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THE **TRAFFICKING** OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN NEPAL

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All reasonable efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of the data referred to in this report, including through data verification. We regret, however, any data errors that may remain. Unless otherwise stated, this report does not refer to data or events after November 2019.

TRAFFICKING OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN NEPAL

This country report is extracted from a research report *The trafficking of girls and young women: evidence for prevention and assistance*. The overall research presents original data collected by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) on the trafficking of girls and young women up to the age of 24 in Nigeria, Nepal and Uganda. Data on Nepal is included in this country chapter. This research describes the migration and trafficking trajectories of girls and young women from Nepal. It provides a snapshot of the realities faced by this group, which is not often studied. This report is intended to stimulate discussion and inform efforts to address human trafficking through survivor-centred gender-and-age-sensitive approaches.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Poverty and inequality

Despite economic growth averaging 4.8 per cent over the last decade¹ and recent improvements in human development indicators, Nepal remains one of the poorest countries in the world.² Nepal is ranked 149 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index³ and has a score of 0.48 in the Gender Inequality Index (where 0 represents equality between males and females and 1 is the lowest score).⁴

There are large disparities in poverty rates across gender, social group and geographical area.⁵ Poverty in Nepal is coupled with deeply entrenched discriminatory practices directed at certain groups within society. Although caste-based discrimination is illegal in Nepal, the caste system has been well documented for creating marked social stratification and associated restrictions on social mobility, preventing low caste families from escaping poverty.⁶ Furthermore, the problems of landlessness and the adverse incorporation of poor Nepalese people in the local and international labour market perpetuates chronic poverty.⁷

Adolescent girls' and young women's rights

Adolescents and youth (10-24 years) represent approximately 32 per cent of the total population of Nepal.⁸ There are around 4.72 million adolescent girls and young women in Nepal, 16 per cent of the estimated total population (29.1 million).⁹

Social norms in Nepal historically condone control of female sexuality and girls' and women's normative subservient role in the household.¹⁰ Poor, marginalised and low caste women and girls occupy weak social, economic and political positions in Nepali society. Their common reliance on loans can drive unsafe migration, hazardous labour, trafficking and bonded labour.¹¹

Eight out of ten girls (79 per cent) complete primary education (compared with 89 per cent of boys).¹² Completion rates significantly decrease with age through lower secondary (60 per cent of girls and 70 per cent of boys) and upper secondary (3 per cent of

girls and 10 per cent of boys) education.¹³

The challenges related to the quality of education in Nepal have led to many girls and boys having poor learning outcomes and lacking some of the basic skills necessary to transition into decent work.

Girls drop out of education primarily due to poverty, with marriage being cited as the second most common reason. Once out of school, many girls are expected to start working in their home contributing towards domestic duties or outside of their home to generate income. As a result, 40 per cent of girls between 15 and 19 years old are in employment.¹⁴

In Nepal, 7 per cent of girls are married by age 15 and 40 per cent by age 18. Nepal ranks as number 17 in the world for the prevalence of child marriage.¹⁵ Married girls in Nepal are 11 times more likely to be out of school compared with their unmarried peers.¹⁶

Child labour

Although the prevalence of child labour is declining at the rate of 100,000 every year, there are still around 1.6 million child labourers in Nepal. Sixty per cent (373,000) of the 621,000 children engaged in hazardous work in Nepal are girls.¹⁷

Natural hazards and climate change

Nepal is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, ranking in the top 20 globally and as the fourth most vulnerable to climate change.¹⁸ Nepal is particularly prone to natural hazards due to its geographical location and active tectonic processes, young and fragile geology, variable climatic conditions, unplanned settlement and growing population.¹⁹ In addition to earthquakes, the country is exposed to multiple hazards including floods, fires, avalanches, landslides and drought which regularly lead to deaths and loss of property.²⁰



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Plan International UK interviewed adolescent girls in Nepal who are survivors of trafficking for its Because I am a Girl campaign

MIGRATION IN NEPAL

International labour migration is an important strategy for improving livelihoods, buying land, paying debts, accessing education and health care or building a safe place to live.²¹ This is particularly the case among rural Nepalese populations. According to World Bank data, remittances account for 28 per cent of the country's GDP.²²

Female migrants comprise 69.7 per cent (342,315) of the total number of international Nepalese migrants.²³ However, girls and young women (0-24 years) represent just 16 per cent of the total recorded female

international migrant population.²⁴ According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), more than one in six girls between five and 17 years old indicates marriage as the reason for their most recent migration.²⁵

