



Sex Trafficking in Kathmandu's Entertainment Sector

Summary of Literature Review – December 2015¹

Research and reporting on human trafficking in the Nepalese context has been predominantly focused on external trafficking from Nepal. Nepal was labeled a “source country” by the U.S. State Department in 2012 in its annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report.² Much of this trafficking was reported to take place from rural villages across borders, primarily to India and, increasingly in recent years, the Gulf states. However, there is some indication that there is now a much higher proportion of trafficking internally, particularly to the capital, Kathmandu. This was reflected in the 2014 TIP Report, with Nepal being re-categorized as “a source, transit, and destination country.”³ The earthquake on April 25, 2015 and subsequent aftershocks caused catastrophic damage to the infrastructure and economy of the country, which disrupted the trajectory of trafficking nationwide.

Though some reports cover internal trafficking in Nepal, specifically to and in Kathmandu, the scope is limited. These reports include only a handful during 2014, and of those, none are of an academic nature, and there are no reports thus far in 2015, and therefore, none since the earthquake. What does exist suggests a large entertainment sector, involving commercial sexual activity, and varying degrees of exploitation, including trafficking. Of the reports that do exist, several point to the recent, rapid growth of Kathmandu's entertainment sector⁴⁵⁶, partially due to urbanization and the liberalization of Nepal's

¹ Free the Slaves gratefully acknowledges the contribution of Michelle Palmer, M.A. in Modern Slavery Studies, who drafted this summary report.

² U.S. Department of State, “Trafficking in Persons Report 2012: Nepal,” (2012): 1, Accessed April 28, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2012/192368.htm>.

³ U.S. Department of State, “Trafficking in Persons Report 2014: Nepal,” (2014): 1, accessed April 28, 2015, <http://nepal.usembassy.gov/recent-reports-on-nepal/2014-trafficking-in-persons-report.html>.

⁴ Naresh Newar, “Growing ‘entertainment’ Industry Traps Nepali Girls,” Inter Press Service News Agency (July 8, 2012): 1, accessed April 28, 2015, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/07/growing-entertainment-industry-traps-nepali-girls/>.

⁵ Samrakshak Samuha Nepal, “Annual Report 2012/2013,” (2013): 1, accessed April 30, 2015, <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B89ywJTFWLnNLVZIYjdUblBSbUE/edit?pli=1>.

⁶ National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Nepal, “Trafficking in Persons Especially On Women and Children in Nepal: National Report 2012-2013,” (2014): 1, accessed April 30, 2015, [http://www.nhrcnepal.org/nhrc_new/doc/newsletter/Report%20of%20Trafficking%20in%20Persons%20\(Especially%20on%20Women%20and%20Children\)%20National%20Report%202012-2013-En.pdf](http://www.nhrcnepal.org/nhrc_new/doc/newsletter/Report%20of%20Trafficking%20in%20Persons%20(Especially%20on%20Women%20and%20Children)%20National%20Report%202012-2013-En.pdf).

economy⁷, as an impetus to the increase in internal trafficking within Nepal. However, the earthquake has certainly altered the situation.

The entertainment industry in Kathmandu consists of massage parlors, dance bars, and cabin restaurants. (A cabin restaurant provides private seating areas, separated by plywood walls and curtains, each with its own waitress. There are numerous reports of sexual exploitation of waitresses.⁸) Though the entertainment sector in the region has almost entirely shut down since the earthquake, it is still important to note its previous state. A 2012 report estimated 11,000 to 13,000 girls and women in this industry⁹, and a 2014 report estimated 50,000.¹⁰ Whether these figures reveal a vast increase in the two-year time frame, an underestimation in the first report, or an overestimation in the second report (or some combination) is undetermined.

The entertainment sector, or what remains of it, includes significant crossover with commercial sexual activity. Many of the girls and women are expected, and in some cases forced, to provide sexual favors to customers as part of a job that also may involve massage, dance or serving food. One indicator of the existence of trafficking is the rate of underage workers in the sector, who, if also engaged by their employers in commercial sex, are also victims of sex trafficking. One study interviewed 200 workers from cabin restaurants, and 42% of respondents were under the age of 19.¹¹ Another study with 63 participants found 68% to be under the age of 18.¹² However, no broad statistic is reported for the rate of underage girls in the sector.

