Some girls mentioned that they, or other girls in the brothels where they worked, had been drugged by their abductors. Girls who are abducted are often drugged before a journey during which they are sold to brothel owners in India.

I was taken to India by neighbours, a mother and daughter, whom I knew quite well. They told me they had to go to a market far away to pick up something and asked me to come along. A taxi was waiting for them. They travelled a long way. It was very late when they finally arrived in Badi Bazaar. They got another taxi and arrived at a village house like my own. I was put in a room and the door was locked. A woman called Asa told me the woman she came with had gone out and would be back later, but she never came back. After three nights, I pleaded with her to let me go. I was told 'No, you have been sold and have to work. All Nepali girls have to work'.

Traffickers

In many cases family members, uncles, cousins and stepfathers also act as trafficking agents. Of the girls interviewed, 15 were trafficked to India with the help of family members or rela-

tives. Likewise, 18 were trafficked by known persons but not relatives, and nine were trafficked by unknown persons. Traffickers are most typically men in their twenties or thirties or women in their thirties and forties who have travelled to the city several times, knowing hotels to stay in and brokers to contact. Traffickers frequently work in groups of two or more. Male and female traffickers are sometimes referred to as *dalals* and *dalali* (commission agents) who are either employed by a brothel owner directly, or operate more or less independently. In either case, to stay in business, they need the patronage of local bosses and the protection afforded by police bribes.

Women who are already in the sex trade and have graduated to the level of brothel-keepers, managers or even owners travel through their own and neighbouring districts in search of young girls. The following story encapsulates the essence of the dream of success and glamour that these women symbolise to the simple village girls. Female traffickers are referred to as *didi* or *phupu didi* (literally, paternal aunt) or *sathi* (best friend). Local women who have returned from India are also employed as recruiters. Usually these *didis* return to the villages to participate in local festivals and to recruit girls to take back to the cities. These women are well placed to identify potential trafficking victims because they know local girls and their families.

After 2 years of my marriage, my husband brought a co-wife who gave birth to a son. I was then completely rejected from them. In the meantime, a woman who had come home for vacation promised me and my three other friends good jobs. We ran away with her and she took us to Calcutta. But instead of giving us good jobs she sold us to different brothels.

Not all *dalals* work independently. An unknown number are connected to different networks that operate on various levels and size of organisations. Some syndicates include government officials, border policemen and politicians.

Life in the brothels

Nepali girls in India's red-light areas remain largely segregated in brothels located in what are known as *Nepali kothas* (compounds). The concentrations of Nepali vary between cities, but appear to be highest in the Mumbai neighbourhood of *Kamathipura*. Brothels vary by size, physical configuration, ethnicity of sex workers and price. Most Nepali girls are associated with *gharwalies* (brothel owner). Depending upon the *gharwali*, the number of girls and women per brothel ranges from 5–10 to 150–200, with an average of 90–100 girls and women per brothel. In all cases, movement outside the brothels is strictly controlled, inmates being subjected to both psychological and physical abuse. The cheapest brothels, no more than dark, claustrophobic rooms with cloth dividers hung between the beds, are known among Nepali as *pillow houses*. Certain lanes are known particularly as Nepali *gallis* [street]. The living conditions of Nepali girls in all brothels are very poor. A social worker familiar with the Indian brothel system told us:

There are several grades of sex workers, based on beauty, hard work, 'talent'. The tops are call girls. Then comes 'bungalow' which is a higher grade, then 'pillow house' which is the lowest. Most girls start in pillow house and work up if they do well ... some girls receive training, how to approach customers, languages. During training, girls are beaten and locked in a room like a jail ... until they stop fighting. At first a girl gets two or three clients a day, then it escalates...