The types of low-skilled or informal labour that most migrant girls participate in, such as domestic work in the Middle East and Gulf States, or working in India's entertainment sector, is associated with highly exploitative working conditions and vulnerability to trafficking.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NEPAL

Trafficking in persons is a serious problem in Nepal, characterised by cross-border, international and internal trafficking of women, men, and children for various purposes including commercial sexual exploitation and forced labour. As is the case globally, however, there is a critical gap in reliable prevalence estimates of the trafficking of girls in Nepal and to date most estimates rely on case data, administrative data or surveys. While there is not a single, comprehensive estimation of the number of Nepalese girls trafficked from and within Nepal, research shows that it is a pervasive human rights issue.

For example, the Women and Children's Service Directorate (part of the Nepal Police) reported 366 cases of trafficking from 2013-2015, of whom 94 per cent were female and approximately half were under the age of 18 at the time of their case.²⁶ Nepal's National Human Rights Commission's (NHRC) most recent trafficking in persons report indicates that 78 per cent of identified victims of

trafficking in 2017/18 were female, and 25 per cent were children.²⁷ The NHRC also estimates that hundreds of female migrants, many suspected to be adolescent girls, are trafficked for marriage to the Republic of Korea and the People's Republic of China every year.²⁸

Internal trafficking is also a significant issue in Nepal. Girls are trafficked internally within Nepal for forced labour (primarily in the garment or service sectors), sexual exploitation, and forced marriage, but the magnitude of these types of trafficking is unclear, as is how prevalence might vary by destination or sector.²⁹ A significant number of girls are estimated to be trafficked for sexual exploitation in Kathmandu's entertainment sector and across the open border with India to Mumbai and other urban centres. Recent research in Kathmandu found that between 40 and 60 per cent of the females interviewed in entertainment sector workplaces (massage parlours, dance bars and cabin restaurants) were under the age of 19.³⁰

NEPAL FINDINGS

WHAT DOES THE DATA SHOW?

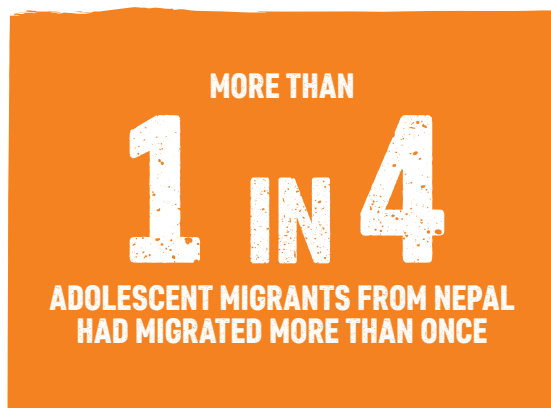
Due to the limited number of cases in the VOTD for Nepal, the empirical findings for the Nepal chapter are based on the data from the evaluation of the South Asia Work in Freedom Transnational Programme (SWiFT) in Nepal, alongside the results of the qualitative interviews with adolescents conducted by IOM for this report.

Surveys were conducted with 521 returnee migrants in three of the five districts in which the Work in Freedom Programme was implemented: Chitwan, Rupandehi, and Morang. This research was funded

by the UK Department for International Development.

Among returnee migrants, **45** were adolescent (10-18 years old) at the time of their most recent migration and **105** were aged 19 to 24. More than **one in four** adolescent migrants and **a third** of young women had migrated more than once. The results from the sample of adolescent girls and young women who participated in the survey are presented here.

Analysis of the VOTD data for Nepal is presented separately in Box 2.



DRIVERS OF MIGRATION AND RISKS OF TRAFFICKING AMONG GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN NEPAL

Economic and aspirational motivators

Poverty and limited economic opportunities

Nepal is characterised by structural poverty and inequality. Although poverty levels are declining, an estimated 10 million people (32 per cent of the population) live on incomes between USD1.90 and USD3.20 a day.³¹ The proportion of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) stands at 32 per cent.³² In this context, international migration may be seen an alternative to meet individual and family aspirations.

“We should mobilise local resources and generate jobs for them. On the one side we are saying migrants for foreign employment are vulnerable; on the other side here are no jobs to do, no business, no working environment: what will they do?”

