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## **Nepal's Sex Trade**

**by Richard S. Ehrlich**

**KATHMANDU, NEPAL -- Thousands of young Nepali women are being abducted from Nepal's Himalayan villages and sold into prostitution in India, where they often become infected with the AIDS virus.**

**"They are beaten in the brothels," said Durga Ghimere, president of ABC Nepal, a Kathmandu-based women's welfare group funded by the American Foundation for AIDS Research, UNESCO, the Global Fund for Women, and the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Population and Development Activities. "Each woman must entertain more than 30 men in a night. It is inhuman. Women should not be treated like animals."**

**Ghimere told the Bay Guardian that the Nepali girls, some as young as 12, are prized by Indian men for their fair complexions, small eyes, and beautiful Mongolian features. "The girls are very naive and innocent," she said.**

**An estimated 5,000 to 7,000 young Nepali women are abducted or run away from home each year to go to India to become prostitutes, according to Ghimere.**

**"There are 40,000 to 50,000 Nepali prostitutes in Calcutta and an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 in Bombay. In all the big cities in India you can see Nepali girls," she said, adding that a total of 200,000 Nepali women are currently working in the sex industry throughout India.**

**Most of these girls are lured away from their Himalayan villages across Nepal's southern frontier, by men who promise to marry**

them or give them work. They end up working in brothels in Calcutta, Bombay, New Delhi, and elsewhere in India. Pimps can "resell" a prized Nepali prostitute for up to \$1,000.

#### Roots of the problem

Prostitution blossomed in Nepal during the rule of the elite royal Rana family, from 1850 to 1950. The extended royal family persuaded women to work in the palace and nearby mansions as maids and wet nurses and then enticed many of them to become concubines.

"A Rana prime minister and prince could have thousands of maids and hundreds of concubines," Ghimere said. "Even though Nepal is now a democracy, this tradition of sale and migration as sex workers continues."

Despite the greater number of Indian women engaged in prostitution, demand for Nepali girls is high. "Nepal's hill girls mature very early, sometimes at 12 or 13 years old. Indian girls are not as innocent as these hill girls," Madhavi Singh, an economist at Kathmandu's Center for Economic Development and Administration, told the Bay Guardian. "Nepali girls have a very [trusting] nature. If somebody says, 'I'm your husband and I'm taking you to my home,' they believe it."

Gauri Pradhan, founder of Child Workers in Nepal, a Kathmandu-based advocacy group, said: "There is probably not a single brothel in India where Nepali girls cannot be found. The young women who are sold against their will are tortured mentally, physically, and sexually. Their bodies are burnt with cigarettes. They are denied food and water. They are isolated and gang-raped."

But, Pradhan said, there are many mountain villages "where abduction and deceit are not needed to traffic women into Indian brothels because women give their consent without hesitation. For them, India means Bombay, and Bombay is their dream land, which will put an end to the poverty and hardship of their lives.

"These mountainous villages may be beautiful for visitors, but there is a constant struggle for their inhabitants to meet their most

**basic human needs.**

**Singh agreed that more and more Nepali women are entering prostitution by choice. "They want material things, they want to enjoy life. So they run away from home because they want to have all those things overnight."**

**Some single women are turning to prostitution simply to make enough money to get by in an economy that denies them equal work opportunities.**

**Padma Mathema, a spokesperson for Nepal's National Planning Commission, said there are very few jobs available for Nepali women. "The only new opportunities which have evolved for women in the recent past are in the carpet industry, textile weaving, and the garment industry," Mathema said. "We find that women workers are concentrated in the least-skilled, poorest-paid levels of these industries."**

**As is the case in India, many Nepali parents prefer to have sons rather than daughters, because girls are perceived as a financial burden. Neelam Basnet, a spokesperson for Nepal's Ministry of Education and Culture, said that cultural expectations of girls contributes to keeping them uneducated as well.**

**"Girls are denied the same educational chances as boys," Basnet said. "The general view is that girls' major responsibilities will be within the domestic sphere where education is perceived to have little to offer, especially in child rearing."**

**After AIDS**

**Nepali prostitutes may be highly prized when they are working, but if they become HIV-positive, and many do, they are treated as outcasts. Dr. Pushpa Bhatt of Nepal's AIDS Prevention and Control Project gave the example of a prostitute named Geeta who returned to her village. When villagers discovered that she had contracted the AIDS virus, she was shunned by family and neighbors.**

**"When she attempted to get drinking water from a shop, she was refused," Bhatt told the Bay Guardian. He said that Geeta's mother**

initially refused to let her enter her parents' home, even though the family had bought the house with the earnings Geeta had sent home during her 11 years working as a prostitute. She was also "restricted" from using the road and going to the bazaar to shop.

"Geeta was infected with HIV while she was engaged in sexual activity in a brothel in Bombay," Bhatt said. "Sexual activity, for Geeta, was forced. She did not choose prostitution; she had been sold into prostitution. The man who sold Geeta ought, at the very least, to be obliged to pay for her medical expenses."

ABC Nepal's Ghimere said, "More than 50 percent of the girls who have AIDS in Nepal were prostitutes who returned from India."

Dr. V.L. Gurubacharya, chief of Nepal's AIDS Prevention and Control Project, said, "So far, the [HIV] infection is seen mostly among prostitutes and the young migrant labor force who have sexual contact with prostitutes, in and out of the country."

Nepalese health officials said AIDS is also being spread by drug addicts sharing needles, a polluted blood supply in some medical facilities, and a lack of prevention education.

ABC Nepal estimates that there are more than 10,000 HIV-positive people in Nepal, but official statistics on just how widespread the HIV virus and AIDS might be in the country's population of 21 million are unavailable because of insufficient testing.

Government reports say only 338 people are HIV-positive, a number that AIDS workers and women's health advocates say is unrealistically low.

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