HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 21
Number 1 *Himalayan Research Bulletin; Nepal After the Revolution*

Article 15

2001

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Recommended Citation

Fujikura, Yatsuko. 2001. Repatriation of Nepali Girls in 1996: Social Workers' Experience. *HIMALAYA* 21(1).
Available at: https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol21/iss1/15

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Repatriation of Nepali Girls in 1996: Social Workers' Experience[1]

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In February 1996, the Maharastra Police raided several brothels in Bombay and rescued about 500 minor girls. Among them, were over 200 Nepali girls.[2] As the government of Nepal was reluctant to repatriate the rescued girls, they were kept in Bombay from February to June 1996. During the 5 months, several NGOs in Kathmandu formulated a detailed plan for repatriation and rehabilitation, and requested that the government receive the rescued girls. Since there was no concrete action from the government, these NGOs submitted a petition to the Maharastra High Court for the release of the girls and the Court Justice decided to send them to the NGOs in Kathmandu. In July 1996, 124 girls arrived in Kathmandu and were accepted into 7 rehabilitation centers.

Since the early 1990s, the issue of trafficking and prostitution has become a major political concern in Nepal. Activists often argue that it was the achievement of NGOs' advocacy in the early 1990s, whose work transformed the problem of trafficking from a non-issue to a major national concern. In particular, the repatriation of 124 Nepali girls in 1996 was remembered by many activists and social workers as a success achieved by pressure from the NGOs. The repatriation, rehabilitation and family reunion were in many ways mass-mediated events in which NGOs blamed the government's reluctance to help "our daughters and sisters," while some government officials accused NGOs of being a "parallel government" and making Nepal a "dumping site of AIDS."

This paper takes up this event of 1996, based on the accounts of several individuals who were directly involved in the process of rehabilitation and family reunion. Although there are many untold stories and alternative evaluations of this event, I have chosen to foreground the views from Kathmandu-based NGOs as important mediating sites between global and local politics. From my conversations with activists, social workers, and survivors of trafficking, I would like to describe several challenges and consequences they faced as they tried to create a socially acceptable space from which the returned girls sought to re-establish their lives.[3]

Rehabilitation Centers

For many social workers, the event of 1996 was their first experience in dealing with such a large number of trafficking victims. As Ashok recalled: "Before 1996, we did not have experience. We had 2 to 3 trafficked girls at a time. But it was the first time that we had more than 100 girls — all prostitutes."[4]

Some social workers described their first encounter with the girls and the transformation of their behavior and life style during their stay in rehabilitation centers. Ashok said: "There was something we had not expected until they

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[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of the panel, "A Decade of 'Democracy': Assessing Activism After the 1990 People's Movement in Nepal" at the Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison, October 2000.

[2]There are different reports with regard to the number of the girls. The number of the rescued girls ranges from 477 to 538. The number of Nepali girls among them ranges from 218 to 238. See, for example, *Everest Herald*, June 12, 1996, "Government disdain for Mumbai stranded girls"; *Everest Herald*, July 21, 1996, "NGOs provide shelter to Bombay-returned girls"; and Gauri Pradhan, *Back Home from Brothels*, 1997.

[3]I am grateful to many activists, lawyers, social workers, and survivors who shared their personal views with me and engaged in passionate discussions. I have chosen to change all the names of the persons I interviewed, as their personal views and my interpretations in this paper do not necessarily reflect official views of the organizations. I did not specify the names of NGOs, but all interviews were conducted in several NGOs which accepted the repatriated girls in 1996 and one survivors' organization in Kathmandu.

[4]Interview, August 8, 2000, Kathmandu.

arrived here. In the center, all the girls smoked cigarettes — all of them! They got up in the evening, dressed up and put on heavy make-up, and looked for boys outside. People in the neighborhood used to say that the rehabilitation center was going to be a brothel... But six months later, there was a total change. I was very inspired by this change. I recently met some of the girls... they are now just normal girls... they developed positive images of themselves in the center."[5] Prabha from another center also pointed out the change: "They realized that they were not normal by themselves. When they went out for shopping food, they noticed that people in the neighborhood stared at them. They felt bad after coming back from shopping. I told them to leave this kind of life style. Then gradually, they started to live a 'total normal life.'"[6]