Key informant

The scarcity of attractive employment opportunities in Nepal, especially in rural areas, is a driver for female migration both to urban centres in Nepal and to countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia and Kuwait, primarily for domestic work. Exploitation of Nepalese female domestic workers is common in the Gulf countries.³³

“I migrated due to poverty... [and a] difficult life due to a lack of money and a desire to earn... I was trying [to migrate to] any place, so that I could develop my skills and earn some money.”

Adolescent girl, 18 years old

In the SWiFT survey, **76 per cent** of adolescent girls and **88 per cent** of young women migrated

with the intention of earning extra income for their family. Almost a third (**31 per cent** of adolescent girls and **36 per cent** of young women) migrated to pay non-family debts. **Forty per cent** of adolescent girls and **47 per cent** of young women were motivated to migrate because of employment shortages at home. One adolescent interviewed in the qualitative research reflected on the lack of choice in her decision to migrate.

“My heart denies [it] but there is compulsion for migration.”

Adolescent girl, 18 years old

Almost all the adolescent girls interviewed for this research entered trafficking through labour migration – only one was deceived into travelling to India and then trafficked for sexual exploitation. Adolescent girls described the various economic pressures (family financial needs, unemployment, medical expenses, outstanding loans) that motivated their migration. One adolescent girl described how access to economic opportunities can be more limited for girls, when compared with boys:

“It is easy for the boys to hunt for jobs compared to the girls. There may be high security threats to the girls, people might be backbiting behind them, there are different kinds [of] risks to the girls, but it may not be the same for the boys... Girls are not as safe as boys.”

Adolescent girl, 18 years old

Limited access to quality secondary education

Poverty, unemployment and low literacy were recognised by key informants as the main contextual determinants of migration

59%

OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS FROM NEPAL HAD NOT STUDIED BEYOND PRIMARY EDUCATION

among adolescent girls, alongside age and gender. While education is an important factor in combating the worst forms of child labour, including human trafficking, issues of poverty, social exclusion and gender bias mean that education is unattainable for many adolescent girls.³⁴

“I used to go school and some household work and then some agriculture... There was problem of road, school was far, I always late for school, we couldn't reach school on time.”

Adolescent girl, 18 years old

As a result, many adolescent girls end up dropping out of school and into marriage, to support their families, or in search of economic opportunities. Many end up being exploited in hazardous work.³⁵ More than half of adolescent girls (59 per cent) and young women (55 per cent) in the SWiFT study had not studied beyond primary education. Furthermore, wider research has indicated that the lack of formal education of young girls (six to nine years old) may be higher among daughters of domestic and agricultural workers in Nepal,³⁶ perpetuating intergenerational poverty.

The 2015 earthquakes had a significant impact on infrastructure and learning environments. This is likely to have exacerbated existing challenges related to the poor quality of education and worsened an already difficult situation.³⁷

Aspirations

Severe poverty and a lack of opportunity are not always the primary drivers of labour migration:

55%

OF YOUNG WOMEN FROM NEPAL HAD NOT STUDIED BEYOND PRIMARY EDUCATION

49 per cent of adolescent girls and 26 per cent of young women in the SWiFT survey did not report any pressing economic reason as a factor that strongly motivated their migration. Migration or entry into the labour market can also be driven by the desire to benefit from globalisation, to gain more freedom and access broader life opportunities, and to see the world.³⁸ For example, 38 per cent of adolescent girls and 36 per cent of young women were influenced by a desire to see a foreign country and almost a third of adolescent girls and almost half of young women were influenced by other people's migration experiences.

Adolescent girls interviewed for this research also considered the importance of aspiration, including the ability to access technology and luxury goods, as a key influence over migration decisions:

“The adolescence period is highly curious, [we] want to learn more, try to know new things, and have keen interest in using equipment and devices, and [are] desirous of having these devices, which are pushing us towards risk.”

Adolescent girl, 16 years old

“A few people from the village have gone abroad for work and the earnings and goods they bring are visible which has affected others, but it is not visible that they have faced problems there. When the earnings, luxury goods, new technology etc. are visible, it is influencing people to go abroad.”

Adolescent girl, 18 years old

Box 1 Legal bans on female mobility

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Government of Nepal put in place widespread restrictions on female mobility. This policy was implemented as a perceived protective measure against exploitation of female migrants following extensive reports of trafficking and exploitation of female Nepalese domestic workers, especially in the Gulf States. Although the specifics have changed, the policy continues to this day for women under the age of 24 (see Table 1).

