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Sex Work Trafficking and Social Acceptance : The State versus Local Perception

Sudeep Singh Nakarmi

Faculty of Sociology in the Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu (Nepal) E-mail:<sudipnakarmi@gmail.com>

Abstract

The government of Nepal has been continuously working with different partner organizations to control sex work trafficking. In collaboration with such different national and international organizations, the Government has been launching various awareness programs and mobilizing anti-trafficking cells. Despite such efforts, sex trafficking has not cooled down in Nepal, so to find out its underlying social causes, an empirical study is conducted with an exploratory research design. For the study, two key informants and three local informants were selected using the snowball method. Similarly, one focus group discussion was conducted with the locals of the study area. This paper explores that the state has overlooked working minutely to build a stable family that provides primary socialization to their children. The state has also failed to provide sustainable livelihood to the locals as well as proper provisions for the rehabilitation of sex workers (returnees). Further, the state considered sex trafficking as a crime whereas the locals of the study area are accepting sex work as a normal household economic strategy. The monetary value that girls or women earn from sex work has been linked with their social prestige. However, in the tug-of-war between the state's intervention and local practices, the locals have now started opting for a middle path of validating girls' abroad travel for sex work by issuing passports.

Keywords

Sex trafficking, Social acceptance, Socialization, Livelihood, Deviance.

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Ph. : 0121-2763765, +91-9997771669, +91-9219658788

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1. Introduction

Collin (1990) argues that the market has remained the engine of historical change where various types of materials were traded in different types of markets such as kinship, slavery, agrarian and capitalist. But he failed to concretize that, in all types of markets, women and girls have been traded as a material, directly or indirectly. Nakarmi (2023) argues that the increasing trafficking of women globally for the sex trade and forced servitude in the Omni-market confirms this as never ending deal. Rajbhandari & Rajbhandari (1997) noted that around 5,000-7,000 Nepali women and girls are moved into prostitution in Nepal and India every year. Adhikari and Gude (1998) including Datta (2005) have also presented a staggering figure that about 200,000 Nepali women and girls have been trafficked and sold into India for forced prostitution over 20 years. One of the reasons for such trafficking cases in Nepal is also due to underdevelopment and pervasive poverty among the rural people. Despite being rich in natural resources, Nepal is still lagging in development in many aspects and the country's economic graph is still low in comparison to other developing nations. With increasing unemployment in the country, there is rampant abroad labour leading to the outflow of human resources toward foreign soil. Side by side, human trafficking is also escalating with foreign labour migration. Although trafficking denotes the transportation of people from their place of origin to a different destination by force, fraud, or deception for domestic servants and labourers, in the paper, trafficking is operationalized as forced prostitution.

Further, this is no hidden fact that women and girls from certain rural areas of Nepal are transported across the national border for commercial sex work. Such women and girls with chronic poverty, and low social standing based on caste and ethnicity are trapped by the traffickers. According to Hennink & Simkhada (2004 : 3), "many

women who become involved in sex work in Asia do so because they are compelled by economic circumstances and social inequality". Having said this, women with weak economic backgrounds and socially excluded based on caste and ethnicity fall at risk of trafficking in Asia. Further, patriarchal social structure is another driving force behind increasing trafficking in Nepal. Due to such, women are viewed as less valuable than men. Such has led to less salary provision to women for doing similar patterns of work. They are also obliged to live under property and subordinate to men, and they have less access to health care and education, among other rights.

Trafficking is seen as a problem in South Asia, including India and Nepal, where girls and women are considered as a metaphor for sex and leisure. A decade earlier, Nepal was considered a source of human trafficking for Indian brothels however at present, urban and outskirts areas within Nepal is becoming a destination hub for sex work and human trafficking. For instance, Subedi (2009) writes that mainly young girls and women are trafficked for sexual exploitation in places such as cabin/dance restaurants, massage parlours and other places within the tourism sector. The majority of these cases occur in the entertainment and hospitality industries and the rest are in brick kilns, garment industries, agricultural and domestic work.

