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Slave trail

The Nepalese women and children being sold into sexual servitude

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Sold out

Ten thousand Nepalese women and children are trafficked from the Himalayan country each year to endure a life of sexual or domestic slavery. As a new political era dawns in the nation, activists are fighting an uphill battle to stem the trade, **Ivan Broadhead** reports.

Nepalese prostitutes at a Mumbai brothel keep a lookout for clients. India and the Middle East are the most common destinations for women and children sold from the impoverished country to traffickers.

In a filthy room in Mumbai's Kamathipura red-light district, Divya Gurung is stripped and beaten for refusing to service his clients. Numbed by pain after weeks of sustained physical abuse, the 15-year-old Nepalese boy eventually resigns himself to his fate. He is duly sodomised by three middle-aged men, the first of the dozen or so clients he will see each day for the next seven years. Or, put another way, the first of the 40,000 clients he will entertain. Having been brought to Mumbai by a close

friend in the belief they were to find steady work in a hotel, Divya has been delivered to a brothel and told that his companion sold him as a *hijra*, a transvestite.

As a virgin, his initial worth is high. Sushila, the madam who bought him for the equivalent of US\$2,000 from the trafficker, has charged each of the three men who gang-rape him US\$10 for the privilege – in India, intercourse with a virgin is still widely thought of as a cure for HIV/Aids. Needless to say, few of his gentleman callers will use condoms, and

the only lubricant offered is a pessary the madam orders him to use.

NOW 25 AND HAVING escaped the brothel, Gurung is back in Kathmandu. He is HIV positive and his story, although unusual because of his gender, is all too common. An estimated 10,000 women and children are trafficked each year from Nepal, predominantly to India and the Middle East, while potentially hundreds of thousands of vulnerable individuals are trafficked internally to the Nepalese capital's booming massage-

parlour industry and partitioned restaurants, where male Indian tourists head in their droves after visiting the city's casinos.

"It doesn't matter where these women and children end up; whether they are forced into the sex industry, domestic service or some other form of indentured labour. What the developed world needs to know is slavery – trafficking and child labour – is alive and well in the third millennium," says Sita Ghimire, of the Norwegian Save the Children office, in Kathmandu.

According to Ghimire, traffickers will dupe parents

into giving up their children with promises of an education and jobs for the youngsters and salaries remitted home. Meanwhile, street children and vulnerable youngsters looking to escape abusive homes are lured into friendship by the gangs. Once they are financially dependent on the traffickers, they are transported and sold to the highest bidder.

Governments and aid agencies are united in declaring poverty as the foundation on which trafficking and child labour are built. Nepal, in political and economic turmoil after the decade-long Maoist

insurgency, is fertile ground for these activities. A source at the United Nation's International Labour Organisation, which has run several studies on trafficking and bonded labour, opines gloomily that little will be done to improve the situation in the short to medium term, "Not while the political parties are doing such a good job of taking everyone back to the Stone Age."

Nepal is one of the poorest nations in Asia, with about a third of its 28-million population earning less than US\$1 a day. The insurgency, which contributed >>

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to the overthrow of the monarchy and declaration of a new republic just a few weeks ago, has caused 15,000 deaths since 1996 and created an environment in which it is all too easy for women and children to go missing. Even if the political situation improves and a new government implements a revolutionary social mandate after the April election – which many observers fear will not take place – the conservative nature of Nepalese society, defined by the caste system, will, without doubt, hinder social and economic progress.

Nowhere is this conservatism felt more damningly than in the treatment of the women and children trafficked into the Indian sex trade, particularly those who return to Nepal with HIV. They are often shunned by their community and, unable to find work or shelter, end up on the streets or back in prostitution. NGOs report incidents of medical staff refusing to treat these patients. Even Nepalese organisations at the forefront of the fight to support trafficking victims risk appearing Dickensian in their approach to these vulnerable individuals.

The Maiti Nepal foundation is a case in point. Established in 1993, it has built an international reputation for rescuing women and girls from India’s brothels, in the process receiving praise from such luminaries as Britain’s Prince Charles and Queen Sofia of Spain.

Yet a sense of stigmatisation permeates the organisation’s discussions about its HIV clients. A spokeswoman tells *Post Magazine* the HIV patients for whom it is responsible are kept at a separate facility about a dozen kilometres from Kathmandu. The organisation does not seek to reintegrate them into the wider Maiti community of trafficked women – apparently because their dietary needs are too complex for staff to manage at the Kathmandu centre where the other 200 or so women and children reside – nor are the victims encouraged to come to terms with the past through discussion of their experiences.