Qualitative research has suggested that the migration bans have not deterred women or girls from migrating. Instead, female migrants have been forced into risky and illegal migration through informal channels.³⁹ This has simultaneously excluded them from national labour migration estimates. Several policy reviews have highlighted the worrying effects of migration bans on female migrants' control of their migration process and on workers' rights abroad.^{40,41,42} Recent findings of the Work in Freedom Programme have, however, indicated that the bans could contribute to a reduced likelihood of forced labour.⁴³

Table 1 Summary of legal bans on female mobility by the Government of Nepal⁴⁴

Summary of migration bans in Nepal	
1985	Women prohibited from leaving the country without consent from their guardian
1998	Permission from guardian required for women seeking to migrate
September 1998	Complete ban on women's migration to the Gulf countries
2003	Ban partially lifted allowing women to migrate for work in the formal sector
September 2008	Restrictions on women's migration to Gulf countries and Malaysia for low-skilled work
November 2009	Women's migration to Lebanon for all sectors banned
December 2010	Ban on women's migration to Gulf countries and Malaysia lifted for all women
August 2012	Women below 30 years of age banned from migrating to Gulf countries for domestic work
July 2014	Age ban expanded to include women of all ages, prohibiting them from migrating to the Gulf countries for domestic work
September 2014	Total ban on women migrating as domestic workers
April 2015	Regular migration channels opened for women migrant domestic workers to the Gulf countries and Southeast Asia; women below 24 years of age banned from migrating as domestic workers to these countries

Nonetheless, such discriminatory bans contravene the principle, set out in the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women,⁴⁵ of substantive equality – including equality of opportunity – between women and men, boys and girls. Instead of prohibiting the mobility of young women, increased efforts should be made to create and enforce rights-based agreements with destination country governments that formalise a shared responsibility for labour recruitment issues, the protection of migrant workers, and the identification and repatriation of victims of trafficking.

Social norms and discrimination

Gender inequality and caste-based discrimination

Women and girls often have limited control over their life decisions, such as attending school, when they marry, or whether to migrate.⁴⁶ State-imposed bans on female migration reinforce those norms (see Box 1).

In Nepal, it is becoming increasingly acceptable for women and girls to work, although the workforce is still highly gendered. While the

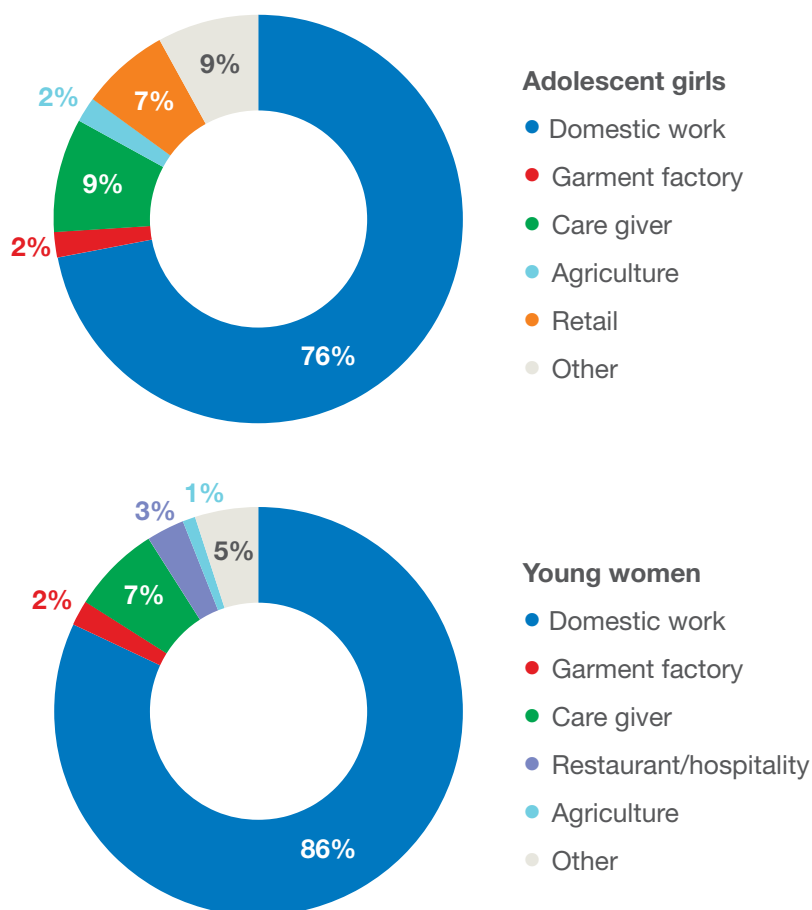
female participation rate in the workforce is high at 81.7 per cent (compared with 84.4 per cent for males),⁴⁷ the demand for female labour is often limited to low-skilled, hazardous sectors where exploitative practices are commonplace, such as domestic work, care work, entertainment and the garment sector.