During the rehabilitation period, activists and social workers also tried to change the negative images of "Bombay-returned girls" in the media and local communities.[7] By the early 1990s, Nepali girls who returned from brothels in India had been seen as causing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Right after the repatriation of 1996, a series of negative reports came out in the media, accusing the girls of bringing AIDS to Nepal and predicting that they would go back to the same profession.[8] Prabha recalled that the Secretary of the Ministry for Women and Social Welfare called the girls "rotten apples." Against these accusations, activists and social workers strongly argued that they were innocent victims, emphasizing that they were minor girls forced into the brothels against their will. "After we convinced the community (near the rehabilitation center) that they were children and did not know anything, people became nice to the girls," recalled Prabha.

In the words of social workers, it was particularly important to convince the girls' family members and home communities that the negative coverage of the media was false and that the girls were victims who went through terrible violence themselves. One of their major efforts was to erase the particular stigma attached to the returned girls to prevent possible rejection by their families and communities.

Family Reunion

From the beginning, family reunion and social reintegration of the girls into the community was the ultimate goal of the rehabilitation process. After the initial phase of providing food, clothes and medical care for the girls, social workers contacted the family members and asked them to come to Kathmandu for a reunion. Anticipating the possible shock and rejection by the family members, social workers counseled the family members prior to their reunion. Sangeeta explained: "First, we did not tell them the fact that their daughters went through trafficking and prostitution. We convinced them that the trafficked girls were not bad girls. We told them that it was not their fault. Only then, we told the parents that their daughters were also victims of trafficking."[9]

Social workers I talked to described various reactions from the parents when they found out that their daughters were trafficked. For example, Prabha said: "I met many innocent fathers and mothers. They did not know where their daughters were. Many parents were overjoyed to see their daughters again. They said, 'we thought our daughter was dead, but she's back — alive! Some of them got very angry and aggressive when they found out that their daughters were sold. One of them said, 'I'll kill the pimp!'"[10] Ashok from another center recalled: "Some parents initially reacted by saying, 'she's dead for us.' But later, they all came to bring back their daughters. But there were some cases in which the girls would not go with their parents."[11] Sangeeta remembered one case in which the girl refused to go with her elder sister who came to pick her up on behalf of their parents: "The girl said, 'I would not go with my sister. It was she who sold me.'"[12]

The question of the possible involvement of family members and relatives in the process of trafficking is one of the major controversies in public debates. When India-based journalists and health organizations started to publish reports on cross-border trafficking in the late 1980s, they often described Nepal as a country so poor that the selling of girls was the only way to survive in many rural areas. In the early 1990s, Kathmandu-based journalists and NGOs were disturbed by the increasing reports which suggested that even fathers and brothers sold their daughters and sisters to brothels. Once activists and social workers had directly interacted with a large number of returned girls

[5]Interview, August 8, 2000, Kathmandu.

[6]Interview, July 5, 2000, Kathmandu.

[7]The image of "Bombay-returned girls" (*bambaibata pharkeka celi*) in the media seems to have shifted during the 1990s. Newspaper reports in the early 1990s often suggested that "Bombay-returned girls" were well accepted by the communities because of their wealth. However, since many "Bombay-returned girls" were reported to be infected with HIV/AIDS, the term had acquired negative images as they were seen as spreading AIDS in the villages and the nation.

[8]For collections of published newspaper accounts and magazine articles, I thank CWIN Resource and Information Centre. Especially, *Bambaibata ghar pharkeka nepali celiharu: samacar tatha lekh samkalam 1996* contains heated debates and opinions during the events.

[9]Interview, July 13, 2000, Kathmandu.

[10]Interview, July 5, 2000, Kathmandu.

[11]Interview, August 8, 2000, Kathmandu.

[12]Interview, July 13, 2000, Kathmandu.

and their families following the repatriation of 1996, they tried to correct the widespread assumption that "parents are happily selling their daughters" or "girls are willing to go." They listened to the girls' stories and learned that the girls had not known what kind of job they would have to do, and they saw many parents get angry when they found out that their daughters were sold. They also met many other families who visited or called them to inquire about their missing daughters. During field visits, they also found that the communities' reluctance to accept the girls came from negative images of "Bombay-returned girls" in the media.