2. Causes of Sex Trafficking

Simkhada (2008) argues that lack of proper education is a contributing factor in increasing sex trafficking in Nepal. In the same, Rajbhandari (1998 : 88) writes that due to illiteracy, social unconsciousness, and social acceptance of multiple marriages and multi-partner sexual behaviour, the migration of girls into prostitution among ethnic women (Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung and Magar) at high altitude is happening unknowingly and reluctantly.

Escalating unemployment is another reason for increasing sex trafficking in Nepal. As per Simkhada (2008), among sexual victims, more than half of them are reported to have been persuaded by false hopes of employment opportunities, wealth, and success in their lives. In such, the open border between Nepal and India (Datta, 2005), with lesser rules and regulations in place, is fueling the rate of sex trafficking in Nepal. Apart from these, there are several other reasons behind sex trafficking from Nepal, which this paper will explore.

Extreme poverty is another reason for sex trafficking in Nepal. The victims are obligated fall into the trap of traffickers for the sake of

livelihood (Kaufman & Crawford, 2011). According to Henink and Simkhada (2004), for the financial needs of the family, young girls are given to Dalal (pimps) by their very own parents for the sake of employment. The size of land-holding and total annual production, livestock and other farm activities, and wage income are the key factors for an individual to fall under the poverty line and so do in trafficking. The people of a very poor category may have very little holding on the land or live on a wage. Members of such families are underemployed or employed in jobs, which are extremely low paying and unsecured (temporary). The family members especially girls and women of such economic status are vulnerable to exploitation and other types of threats.

Sex work is illegal in Nepal even though some people choose it as their livelihood option. Such social deviance is also due to various factors such as under-socialization, marginalization, economic constraints and cultural deprivation (Livesey & Blundell, 2011). To eliminate such social deviance, Skeldon (2000 : 23) writes that trafficking cannot be solved through legal procedures but through an improvement in the socio-economic status of the population, particularly through the education of girls. However, looking at ethnic diversity in Nepal, girls from marginalized and indigenous groups are far behind Hindu girls in terms of education and other facilities. Ethnographer of Tamang, Campbell (1993 : 14), writes that Tamang women are notoriously free from the Hindu notions of feminine propriety. That means in contrast to the conservative feminine ethos of the majority of Hindu women, Tamang women have a reputation for sexual candour, something that is frequently seen as a factor in their participation in prostitution in India. On the other hand, it is not only an issue about indigenous and non-indigenous now. In the broader picture, the legalization of sex work in India has also put tremendous pressure on the rural villages of Nepal for trafficking. Due to such, Gillada (1992) writes that 90% of the total population of prostitutes in Mumbai are girls trafficked from Nepal, Bangladesh, and other towns of India. Now to find out the causes behind females being prone to sex trafficking, the methods mentioned below have been applied.

3. Method

For the study, Kamalesh Rural Municipality (name changed) ward number one (ward number changed) is selected. The reason for

selecting this area is pre-information regarding the frequency of sex trafficking and the existing economic situation of people which could have led to vulnerability for trafficking. This study adopted an exploratory research design. One focus group discussion including five key informant interviews (teacher, ward member and villagers) was conducted during the field visit. These respondents were selected through the snowball sampling method.

4. Findings

4.1 Poverty and Local Livelihood

Agriculture is the main livelihood source of people at the study areas. As per different respondents, the study area is famous for a special type of rice grain production. However, not all of them produce such rice grain due to less land size they hold. Tamang are the major inhabitants of this area (nearly 75% of the demographic composition). Despite of majority in demographic composition, they are the most vulnerable social group due to the unavailability of sufficient farmland. Due to geographical variability and hardy terrain, many villagers, mostly Tamang, have limited options of livelihood and this is leading to pervasive poverty in the study area. According to the first key informant,

The general livelihood (farming) of the local community is very weak. The farm yield is hardly sufficient for six to seven months. Due to this, the poor people of this community are willingly adopting women trafficking. Further, because of peer influence, teen girls easily get into the trap of those traffickers (Key Informant_1, Key Informant Interview, 3rd December 2022).