In the SWiFT survey, for example, **most adolescent girls and young women** migrated for domestic work – a feminised, highly unregulated and often invisible labour sector (see Figure 1). Their main destinations were Bahrain and Kuwait.

Table 2 Destinations for migrant Nepalese adolescent girls and young women (SWiFT data)

	Adolescent girls (10-18)	Young women (19-24)
Oman	2%	3%
Bahrain	49%	54%
Iraq	2%	5%
Kuwait	31%	26%
Lebanon	2%	0%
United Arab Emirates	9%	5%
India	2%	7%
Other	2%	1%

Figure 1 Proportion of girls and young women working in different labour sectors in the SWiFT survey



Adolescent girls are often targeted for exploitation because of their low status and limited agency within society.⁴⁸ Women and girls from marginalised groups, particularly those from the Dalit caste, who have traditionally been considered ‘unclean’ or ‘untouchable’ occupational workers, are particularly vulnerable to exploitation.⁴⁹ In the SWiFT survey, **36 per cent** of adolescent girls and young women were Dalits (compared with the proportion in the general population of just 14 per cent⁵⁰). Despite being forbidden by law, discrimination

against Dalits in employment is pervasive and threats of exclusion from social activities and labour opportunities also increase their vulnerability to forced labour.⁵¹

The proportion of Janajati was also high in the SWiFT sample, with **40 per cent** of adolescent girls and **39 per cent** of young women reporting this indigenous caste. The Brahman and Chettri upper castes were less commonly represented, with **16 per cent** of adolescent girls and **10 per cent** of young women.

April 2015 earthquakes

Anecdotal evidence⁵² suggests a rise in human trafficking in the aftermath of the April 2015 earthquakes, which affected around eight million people in Nepal.⁵³ Girls and boys in the most affected districts faced increased risks of child trafficking, child labour, child marriage and violence (including sexual and gender-based violence) as a result of the earthquakes.⁵⁴ Many families lost their homes and livelihoods and adopted harmful coping mechanisms, placing children at further risk.⁵⁵

The earthquakes resulted in widespread displacement and migration. One key informant described different migration trends: poorer people were forced to migrate internally while those with more financial resources sometimes left the country:

“After the earthquake [...] most people have migrated to the cities from (the) villages. Those who are a bit financially stronger have migrated for overseas employment and those who are financially not strong have resided in the cities and it has become a two-way chain.”

Key informant

The NHRC reported a 15 per cent increase in the interception of people vulnerable to human trafficking during the three months following the earthquakes.⁵⁶ This trend was noted by key informants to this research:

“If we analyse the data, it has increased by 15 per cent after the mega earthquake in Nepal. The risk of trafficking is increased during natural disaster, and conflict. The natural disasters like floods, landslide and earthquake made many people homeless and displaced. At that time certainly they were at high risk; in some of the places like Nuwakot, Sindhupalchok, we can see still they are at risk. In these districts in some places, they are still living under the tents.”

Key informant

According to the NHRC, the Nepal Police rescued 161 children (52 per cent of them girls) from different border points between Nepal and India in the five-month period directly after the earthquake.⁵⁷ Other anecdotal evidence supports this trend. For example, in 2016 the anti-trafficking NGO Maiti Nepal intercepted more than 5,700 ‘vulnerable’ girls at border crossings to India. This compares with 2,900 in 2014, the year before the earthquakes.⁵⁸ The Sahastra Seema Bal, the Indian border force, also reported an increase from 33 victims of human trafficking in 2014, to 336 in 2015 and 501 in 2016.⁵⁹

**THE INDIAN BORDER FORCE
REPORTED AN INCREASE IN NEPALESE
VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING FROM**

33

IN 2014, TO

336

IN 2015, AND

501

IN 2016

RECRUITMENT AND ENTRY INTO TRAFFICKING

Recruiters, brokers and labour intermediaries

Traffickers are commonly portrayed as external predators, but it is rare that girls and young women would not have had some previous interaction with the recruiter before the migration process.⁶¹ Most adolescent girls and young women in Nepal are influenced to migrate or introduced to labour intermediaries by their wider network, including family members or social contacts.^{62,63}

Recruiters or brokers are often known to the girls and young women or to their family. Most adolescent girls interviewed for this research reported that it was a close family member, kin, neighbour or friend that first initiated their consideration of or plans to migrate. Some of the girls migrated with a sibling or friend.