All interviewed girls had no previous experiences of sex work, and no intention of engaging in this trade. *Jamuna* recounted her early days in a brothel:

When I entered the brothel I saw many girls who looked younger than 20 years of age. I did not know what they were supposed to do. They looked very strange to me. I had never seen girls wearing so much make-up and bright red lipstick. Their clothes were different too. They all had on very short skirts with lots of jewellery. They were not typical Nepali girls. The brothel-keeper told me to take a bath, get make-up and put on clean clothes. 'What is my job?' I asked. 'What's going on?' 'You will do what I tell you' said the brothel-keeper, 'you will find out in a few hours.' 'I don't want to stay here' I replied...' The brothel-keeper laughed and walked away. I looked at the others for help. 'There's no way out' they said 'you're going to be a prostitute'.

Sarmila recounted her terrible experiences in the brothel,

...on my first day, a fat man came to my room. He had paid a large amount of money to rob me of my virginity. I locked myself in the bathroom but the brothel-keeper came and made me open the door. Again the fat man came into my room. I pleaded with him and eventually he left, giving me Rs 10 ... The next day, however, a young boy came and I lost my virginity...

Every girl said that the brothel owner or manager forced her to work by invoking her supposed indebtedness. A girl's earnings depend on the type of brothel in which she is employed, her age, appearance and the nature of the sex acts she is compelled to perform. Although most business is conducted in the brothel, and is charged by the minute or hour, customers can pay extra to take women outside. A girl may be sent to a client's house or a hotel for the night. If a customer buys a woman's services for a longer period, her debt resumes upon her return. One customer paid a large amount of money and kept a woman in his home for 2 weeks. He returned her to the brothel, where she worked to repay the remaining debt.

None of the girls knew much about the monetary arrangements between the brothel owner, the agents and their families. But later on all were frequently reminded that they had to work to pay off their debts, and many were threatened for not earning enough. Some of the girls had a vague understanding that they would have to work for a specific length of time to pay off the debt, and that there was an agreed-upon amount of payment given then. Very occasionally, brothel owners might treat a girl more kindly, buying her clothes or giving her treats. This was rare though; with few exceptions, girls were unable to communicate with anyone outside the brothel; some were even forbidden to take Nepali clients in case the latter helped girls escape. Even conversation with customers was sometimes forbidden:

Only girls who pay off their 'loan', have gone on a holiday to their village and come back, are allowed to leave the brothel alone.

Very few of the interviewees were in occasional communication with their families. One girl found a customer who was willing to send word to her family.

A Nepali man I met in the brothel wrote a letter to my family telling them what had happened to me... after few months my brother went to Bombay to see me there, but he was not allowed to do so. My family then brought charges against that trafficker and brothel. I was sent back to Nepal with the help of social workers.

Besides being compelled to serve customers, brothel owners sometimes forced sex workers to perform personal housework or childcare chores.

Return and reintegration into community

Three major processes were involved in returning home. Girls are rescued, escape and released or self-returned (see Table 2). The majority were rescued by police and/or social workers. A few escaped on their own or with the help of other people. Only four girls were released by a brothel owner and/or self-returned (with the brothel owner's consent). Mainly, girls were being rescued and put into an Indian rehabilitation centre before returning to Nepal, or were then shifted to a Nepalese rehabilitation centre before returning to their family.

It is illegal for girls below 18 years to work in a brothel in India. Brothel-keepers always ask young girls to say that their age is more than 18 years if police raid the brothel. Some girls were able to escape from brothels with the help of others. *Neela* escaped with the help of her regular customer. When a girl is too old to attract customers she is released from the brothel. Some are thrown out when they are tested HIV positive, others only when they have full-blown AIDS. Sometimes girls were allowed to come back to Nepal for a short time. Some of those girls do go back to Indian brothels and some stay in Nepal. *Kanchi* was sold by a family member but after working for 5 years, she was able to return to Nepal. A small number of girls accepted their lives in the brothels and became brothel owners themselves.