The Nepal government with development organizations such as GNI and Rudrek Nepal is working to prevent child marriage and human trafficking however the growing number of such cases demonstrates that cultural and social values are inbuilt within the society to foster sex trafficking. In an informal conversation with a hotel staff, the researcher asked if a winter cap could be purchased in the local market. However, in a hilarious informative way, he informed me that other materials can also be bought that are required during a cold night. This indicates how local people perceive sex work in a normalized way. On this basis, it can be imagined how far the pervasiveness of sex work and sex trafficking has deep-rooted in the study area.

Another Key Informant said that,

There are four layers of traffickers in our community. The first layer works on identifying those teens who are from weak families. The second layer works on influencing those targeted teens. The third layer connects such teens with the last layer and the last layer manages to get those teens out of the village. In each operation, they target hardly two teens at times. They work in four layers and we are just one so we are failing to stop them (Key Informant_2, Key Informant Interview, 3rd December 2022).

The above situation detailed by Key Informant 2 shows that the study area is becoming a prime breeding ground for such crime. The operating layers of traffickers detailed by Key Informant demonstrate that sex trafficking in the study area is becoming a political issue rather than just trafficking. However, on the flip side of the coin, sex trafficking is considered as a household economic strategy in the study area. The locals admit that sex trafficking is a normal phenomenon in the study area.

4·2 Problem in Socialization and Literacy

In another interview, Tasi (name changed) informed that family members themselves stepped forward for sex trafficking of their daughter. According to him, “father and husband of this community argue that if all are sending their daughters and wife for sex work, then why can’t I send mine?” (Tasi, personal communication, 3rd December 2022). He further informed that the “...value of girls is much higher in our village. The family members celebrate when a female child is born in their family so that they can send their daughter for sex work when they become teens” (Tasi, personal communication, 3rd December 2022).

The way Tasi informed about the village and the importance of girls in their society, clearly shows how girls and women are taken as material. Such a phenomenon is evident, especially in Omni capitalism where everything is traded by one or another means. This also indicates under-socialization among family members in the study area.

Lack of literacy is another reason why women and girls fall into such a trap. Raju (name changed) informed that “traffickers convince the mother of teens by saying that you have two daughters but your ears are still without ornaments” (Raju, personal communication, 3rd

December 2022). The way traffickers lure women and girls showcase that traffickers are selective to poor and uneducated households. Raju further adds, "It is not only about the traffickers but parents are also equally interested in sex trafficking" (Raju, personal communication, 3rd December 2022).

Tasi, in the same line, adds that "girls equally show their interest for sex work/sex trafficking because lads in the village always look for such sex trafficked returnee girls (after being in prostitution) from abroad. Such girls/women are what these local lads look to marry after the retirement from brothels" (Tasi, personal communication, 3rd December 2022). Here, the retirement of trafficked girls and women is informed as 20-29 age. Such returnees are in high demand for marriage among the male youth in the village. As per Tasi, such girls send nearly one to 1.8 million rupees per year to their families. This shows the economic value of sex work among the female members in the study area. The monetary value that they earn from sex work is associated with their social prestige after retirement age. In the same, Rajbhandari and Rajbhanri (1997 : 35) write that "in Tamang communities of Sindhupalchowk district, the brothel owner or senior prostitutes, who return from India, are even honoured with the title of Maharani (Queen)". This may be the reason why sex work and sex trafficking is pervasive in the study area.

During the interview, Key Informant_2 shared that two of his close relatives were also trafficked. But with an untiring effort and support from the police, the trafficked girls were successfully returned to the village after a few months. As per Key Informant_2, "Nowadays she is in the village and whenever I meet her, she scolds me for bringing her back to the village. She thinks that I have ruined her life" (Key Informant_2, personal communication, 3rd December 2022). As per the same respondent, problems are mostly among ethnic households where family bonding is weak. Those families that are reconstituted and illiterate, are found to be having such problems. Allan et al. (2011) have correctly noted that in a step-family, neither the parents nor the children are aware of the rules and responsibilities and children are also reluctant toward what their parents ask to do. In the study area, the family structure was found to be changing from extended to nuclear and nuclear to step-family. Among the type of diversified family, especially in step-families, parents and children bonding is found to be weak where children are also missing their primary socialization to judge dos and don'ts within the family and the society.