During my interviews, I noticed that many activists and social workers had strong reactions to the media reports, which accused family members of selling their daughters and sisters. Prabha, for example, strongly claimed, "Nepali fathers and mothers would never sell their daughters! It was the international mass media that fabricated the stories." At the same time, social workers also encountered some cases in which close relatives of the girls were involved in trafficking. Some of them came to the rehabilitation center to threaten the girls and social workers, so that the girls would not file court cases against them.

After the Reunion

After the reunion, many girls went back to their home communities with their parents. However, there were also many girls who did not go back: some girls preferred to stay in the centers; some of them did not have family; some of them died in the centers; and some of them came back to Kathmandu because of the difficulty they faced in their home communities. Govinda said: "Even when the parents were willing to accept their daughters, sometimes the community did not allow that. Some parents brought their daughters back here and asked us to find jobs for them in Kathmandu. ... Many other girls came back without contacting us. They looked for jobs themselves. ... Some of them went back to the life of prostitution."[13]

Although most of the centers initially set a period of six months for rehabilitation, some of the centers extended the period for the girls who could not reunite with their families or for those who came back to the center. Prabha asked me: "Where would they go? There is nowhere to go. Some of them stayed here for three years. We need a permanent rehabilitation center."[14]

Among the girls who stayed or came back to Kathmandu, there was a group of girls who started an organization of survivors to work for anti-trafficking programs. Anita in this organization told me: "In this group, there are women and girls who cannot go back to their villages. After going back to their parents' places, they came back here. Where can they go? It is difficult to live in the community again. They would say, 'she came back from Bombay, ... she is a bad girl ... ' For those who do not have families, who cannot go back home, the government did nothing. ... For them, it has become impossible to live in the society. ... We are victims ourselves."[15] In another NGO, the girls who could not go back home became volunteers at the transit homes along border areas. Their mission was to watch and intercept girls and pimps crossing the border.

In the last two cases, survivors were provided with a safe place to live and a new respectable identity. Girls who had no hope of going back home also said that they were proud of working for anti-trafficking programs in a "respectable profession." Some of the transit homes were also hospices for girls and women in late stages of AIDS. Some of them expressed their desire to dedicate the rest of their lives to the service of the anti-trafficking mission in Nepal.

In rehabilitation centers, the girls were encouraged to describe their own experiences. Although many activists and journalists speculated about the main cause of trafficking — poverty, lack of education, discrimination of female children, an historical link between some communities and sex markets in India, and so forth — their accounts paid little attention to the girls' desires and aspirations involved in the process. Many life stories written in the rehabilitation centers revealed not only the violent processes of trafficking and brothel lives, but also the various intentions and aspirations of the girls when leaving their home villages — to escape from family problems or to become independent: "If boys can work, why can't girls? ... Of course I can earn my own living."; "I should not have to depend on my parents. ... but no one wanted to employ a village girl with little education."; "In Kathmandu I managed to find a job in a carpet factory. I was so proud of myself. I was earning my own living and sending money home to my parents." Some of the girls left their villages with their boyfriends, hoping that they would have "love marriages."[16]

Some Reflections

One of the major efforts of activists and social workers was to create a socially acceptable place and identity for the girls by transforming their behavior and attitudes, while at the same time erasing the negative public image of

[13]Interview, July 12, 2000, Kathmandu.
[14]Interview, July 5, 2000, Kathmandu.
[15]Interview, August 9, 2000, Kathmandu.

[16]ABC/Nepal, *Maiti Pharkeka Celiharu*, 2055 v.s.

"Bombay-returned girls." They also tried to give them some skill training so that they could earn their own living. But the demand for a near-permanent rehabilitation center, providing a safe place to live and a sense of dignity, still reflected the fact that there was no respectable place outside of the centers for them to live on their own. Moreover, the girls' narratives of their life stories suggested the gap between the girls' desires and the existing material conditions and social norms in which girls could not always actualize their aspirations. Although activists and social workers were aware of this contradiction, their capacity was limited to advocating stronger protection of girls from the dangerous world rather than challenging the contradictions embedded in the existing material and social conditions. They were, nonetheless, responding to the immediate demands and making strategies within the limited discursive and institutional contexts at the time.