Many trafficked girls spend some time in a rehabilitation centre in Nepal after exiting brothels in India. Rehabilitation centres are typically run by NGOs and provide health and social assistance to returned trafficked girls. In addition, girls are provided with literacy and skill-building classes to assist them to integrate back into their communities. However, these girls reported enormous problems in returning to community life, in particular reporting high levels of social stigma directed at trafficked girls. Frequently, not only society at large but also parents condemn their daughters morally, and repudiate them. They are fully aware that society looks down on them and therefore offers no hope for a dignified life. One girl mentioned:

I do not want to go back to my home. I would rather prefer to stay at a rehabilitation shelter and continue my studies.

A common phrase cited by a number of respondents captured the social values surrounding girls involved in sex work:

Ke game chori cheli dimma jastai hunchha, ekchoti futepachhi, futyo, futyo. [What to do? Unmarried girls are like eggs, once broken you cannot join them.]

If girls who return home have managed to earn money, they are more easily accepted back into their communities, and may eventually marry. Those who escape the brothels before paying off their debts, who return without money, or who are sick and cannot work, are shunned by their families and communities. Many return to India.

Conclusions

The key routes to sex trafficking include employment-induced migration to urban areas, deception (through false marriage or visits) and abduction. Current findings underline the role of poverty in the sex trafficking of Nepali girls, with over half reporting being lured by traffickers through promises of economic opportunity. The predisposing factor of poverty has been previously highlighted regarding trafficking both within South Asia and in other regions worldwide (Huda, 2006; Okonofua *et al.*, 2004; Woolman and Bishop, 2006). At the local level, trafficking stems from deep-rooted processes of gender discrimination, a lack of female education, the ignorance and naïveté of rural populations, poverty and lack of economic opportunities in rural areas with the consequent marginalisation of particular social groups. Wider factors include the low social status of the girl child, corruption of officials, an open 1500 km border with India, lax law and weak enforcement machinery, and local political apathy (Acharya, 1998; Asha-Nepal 2006; Asia Foundation and Population Council, 2001; Friedmann, 1996). These local level processes are in turn shaped by macro-level economic and social forces that are changing the way markets operate and the kind of labour that is required. None of this explains why some communities are more affected than others, however.

It is very hard to answer the question of how many girls were actually tricked or forced into the trade or how many went into the business of their own free will, because it is not clear where the dividing line is between choice and compulsion. As O'Dea (1993) noticed, the expression 'own free will' seems out of place in this context. The influence of poverty, family pressure, caste and gender discrimination has to be taken into account. Mere resignation due to lack of a viable alternative may seem a rational response. In the Nepali context, 'voluntary prostitution' is often considered a paradoxical term. However, it does not serve the reality of trafficked girls to fit their cases to a dichotomous system that only admits voluntary or forced prostitution. There are too many forces at work to decide.

Nepali girls are expected to work hard in the household. Studies indicate that to get rid of the poverty-stricken economy of the household, women and girls are always in search of economic opportunities within and outside the country (UNICEF 2006). The female crude economic activity rate in Nepal, reported over three censuses, is far lower than in men (Shtrestha and Panta, 1995). Migration is playing an increasingly important part in Nepal's economy and social structure. As these factors lead to an increase in migration, more girls are found to be trafficked in the process, a finding consistent with earlier research (Asha-Nepal 2006; Asia Foundation and Population Council, 2001; Rajbhandari, 1997). Many misconceptions or over-simplifications of the underlying causes of migration obscure the resources available to trafficked persons or their resiliency. For example, poverty is often cited as the reason for migration or accepting employment conditions of debt bondage, despite the common occurrence of migrants actually paying for transportation or transit services.