In one of the interviews, the respondent (who refused to disclose name) informed that socialization from peers is playing a pivotal role in increasing sex trafficking cases in their village. The way how their friends are living (wearing fancy clothes and carrying fancy items), is influencing such teens. For instance, mobile phones among teens are one of peer's influence (socialization) in the study area but on the other hand, such mobiles are making it easy for traffickers to contact such teens. From the focused group discussion, it also came to know that, school dropout cases are increasing in the study area and focused group participants have claimed that this is due to increasing access of children to mobile phones. As per a local school teacher, in the same discussion, the discipline coordinator of the school has recently seized 15 mobile phones from the students. Participant 3 of the Focused Group Discussion (3rd December 2022) informed that these students were involved in wage labour during school holidays and purchased cell phones so it is impossible to keep them away from mobile phones. Overall, from the FGD conversation, it can be confirmed that the growing number of technologies in hand and access to the internet is exposing students to the world. The internet and social media are becoming virtual meeting points for both the victims and traffickers, leading to increasing human trafficking in the study area.

In another interview, Gyalbo (name changed) shared how peers are fueling in escalating sex trafficking in the study area:

“The fashion for marrying sex worker returnees is high in the village and if they give birth to a female child, they again send their daughter for sex work after their daughter becomes a teen. In such cases, fathers of teens physically visit the CDO office to claim their daughter is 18 years old and file an application to issue a passport. When they (father and daughter) set out from the village for a passport issue, such teens hardly return with their father or relatives. When other villagers ask about their daughter, they try to bluff and skip the subject matter” (Gyalbo, personal communication, 3rd December 2022).

Despite several interventions and awareness programs by the government and non-profit organizations in the study area, the trafficking incident has not yet decreased. One of the respondents informed that the community of the study area do not celebrate Sonam Lhosar. Religious and cultural values produce different social sanctions in the society that maintain social order in the society but if there is less or no belief toward their religion and culture, there will

be no fence to hold them back in social order. The community members skipping their own culture and religion also symbolizes the rise of individualization thus fostering sex trafficking.

4.3 Cultural Deprivation and Marginalization

One of the major causes of increasing sex trafficking in the study area is cultural deprivation. It is a situation where people of low strata have inferior norms, values and skills. Notwithstanding, different class strata have different sets of values. Some groups in society lack the attitude and values which would disallow them to be successful (Livesey & Blundell, 2021 : 26). Children from working-class backgrounds are more likely to have been socialized to prefer immediate gratification (Baumeister & Bushman, 2017) and are thus less likely to have acceptable moral values and attitudes in society. In such a family, members fail to pass on their culture to their offspring. Immediate gratification such as earning money is what they are prodding in their children's subconscious mind. That is why, "children of this community usually go for labour work nearby town during holidays" (Shyam-name changed, personal communication, 3rd December 2022). If such children had been born in different and high-echelon caste groups, their culture would have deferred gratification to set long-term goals through proper education and be a successful person in life.

But on the other hand, the way how state is pointing these social values and culture lags as wrong is also naïve. Sex is a matter of biological need and personal pleasure so people from such a community would not risk their life to earn their living if they have proper life chances in their life. It is a marginalized status that forces them to opt for such a profession. Although the study area is close to the capital city, proper development in terms of road and infrastructure, education, health, government facilities, tourism, agriculture and awareness are still way behind to reach the community.

One of the FGD participants confirmed that women trafficking is almost zero in their village, which the interviewee opposed during a separate interview. In this regard, it has been informed that two school girls were recently rescued from being trafficked. Certain people in the study area are trying to cover up the ongoing scenario of sex trafficking in the study area, however, it is noticed that trafficking is continuing at its pace and rhythm. This demonstrates

that locals of the study area are aware of what they are involved in and how the state envisions their activities.