“The brother from our village told me he will take me to the city and find the job for me.”

Adolescent girl, 18 years old

Fictional case example 1 – Laxmi

Before Laxmi⁶⁰ decided to migrate, she used to live in rural Nepal. Her father died when she was ten years old. She lived with her mother and two siblings. Her uncle would occasionally help with her family's expenses, but he had a drinking problem and was often verbally and physically abusive towards her. She used to fear her uncle. While in her home village, Laxmi used to collect fodder and firewood, fetch water and carry manure to earn some money. She worked from 8am to 5pm every day. She gave most of the money she earned to her mother, but sometimes used some for herself. She used to earn approximately half of the wage given to boys her age for the same job. She had been out of school for two and half years before migrating.

She left her village when she was 14 years old to work in Kathmandu. Her uncle arranged the job through common acquaintances. She went by bus to the city accompanied by an acquaintance from her village. She felt frightened and alone when she got to Kathmandu but started to work as soon as she arrived there. She worked for three years in a hotel cleaning dishes, chopping vegetables, preparing tea. She used to work 14 hours per day and could not leave the hotel if she wanted to. She received food and accommodation but was not paid for her work.



“There was one neighbouring elder brother in Kuwait; he told me to come to Kuwait then after issuing passport I had gone there.”

Adolescent girl, 18 years old

“There was my sister and I went with her.”

Adolescent girl, 16 years old

In the SWiFT survey, **40 per cent** of adolescent girls and **44 per cent** of young women reported that the broker was a friend, family member or acquaintance, or were referred by a family or community member. **Thirty-six per cent** of adolescent girls and nearly a third (**31 per cent**) of young women had help from the family or a friend to find a job abroad.

Half the adolescent girls (**53 per cent**) and **63 per cent** of young women used a local recruiter to help them find a job abroad, and **40 per cent** of adolescent girls and **29 per cent** of young women reported that they were influenced by a recruiter in their decision to migrate.

Eighty per cent of adolescent girls and **64 per cent** of young women paid for their migration expenses (i.e. travel, recruitment fees, expenses for documents etc.). Almost one in six (**16 per cent**) adolescent girls and **29 per cent** of young women took out a loan to pay for their migration, while **29 per cent** of adolescent girls and **10 per cent** of young women had the amount deducted from their wages at their destination.

Pre-departure risks

More than half of women in Nepal (62%) use recruitment agencies to migrate.⁶⁴ The country has a thriving labour recruitment industry, with almost 800 firms licensed by the Government and 50,000 brokers engaging in recruitment activities, mostly unlicensed and operating ‘illegally.’⁶⁵

Recent media publications have reported on the risks that Nepalese children, adolescents and their families can take when they place their trust in labour intermediaries, who then force them into work or bonded labour.^{66,67}

However, the complexity and uncertainty of international migration make labour intermediaries indispensable for migration to some destinations. Common abuses by labour recruiters include: deception about the nature and conditions of work, retention of passports, replacement of contracts, undisclosed fees, deposits and illegal wage deductions, illegal recruitment fees to workers, debt bondage linked to repayment of recruitment fees, and threats of violence and deportation.^{68,69}

Among female migrants interviewed in SWiFT, **96 per cent** of adolescent girls and **92 per cent** of young women did not know if the labour intermediary they used was licensed.

Most adolescent girls (**76 per cent**) and young women (**66 per cent**) did not have a written work contract before they left Nepal for their most recent migration. The minority had a labour permit (**35 per cent** of adolescent girls and young women who responded to this question) or life insurance (**25 per cent** of adolescent girls and **21 per cent** of young women who responded⁷⁰) when they migrated.

One of the key informants interviewed for this study claimed that adolescents were especially at risk of trafficking because they were more likely to be deceived by recruiters or brokers:

“The most high-risk group for being trafficked is the adolescence group, because the adolescents trust very easily, and it is easy for the brokers to entrap such a group. The adolescents are in very high-risk group, because in any form of trafficking, the brokers can earn better money, and get more profits.”