In Nepal, high-level decision makers, lawmakers and politicians at the local level are often accused of being the protector of the traffickers. Many commentators blame the lack of legal enforcement arguing that policies are sound in Nepal but not their implementation and that political commitment is required to implement public policies. Political leaders and higher authorities in bureaucracy are accused of releasing the arrested traffickers from custody and taking political and monetary benefits from them or having associations with brothel-keepers

(Friedmann, 1996; Rajbhandari and Rajbhandari, 1997; Thapa 1990). Malpractice in political and administrative levels in both places of origin (Nepal) and destination (India) of trafficking were reported by both victims and key informants in this study. Much Nepali and Indian literature has mentioned the hardships experienced and the poor economic structure of the household that leads girls to being vulnerable to trafficking and to their involvement in prostitution. Case studies (ABC Nepal 1998; Rajbhandari and Rajbhandari, 1997) indicate that poor economic conditions are the most common factors identified by the girls. However, the possibility of their involvement in other sectors of economy is not detailed. Girls, once trafficked and forced to be in sex work, often accept their fate later, because there are no options or alternatives left.

The root causes of trafficking are thus multiple and complex. However, this study suggests that both trafficking and migration operate primarily through personal connections and *social networks* (such as an aunt who returns to the village and takes her niece back to the city), and through unregistered brokers who may or may not be strangers to the locality. Girls voice opinions like... *my sister worked there before, so I went there...*, which further underline the significance of social networks in the sex trade.

Debt bondage, prohibited under The U.N. Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, is defined as a situation in which debtors pledge their personal services against a debt they owe, but the person to whom they owe it fails to deduct the value of their services from the debt, or the length and nature of those services are not respectively limited and defined. The debt bondage which supports the trafficking nexus is also tantamount to forced labour. Slavery and forced labour are prohibited under Nepali and Indian laws. India enacted the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act in 1976, which outlaws all forms of bonded and slave labour. In addition, Article 374 of the Indian Penal Code makes it a crime to compel unlawfully any person to labour against his/her will (Human Rights Watch 1995). Regardless of the victims' origins, their reports of abuse in Indian brothels are remarkably consistent, indicating conditions of slavery and servitude which contravene Indian law (ILO/IPEC 1998).

It is still not known how many trafficked persons return without NGO assistance and what type of reintegration strategies they employ. There is some evidence in this study that some girls decide to settle in urban areas, setting up small businesses or, if they are sex workers, staying in the sex trade directly or indirectly as madams or brokers. At the same time, this study also noted that girls from communities where sex work is a common practice may find it easier to return home where they may marry and/or set up small businesses. Further research into coping and livelihood strategies employed by trafficked girls would assist in the development of more effective reintegration strategies. Society has traditional values that degrade brothel returnees, but brothel returnees also have a psychological stigma that makes them hesitate to face common people. It should not be implied that the brothel girls do not want to go back home; however, social norms and the possible reaction of the home community have become obstacles to restore them to normal life.

How then should we respond? The existence of specific and clearly defined networks of trafficking has implications both in terms of efficient use of resources and in terms of the effectiveness of the activities. In addition, the messages from NGOs in the form of leaflets are likely to be futile for the illiterate populations amongst whom they are distributed. Movement in and out of coercive and exploitative circumstances is a dynamic process that is well

recognised in irregular migration, smuggling and trafficking. Interventions that intercept trafficking at its outcome point, rather than at the time or place when it first occurs, draw attention to the problem of identifying when movement within or between countries becomes exploitative and not voluntary, and could serve to protect an individual's right to migrate. A human rights analysis draws attention to the promotion of equality and non-discriminatory migration.

There is an overemphasis in the literature at present on legal responses. The legal response to trafficking, either through international conventions or state-sponsored regulations, can never be a complete response or a solution. Indeed, an over-reliance on legal mechanisms can produce results that are counterproductive. When laws are created to be as broadly encompassing as possible, an overgeneralisation occurs that actually restricts the application of the law, reducing its impact. Legal measures to restrict trafficking that lack specificity in terms of gender and age have been shown to mischaracterise the harm done by trafficking, and actually compound restrictions on the movement and employment of younger girls instead of protecting these rights (Huntington, 2002). Additionally, a rescued or escaped girl's rehabilitation efforts require a positive reflection of the society towards her for the rest of her life. In some cases, the hiding of brothel returnees would not be helpful, nor create general social acceptance. Traditional values and norms are hindrances to rehabilitation efforts. Social reintegration becomes much more painful for the person once involved in sex work and rehabilitated later, which may force girls to stay in the sex trade even if they return to Nepal; a significant proportion of girls have indeed reported their unwillingness to go back home after becoming sex workers. NGOs working against girl trafficking tend to focus only on the group of girls trafficked in the most exploitative way and publicise this picture. Existing interventions hardly cover the family-based trafficking which the present study has identified. Partial truths, from whatever side, do not help the issue and caution is required in assessing the situation; intervention strategies may otherwise be wasted. This study also highlights the role of violence in sex trafficking. Gender-based mistreatment in families appears often to contribute to girls' vulnerability to sex trafficking.