Worse still, the spokeswoman continually refers to these patients as the “terminally ill”, despite the fact

that Maiti recently implemented an antiretroviral drug therapy programme, supported by charities in Japan, Switzerland and Britain, which could extend the life expectancy of these women by decades and transform their illness from a death sentence to a chronic condition.

While it is discomfiting to encounter what amounts to the language of apartheid from agencies that position themselves as advocates for the trafficked, for the likes of Gurung – transsexual and HIV positive – verbal stigmatisation is merely the precursor to physical abuse and the broader problem of reintegration into the community.

“As I grew older I became more aware of the need to escape my prison,” Gurung recounts. “So with this in mind I began to stash away the tips from my regular clients.”

A good earner and having gained the trust of the brothel owners over a period of time, at 22 he finally had enough money to escape. It was a festival day and for a few hours he was allowed to leave the tower block in which more than 70 other Nepalese youngsters were working in enforced prostitution. Giving his minder the slip, he began his long journey back to his village, near the city of Pokhara, in central Nepal, by bus, by train and on foot. On arriving home, he discovered his father had died a few months earlier.

“In Nepalese tradition, sons shave their head as a

sign of bereavement on the death of their father,” he explains. “Three of my brothers are ex-British Army gurkhas. They didn’t understand that after seven years of being forced to behave like a woman in the brothel, I actually considered myself to be a woman and dressed as such. When I finally got home, my brothers beat me for humiliating the family, shaved my head ... and I had to run away from yet another place.”

Although it took years for Gurung to save enough money, as a resourceful twentysomething he was eventually able to shape his own destiny. Younger children are in far more precarious situations.

In 2000, the *South China Morning Post* reported the story of Lieutenant Colonel Philip Holmes, a former British Army officer who founded the Esther Benjamins Trust (EBT) in memory of his deceased first wife. The trust came to prominence with an early programme to secure the release of children held with their incarcerated parents in Nepalese jails. EBT’s reputation has expanded considerably since then and one of its most important projects today is the rescue and rehabilitation of Nepalese children trafficked across the border, particularly into Indian circuses.

The circus shows are designed to titillate a predominantly male audience. Nubile Nepalese girls, many as young as eight, are painted in gaudy make-up. They are agile enough to thrill while walking a tightrope, pretty enough to hold the eye despite their grotesquely skimpy costumes and young enough for their broken bones to heal quickly after a fall. Sexual abuse of these unaccompanied minors is rampant.

Holmes and his dedicated staff have retrieved several hundred children from India, and each rescue operation requires months of planning – corruption and bureaucracy have to be overcome – to bring the children home.

“With rescues, you’re just picking up the pieces, though,” Holmes argues. “What we really need to do is get the traffickers. It’s like dealing with terrorism – if we can take these people out of the game then the problem stops.”

Out of the blue, such an opportunity arises. >>



Ivan Broadhead

“NATIONAL RESPONSES TO TRAFFICKING ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BORDER ARE STILL WOEFULLY INADEQUATE”

HOLMES TELEPHONES ONE Tuesday morning, Kathmandu is in chaos, with protesters on the streets burning tyres and stoning cars in reaction to the government’s 25 per cent increase in fuel charges. Travel around the city is difficult. Can we meet at the central police station in 20 minutes, he asks.

An hour later, morning mist still lingers over the Jagannath Temple in Durbar Square. Below the steps to the police headquarters, Kathmandu’s version of the rush hour plays out: men and women negotiate their path through cows, orphans, holy men and the battalions of soldiers on high alert for the next riot. Inside, Holmes is in discussion with Superintendent of Police Savendra Khanal, who listens attentively to both the ex-soldier and the walkie-talkie on his desk, which chatters with updates on the civil uprising outside.

Thirty-six hours ago, EBT received a call from Childline India regarding a trafficker who had been arrested with three Nepalese girls at the Gorakhpur railway station, an Indian rail junction near the Nepal border. The trafficker had been brought back to Kathmandu and Childline was seeking EBT’s help to secure a prosecution and care for the children.

Outside in the corridor, the girls, all in their teens, are waiting to be processed. In the patriarchal world that is a Nepalese police station, they look decidedly out of place. However, one of them has spent time as a Maoist freedom fighter and it soon transpires she has experienced worse deprivations than being questioned by officers of the law in a freezing police station.

Under the watchful gaze of their EBT and Childline advocates, the girls answer the questions put to them, telling how their families believed they had paid for their children to be sent to Kuwait and placed in domestic service with wealthy Arab families.