As in the sex industry elsewhere, there are varying degrees of exploitation within the sector. There are reports of the use of force and deception both in recruiting to the sector and during employment. Many of the workers come from rural villages outside of Kathmandu Valley¹³, and there is a consistency in victims' stories of poverty, limited opportunity, and family difficulties¹⁴, which increase their vulnerability to trafficking. The ten-year civil war, which ended in 2006, is often noted as another cause of increased vulnerability of rural girls and women. Despite the destruction of much of the entertainment sector, this is still the case. Free the Slaves' in-country partners report that young women from surrounding areas are still being trafficked into Kathmandu, bound for other cities or even for external trafficking.¹⁵ Female workers both in Kathmandu and from outside of the city have no other skills or opportunities and are thus vulnerable to deception by traffickers.¹⁶ The earthquake increased risk of trafficking by exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. In particular, the disaster has led to financial crisis for

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "NEPAL: Cabin waitresses subjected to sexual exploitation," (June 20, 2008) IRIN News: 1, accessed June 9, 2015, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/78846/nepal-cabin-waitresses-subjected-to-sexual-exploitation>.

⁹ Newar, Naresh (2013).

¹⁰ NHRC Nepal (2014).

¹¹ NHRC Nepal (2014).

¹² J. Frederick, M. Basnyat, and J. L. Aguetant, "Trafficking and Exploitation in the Entertainment and Sex Industries in Nepal: A Handbook for Decision-Makers," Terre des hommes Foundation (2010): 1, accessed April 30, 2015. <http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/handbook.pdf>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Miranda Worthen, "Sex Trafficking or Sex Work? Conceptions of Trafficking Among Anti-Trafficking Organizations in Nepal," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (July 15, 2011): 87-106, accessed April 30, 2015, <http://rsq.oxfordjournals.org/content/30/3/87.full.pdf+html>.

¹⁵ Neelam Sharma, e-mail message to Karen Stauss, August 28, 2015.

¹⁶ Ibid.

many through loss of homes, jobs, and economic opportunities. In some cases, the main earner of the household died in the tragedy. Furthermore, UNICEF estimated 24,000 classrooms destroyed and close to 1 million children out of education.¹⁷ These dire situations open the door to debt bondage and deception. In some cases, it creates an opportunity for a trafficker to pose as an aid worker or labor recruiter, promising work or education either in Kathmandu or abroad.¹⁸

Only one report posited that trafficking occurred from the entertainment sector to India. According to Terre des Hommes in 2010, "Trafficking from Nepal to destinations outside South Asia is on the rise. The Kathmandu-based sex industry was described as a 'training ground' to prepare girls and women for the Gulf countries and other destinations."¹⁹ Presumably, some of those girls and women were trafficked into the sex industry in Kathmandu and then coerced into migrating to other states. Some of them may be trafficked into Kathmandu and then later migrate and end up in the sex industry abroad, in some cases voluntarily and in some cases through coercion or deception about the nature of the "work" abroad. The initial trafficking would raise serious questions about meaningful consent to the later out-migration; and others still may be women who have engaged in the sex industry voluntarily throughout their internal and out-migration. Again, the trajectory of these estimations is likely to have changed because of the earthquake.

In conclusion, there is a serious lack of information about the extent and causes of sex trafficking in the entertainment sector in Kathmandu, particularly since the earthquake. More and better research is needed, including practical research on effective interventions to protect women and girls in the sector from sex trafficking and other exploitation. Both rigorous academic research and studies and published reports from governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations would be welcome additions to the existing body of research on trafficking into the entertainment industry of Kathmandu.

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¹⁷ "Nepal Earthquake: Education for Nearly 1 Million Children in Jeopardy." UNICEF. May 7, 2015. Accessed September 7, 2015. http://www.unicef.org/media/media_81802.html.

¹⁸ "Update on Earthquake Impact and Recovery in Nepal." Free the Slaves. May 8, 2015. Accessed September 7, 2015. <http://www.freetheslaves.net/update-on-earthquake-impact-and-recovery-in-nepal/>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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