The repatriation of Nepali girls in 1996 took place in the field of negotiations among the global public, the state, NGOs, media, and local communities. Since the late 1980s, victims of cross-border trafficking and forced prostitution were often taken up by global media and aid organizations as extreme examples of displaced citizens who suffer from limited civil rights and frequent neglect by the state. In particular, poor girls in developing countries were often singled out as "girl children at risk," and the local practices of families and communities became increasingly questioned in global media and professional discourses.[17] Although international legal instruments were rarely applied to actual criminal cases in Nepal, they seem to have entered symbolic processes in which public debates about "girl trafficking" often revolved around the question of whether families were "willingly" and "knowingly" sending their daughters or whether girls "chose" to enter prostitution.

In Nepal, NGOs and journalists had not only situated the problem within the global concerns of the spread of HIV/AIDS, trafficking, and child prostitution, but also generated more internalized national debates, raising questions of "Nepali" culture and family values in terms of the protection of unmarried daughters and sisters. Trafficked girls were not only defined as displaced citizens, but also viewed as "our daughters and sisters" of the nation. Although Nepali activists were participants in transnational networks and the global media campaign, they also strongly reacted against international media portrayals of trafficking patterns in Nepal as socially accepted income generating strategies for poor families and communities. Families and communities, on the other hand, variously responded to the politicization of their kin relations. Activists and journalists were simultaneously responding to the global public and to local communities and families.

Throughout the 1990s, the dominant narratives of "girl trafficking" were constantly being transformed as activists and journalists responded to the changing demands within Nepal. The repatriation of 1996 marked one of the major shifts in public debates along with the urgent demands of recovery, rehabilitation, and family reunion of the rescued girls. During the process, activists placed a strong emphasis on the stories of "innocent victims", based on their direct interactions with the girls as well as their concern about the girls' difficult re-integration into society.

Some observers had criticized Kathmandu-based "power NGOs" for making myths to get dollar funding, or limiting their focus to victims of "forced" trafficking while ignoring the difficult conditions of many adult sex workers who were not "forced" or trafficked. Reacting to these accusations, others insisted on the authenticity of the returned girls' testimonies. At one level, these debates were competing to tell the "truth" or "what really happened" based on interviews with women and girls. At another level, I would suggest, different narratives of women and girls might be understood not only as evidence of past events, but also as delicate projections of futures sought from different sites. Although sex workers in brothels, rescued girls in rehabilitation centers, and returned girls in villages might be situated in the same circuit, the specific social contexts of these sites require different strategies of speech and silence.[18]

Social workers who were involved in the repatriation of 1996 privileged the narratives of the returned girls speaking from the rehabilitation centers. Some observers complained that all the girls were telling the same trafficking stories. I wondered, however, if something more than repetition might be produced when the standard stories were re-narrated by survivors. I was struck when Anita in the survivors' organization told me: "In 1996, we did not know anything about trafficking. Now we know many things. It is not their will to go. Somebody takes them (to the brothel)." "Trafficking," as she used the term, was something they learned to narrate and teach others, rather than something they experienced as past events. Several days later, when I visited the office again to pick up a video film

[17]In response to the demands of transnational networks of feminist organizations, the issue of trafficking and prostitution has been debated over the question of "consent" and "coercion." In the 1990s, the definition of human rights principles has been broadened beyond the state's violation of individual citizens rights to recognize the domains of family and community as possible sites of violence against women and children.

[18]For a sensitive case study of brothels in India, see Carolyn Sleightholme and Indrani Sinha, *Guilty without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta* (Calcutta, 1996).

I had ordered, Anita asked me if I wished to watch the film in the room with Sandhya, another member of the organization with whom I was talking at the moment. We watched the film together. Sandhya explained to me what was going on in several important scenes. After the film ended, she asked me if I understood everything. When I said I was trying to understand the last scene where the trafficker was chased by villagers and fell from the cliff to death, Sandhya nodded and said, "*samuhik nyaya* (social justice)." When I was about to write down the word in my notebook, she said she would write it down for me. She wrote: "*antama kanunle nyaya nadie ra samuhik nyaya dieko cha* (In the end, the law did not provide justice, so the social justice has been done)."