Similar to what Durkheim argued that people simply follow patterns that are general to their society (cited in Giddens, 2004 : 9), it is viewed that people are simply following the pattern of sending family members for sex work, as a normal social process. However, from the state's perspective, sex trafficking and sex work are illegal and undignified professions. This demonstrates a tug-of-war ongoing between the local and the state. The ongoing sex trade in the study area is becoming a normal social practice to which the state is accusing the act of crime.

5. Discussion

Rimal & Simkhada (2022) argue that such human trafficking can be mitigated through increasing financial inclusion. One of the most common reasons the people of Nepal become victims of Human Trafficking is their financial status & socio-economic marginalization. When debt begins to pile up, those who are in insecure financial situations look for ways to make additional money. This is when the victims are brainwashed with the hope of earning a good income from the traffickers.

The anti-trafficking community presents the history of trafficking in Nepal through the Prostitution Framework, focusing on the innocent vulnerability of rural Nepali girls in juxtaposition to wealthy urban men (Worthen, 2011). However, to bring a value-free result of the research, respondents' perspectives are included where it is found that sex work has been accepted as a normal social practice rather than a crime. Society itself does not consider sex work as social deviance but as a matter of prestige. In such, the fabrication of sex work may not build a healthy relationship between the local community and the state.

If the locals have accepted sex trafficking as social prestige and a common social practice, the state and non-profit organization cannot stop such activities until the community members themselves find alternative ways of livelihood. The state's intervention will definitely make them opt for other loopholes. Hence, to stop such activities, rather than operating anti-trafficking cells, the government needs to work out in three parts. The first part is socialization among the children and family members. Any program that builds harmony

among family members, and provides a safe and secure environment to children is important. For this, a proper livelihood option, free education and proper nurturing environment is required. If the children are properly socialized and educated, they will know the real value of their life.

From a sociological point of view, such deviance has not landed suddenly in society. Apart from an economy and livelihood deprivation, this study has located under-socialization as one of the prime causes. As mentioned earlier, teens of the study area are missing out on their primary socialization due to which they are unable to judge do's and don'ts.

Similarly, marginalization is another key factor for such deviation. People living in this area are geographically far from the state's supervision. These people are not only geographically marginalized but also marginalized from proper forms of economy and livelihood, political participation and most importantly development that the state has missed. Linking with under-socialization, another crucial factor is also cultural deprivation. As most of the people living in the study area are farmers and belong to the working class, their children have been socialized into preferring immediate gratification. It is why the members of the society are more toward earning money via any means rather than setting long term goals themselves for the future.

On the other hand, through education, the government is trying to bring all those tax-paying subjects in one frame. If this is the state's intention, then education standards need to be uniform and every individual should be given access to various resources that will inspire them to learn and lessen the financial strain on their families. Furthermore, without the development of a market, sustainable livelihood is challenging. And, it appears difficult to eradicate sex trafficking; nevertheless, it can be reduced with the legality of sex work, surveillance, and other essential official assistance.

6. Conclusion

Economic hardship is not the sole factor contributing to the trafficking problem. Youngsters are becoming more vulnerable to traffickers due to broader socio-economic causes, particularly the advent of contemporary technology. While globalization has made it easier for people to utilize and consume a wider variety of commodities, technology, including smartphones and the internet, is

also exposing potential victims to traffickers. Similarly, differences in family structures are also making a bigger difference in how well children socialize in their early years. However, there are additional variables contributing to the rise in sex trafficking in the research area, such as a lack of sustainable livelihood and education that raises awareness and fosters socialization.

There is a tug-of-war between state and local practices. On the one hand, the community accepts continued sex trafficking as normal. The family members of sex workers not only support them but also openly identify them as such. Even the female participants in the sex industry thought their profession was beneficial. This has led to the widespread and socially acceptable phenomenon of sex trafficking in the studied region.

On the other hand, the state, in a monolithic way, is trying to suppress sex trafficking without building any proper livelihood base for locals. , the state still views it as a crime while the community have readily accepted sex work as a routine means of subsistence. Several groups, including the local government, have launched awareness campaigns in the study region. Nevertheless, there is no indication that it is declining. Rather, as a result of the government's intervention against this kind of trafficking, male family members are now lawfully transferring their female relatives abroad by obtaining passports.

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