“They had a very lucky escape,” says Abhishek Pathak, the Childline co-ordinator who has been with the girls since they were intercepted. It appears the trafficker, a woman named Tulsi, bought the girls

Right: girls rescued from a circus in northern India by members of the Esther Benjamins Trust (EBT). Below: an EBT counsellor briefs the three teenage girls intercepted near the India-Nepal border. The trio believed they were being placed in domestic service with wealthy Arab families but were actually en route to the brothels of Mumbai.



train tickets to Mumbai, home to the infamous caged prostitutes and more fleshpots than any other city in India. “Had the trafficker got them to the brothels, it would have been even harder to rescue them,” says Pathak. “Girls are locked away there; they just go missing. Half of them end up with HIV. It’s far easier if we can intercept them on the journey.”

Pathak, 27, has been working for Childline for only seven months but has already been involved in two major rescues. “By joining forces with partners like [EBT], we’re generating better intelligence about the trafficking process and coming up with ideas to stop it,” he says.

One of those ideas is a scheme that saved the three girls. “We’re training a network of coolies at the big railway stations to identify passengers who might be traffickers, especially men and women travelling with groups of young girls who seem unrelated to one another,” explains Pathak. “It was a call from one of these coolies that tipped us off about the girls here.”

It is small-scale initiatives like this that show the traffickers that society will not sit back and tolerate the exploitation of women and children. However, the India-Nepal border stretches for nearly 3,200km, neither Nepalese nor Indians need passports or visas to cross it and, according to Ghimire, effective policing can only be instigated at an inter-governmental level.

“National responses to trafficking on both sides of the border are still woefully inadequate, despite the fact both India and Nepal are signatories to a host of international conventions which compel states to take effective measures against the trade,” she says.

While there are some signs of progress – in July, Nepal passed a law imposing further penalties on trafficking and awarding compensation to the victims – the extent to which both governments and NGOs have their work cut out is highlighted by the case of one of the girls who has just been picked up.

During the course of the police interview, one of the girls reveals she was rescued by Maiti at the same border post a year ago. Although the risk of being sold into a circus, domestic servitude or the sex industry was clearly explained to her destitute parents, they were still willing to take the gamble and pay for her to be re-trafficked on the chance that a well-paid job would be waiting at the end of her journey.

Faced with this desperate need to escape poverty,

EBT and other NGOs are seeking ways to create a sustainable future for rescued women and children. “Many of the charities in Nepal train their returnees to work in beauty salons or as housekeepers,” says Holmes. “But what’s the point of doing that if all it means is they’re in low-paid jobs and still looking to India or Qatar for a way to improve their lives?”

In an attempt to address the problem, Holmes has set up an artisan business called Himalayan Mosaics. Girls who wish to participate are taught pottery and mosaic work, and given the tools for the job. Their works are then sold to private collectors via commissions and exhibitions, with any profits put back into EBT’s work. The operation not only provides a stable income for the children – several are earning more than the main breadwinner in a typical Nepalese household – it also acts as a form of occupational therapy, giving the girls their first taste of independence and an opportunity to bond and share their experiences with one another.

Things are looking up for a minority of Nepal’s many trafficking victims but the challenge now, says Holmes, is to extend that hope to the others.

As for Gurung, his life rosier, too. He works at a hospice run by the Blue Diamond Society, a human rights organisation that represents the interests of sexual minorities. The society has had its work cut out fighting discrimination. Hospitals often refuse to take transgender HIV patients, using the excuse that their ID cards show them as male when they appear female. The society’s members once had to retrieve the body of a colleague from a hospital mortuary in Kathmandu and take it by taxi to be cremated, purely because the mortuary attendants refused to touch it.

Thanks to the Elton John Aids Foundation, the society is able to provide Gurung with anti-retroviral drugs as long as funding remains.

And last year, after a spate of violent attacks on sexual minorities, Blue Diamond successfully lobbied Nepal’s Supreme Court for the legal recognition of transgender men and women. In a landmark judgment passed in December, the court ordered the government to make provisions to recognise humans as either male, female or third gender.

“To finally have an identity ... that legacy alone is worth much of the pain of being trafficked,” says Gurung. ■



Above: Britain’s Prince Charles meets rescued girls, all of whom are HIV positive, at the Maiti Nepal Refuge Home in Kathmandu in 1998.

Left: Nepalese women saved from brothels in Indian cities line up at the Maiti shelter to identify an alleged trafficker. Below: Divya Gurung (right) with friends Dipika (centre) and Kala of the Blue Diamond Society, which represents the interests of sexual minorities.

