

Trafficking a growing trend, exacerbated by conflict

By Surendra Phuyal

Kathmandu, Kiran and Rinki, two teen girls from near Kathmandu Valley, were recently rescued from a New Delhi brothel. Their "loved ones" trafficked and sold them at GB Road, the Indian metropolis' red light district, last year.

The activists who rescued them with the help of Delhi police immediately flew them to Kathmandu and handed over to Maiti Nepal, a famous non-governmental organisation that is working to combat trafficking in women and children. The organisation also works to rehabilitate victims of trafficking.

The 17-year-olds are now receiving shelter at Maiti Nepal, where they are also undergoing skill-development training. However, not every Nepali girl forced into prostitution in Indian cities - both big and small - is as lucky.

"There are a lot more, who are serving as many as 30 to 35 clients in a single day in Delhi and other cities, and waiting to be rescued," says Roma Debabrata, President of STOP (Stop Trafficking Oppression and Prostitution of Children and Women), a Delhi-based organisation.

So far, Debabrata, also a Senior Reader at Delhi University, has personally engineered the police-and-civil society-aided rescue of over 127 Nepali girls in the last two years, 85 of them were rescued and returned to Nepal this year alone.

"I become their guardian and fly them here because these girls often tend to be at high risk and vulnerable to mafia-attacks," she says. "And I hand them over to Maiti Nepal, because it is not like other NGOs here that are more like projects."

According to International Labour Organisation (ILO), every year as many as 12,000 Nepali girls are trafficked from Nepal, the majority of them to India, where they are forced into prostitution. Experts say the trend is not showing any sign of slowing down, with the number of trafficked girls increasing every year.

Moreover, what has started to worry activists is the fact that the continuing conflict in Nepal has exacerbated the problem. With the conflict worsening every day, they say that more and more people are migrating down to Indian cities for menial jobs--an argument supported by recent reports from eastern and western parts of the country.

Given this situation, activists say, Nepali women and specifically minors have become vulnerable to trafficking, and the possibility of them ending up in brothels in Kolkata, New Delhi, Mumbai, Lucknow and other cities remains extremely high. "Yes the conflict and the continuing migration has made our sisters more vulnerable," agrees Anuradha Koirala, the founder of Maiti Nepal.

Records at Maiti Nepal corroborate this argument. Volunteers of Maiti Nepal intercepted 56 girls bound for India at various points in 1998. The number climbed to 150 a year later in 1999, and to 395 in 2000. In 2001, Maiti Nepal volunteers stationed at nine different border points intercepted 350 India bound girls.

"The scenario is very grim, and being the immediate neighbour, India will have to share the social as well as economic burden," says Debabrata.

Also, in recent years the trend of trafficking in women and children has seen a kind of paradigm shift, according to experts. "They need not necessarily be the ones from Sindhupalchok, Dhading or Nuwakot districts and they need not necessarily be ethnic girls with Mongoloid features," says Biswa Khadka, Programme Officer at Maiti Nepal. "Girls belonging to every caste and from everywhere in Nepal are being ferreted out to India."

Of them, more than 80 percent are being trafficked to India, while the rest are being flown to newer hubs of East Asia and the Middle East, according to non-governmental estimates.

In New Delhi, Debabrata says STOP activists are trying hard to rescue minor girls (tricked into prostitution by unscrupulous traffickers from brothels at GB Road. "But the problem is that the brothel owners are upping their antes, they have started to shift minors elsewhere at the time of raids," she says. "And unauthorised brothels are coming up everywhere in the city."

"We are neither for legalisation of prostitution nor for anti-legalisation, we are for combating trafficking. We can't give these girls their lost childhood, but these little things we can do. We want to make this (billion dollar) business unprofitable."

Moreover, SAARC member nations should strictly adhere to and enforce the convention on prevention of trafficking in children and women signed earlier this year by the heads of state of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, besides strengthening their domestic anti-trafficking laws, she adds.

So, somebody is taking care of Nepali girls at least in New Delhi. In Mumbai, another big market for Nepali girls, a small office of Maiti Nepal is working. Maili Lama, the winner of this year's prestigious Reebok Human Rights Award, oversees the office known as Maiti Mumbai.

Then, who would take care of Nepali girls in other cities? "We ourselves," says Kiran. "If all of us start taking care of ourselves and stop believing in what others say or promise, then nobody can sell us." "We should not trust strangers anymore, even our friends and relatives," adds Rinki.

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