Significantly, the majority of trafficking victims reported being transported *indirectly* via carpet factories, representing a critical intervention opportunity. With appropriate training, carpet factory owners may be able to separate safely potential traffickers from victims, determine the true nature of the relationship, and secure victims' safety. Cultural factors may partially explain why such experiences place females at risk for trafficking. Nepali girls experiencing disruption via abuse or abandonment by their husbands often face extreme community ostracisation (UNICEF 2006). Families of such girls are also subject to stigmatisation and, therefore, may be reluctant to offer support or shelter based on fears of additional negative consequences for their status within the community, including marriageability of unmarried family members (Goel, 2005). Similarly, whilst traditional cultural norms associate sons with economic and social advantage, daughters are conversely constructed as burdens, particularly regarding dowry (Fikree and Pasha, 2004). Extended family members may be unwilling or unable to assume the costs of providing for unmarried/widowed females.

The study shows that stronger policy and strategy along with political commitment remain critical. There is a compelling need for interventions that actually empower women and girls in migration rather than seeking merely to protect them. The interaction of poverty and gender-based mistreatment of women and girls in families heightens the risk of sex trafficking. Prevention efforts should work to improve economic opportunities and security for

impoverished women and girls, educate communities regarding the tactics and identities of traffickers, as well as promote structural interventions to reduce trafficking.

Acknowledgements

The fieldwork for this study was supported by Small Grants from the Simon Population Trust and the UK Department for International Development Knowledge Programme, *Opportunities and Choices*, based at the University of Southampton. The authors would also like to acknowledge the valuable support and co-operation of the Nepal NGOs which provided access to data and assisted with respondent recruitment. All names cited are fictitious to preserve anonymity.

References

- ABC Nepal. 1998. *Life in Hell: The True Stories of Girls Rescued from Indian Brothels*. ABC Nepal: Kathmandu.
- Acharya U. 1998. *Trafficking in Children and the Exploitation in Prostitution and Other Intolerable Forms of Child Labour in Nepal: Nepal Country Report*. ILO-IPEC: Kathmandu.
- Asha-Nepal. 2006. *A Sense of Direction: The Trafficking of Women and Children from Nepal*. Asha-Nepal: Kathmandu.
- Asia Foundation and Population Council. 2001. *Prevention of Trafficking and the Care and Support of Trafficked Persons: In the Context of an Emerging HIV/AIDS Epidemic in Nepal*. The Asia Foundation and Horizons Project Population Council/Creative Press: Kathmandu.
- DiCicco-Bloom B, Crabtree BF. 2006. Making sense of qualitative research. *Medical Education* 40: 314–321.
- Fikree FF, Pasha O. 2004. Role of gender in health disparity: the South Asian context. *BMJ* 328: 823–826.
- Friedmann J. 1996. Rethinking poverty: empowerment and citizen rights. *International Social Science Journal* 148: 161–172.
- Ghimire D. 2001. *Prevention, Care, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Rescued Girls (ABC's Experience)*. Paper presented at the Technical Consultative Meeting on Anti-trafficking Programmes in South Asia, September.
- Goel R. 2005. Sita's Trousseau: restorative justice, domestic violence, and South Asian culture. *Violence Against Women* 11: 639–665.
- Hennink M, Simkhada P. 2004. Sex trafficking in Nepal: context and process. *Asian Pacific Migration Journal* 13: 305–338.
- Huda S. 2006. 'Sex trafficking in South Asia'. *International Journal of Gynaecology and Obstetrics* 94: 374–381.
- Human Rights Watch. 1995. *Rape for Profit: Trafficking of Nepali Girls and Women to Indian Brothels*. Human Rights Watch: New York.
- Huntington D. 2002. *Anti-Trafficking Program in South Asia: Appropriate Activities, Indicators and Evaluation Methodologies*. Summary Report of a Technical Consultative Meeting. Population Council: New Delhi.
- ILO/IPEC. 1998. *Trafficking in Children for Labour Exploitation, including Sexual Exploitation in South Asia: Synthesis Paper*. ILO/IPEC South Asian Sub-Regional Consultation: Kathmandu (Unpublished).
- ILO/IPEC. 2002. *Internal Trafficking Among Children and Youth Engaged in Prostitution*. International Labour Organisation/International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour: Kathmandu.
- Kamala K, Sanghera J, Pattainhaik B. eds. 2005. *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work and Human Rights*. Boulder: Paradigm.
- Khatri N. 2002. *Nepal: The Problems of Trafficking in Women and Children*. Paper Presented at the 7th Annual Meeting of the Asia Pacific Forum for National Human Rights Institutions, 11–13 November, New Delhi.

