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# Women, Bought and Sold in Nepal

###### **By KATIE ORLINSKY**

NEPAL may be known for natural beauty and Mount Everest, but there is a dark side to this small, picturesque country. Women and girls are being bought, sold and smuggled across the Nepal-India border. Although reliable data on the scope of the issue is difficult to gather, Unicef reports that as many as 7,000 women and girls are trafficked out of Nepal to India every year, and around 200,000 are now working in Indian brothels.

I traveled to Nepal last spring to document the growing problem of sex trafficking and unsafe migration, spending the majority of time in Katmandu and along the Nepal-India border.

One of the women I talked with was Charimaya Tamang, who 19 years ago went out to the fields to cut grass in her village in Nepal. Typically she would have gone with other women from her village, but that day she was alone. A group of men grabbed her from behind, tied her hands and made her swallow “a powder.” When she woke up she was in a city in northern India. “I had never seen tall buildings before,” she recalled. It was a lot hotter than her village and the men offered her a soda. “I didn’t want to drink it but I was so thirsty,” she said. The heat and soda were her last memories before finding herself in a Mumbai brothel under the care of a woman she called “Auntie,” where she remained in forced prostitution for 22 months.

The sex trafficking starts with the procurers in Nepal, who might be anyone: a stranger with a fake job to offer — or a girl’s own brother in-law. Then someone else escorts the women across the open border and out of the country. “The pimp might take a girl across the border in a cycle-rickshaw and put a tikka dot on her forehead so it looks like she and he are married,” said Pamela Gurung, an activist affiliated with the Nepalese branch of the Catholic nonprofit group Caritas Internationalis, which among other things fights human trafficking throughout Nepal. Anti-trafficking workers have started to train border police officers to be on the lookout for scared-looking women, suspicious couples or men with multiple women. But border police officers are not paid much. Many are bribed as part of the vast criminal network of trafficking between India and Nepal.

A brothel pimp or madam pays close to $2,000 for one trafficked Nepalese girl, according to Rupa Rai, head of Caritas Nepal’s gender department. The girl is then obligated to repay this fee over time. Charimaya Tamang was the first woman in Nepal to file charges against her trafficker and win. The very same men that made her drink that soda were caught and put in jail, she said.

Ms. Tamang then began advocating on behalf of other trafficked women. Today she is married with two children and lives in a small room on the third floor of a dilapidated concrete building in Katmandu. On the wall above her bed is a glass display case nearly 12 feet long filled with awards. The situation in Nepal is improving in certain ways, thanks to activists like her, international pressure and better coordination with the Indian police. But the problem is daunting, and the number of trafficked women continues to grow.

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