- Nair PM. 2004. *A Report on Trafficking of Women and Children in India: 2002–2003*, Vol. 1. UNIFEM, ISS, NHRC: New Delhi.
- O'Dea P. 1993. *Gender Exploitation and Violence: The Market in Women, Girls and Sex in Nepal: An Overview of the Situation and a Review of the Literature*. UNICEF: Kathmandu.
- Okonofua FE, Ogbomwan SM, Alutu AN, Kufre O, Eghosa A. 2004. Knowledge, attitudes and experiences of sex trafficking by young women in Benin City, South–South Nigeria. *Social Science and Medicine* 59: 1315–1327.
- Pope C, Mays N. 2006. Qualitative methods in health research. *BMJ* 311: 182–184.
- Rajbhandari R. 1997. *Present Status of Nepali Prostitutes in Bombay*. WOREC: Kathmandu.
- Rajbhandari R, Rajbhandari B. 1997. *Girl Trafficking: Hidden Grief in the Himalayas*. WOREC: Kathmandu.
- Shtrestha P, Panta P. 1995. *Economically Active Population*. Population Monograph of Nepal. Central Bureau of Statistics: Kathmandu; 205–238.
- Thapa P. 1990. Keti bechbikhan: Lukeko Aparadh (Trade of Girls: A Hidden Crime) in Ghimire Durga. (ed). *Chelibetiko Abaidh Vyapar: Yasaka vivid Paksha (Illegal trade of girls: Its various aspects)*. ABC Nepal, Kathmandu; 21–25.
- UN. 2000. *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*. Supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, Annex II. United Nations Doc A/55/383, United Nations: New York.
- UNFPA. 2000. *State of the World's Population*. UN Fund for Population Activities: New York.
- UNICEF. 2006. *Situation of Women and Children in Nepal*. The United Nations Children's Fund: Kathmandu.
- US Department of State. 2001. *Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act 2000: Trafficking in Persons Report*. July. US Department of State: Washington DC.
- US (2005) *Trafficking in Persons Report*. US Department of State: Washington DC.
- Woolman S, Bishop M. 2006. State as pimp: sexual slavery in South Africa. *Development South Africa* 23: 385–400.

Correspondence to: Padam Simkhada, Department of Public Health, Medical School, Polwarth Building, Foresterhill, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB25 2ZD, UK. E-mail: p.p.simkhada@abdn.ac.uk

Contributor's details

Padam Simkhada is a Research Fellow in International Health in the Department of Public Health of Aberdeen University, Scotland, UK.

Copyright of *Children & Society* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.