Key informant



Sharmila* was trafficked to Dubai where she was forced into domestic slavery

Understanding the processes and paperwork involved in migrating is usually difficult for those who can read, but impossible for the **25 per cent** of adolescent girls and young women in the SWiFT sample who could read very little or nothing at all. This could, in part, explain why adolescent girls and young women often rely on local recruiters and labour intermediaries to organise many aspects of their migration.⁷¹ However, doing so may limit their autonomy to decide on important aspects of their migration, such as type of work, destination, work contract or mode of travel, and can leave them particularly vulnerable to trafficking, sexual exploitation and forced labour.

Increasing awareness among women and girls of migration processes could support them to make more informed choices. For example, the SWiFT survey indicated that, prior to their migration, young women and adolescent girls valued the provision of practical information about documentation and avenues for legal migration, vocational

skills-building components, and rights-based training activities.⁷² However, the effectiveness of safe migration trainings is often limited because of the substantial power differentials that women encounter in their interactions with brokers' networks and employers during their migration.^{73,74}

Furthermore, evidence from SWiFT shows that **68 per cent** of adolescent girls and **71 per cent** of young women who experienced forced labour reported being aware of the risks at the time of migration. Additionally, **40 per cent** of adolescents and **88 per cent** of young women who intended to migrate again had experienced forced labour in their most recent migration. This highlights the importance of combining pre-departure awareness-raising efforts with a set of wider strategies that address the structural drivers of human trafficking and the systemic risks in the migration pathway to avoid perpetuating a state of 'informed powerlessness' for migrants and potential migrants.⁷⁵

EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE, ABUSE AND FORCED LABOUR

Means of control

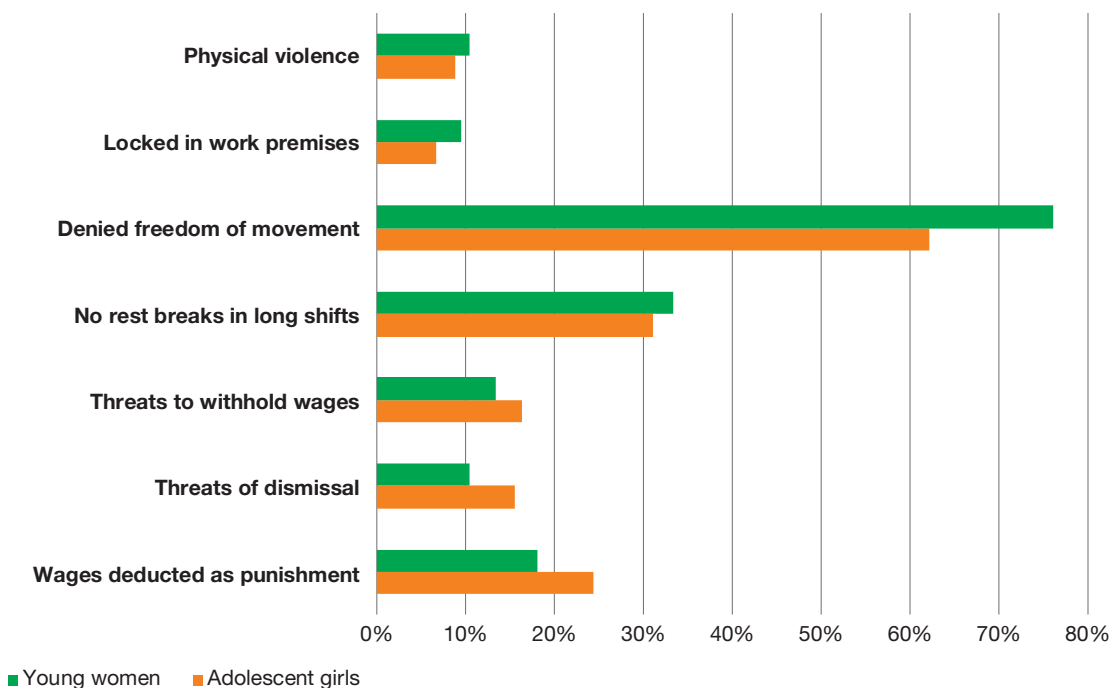
As is common, many of the adolescent girls interviewed for this research were working in highly feminised and often invisible sectors including care and domestic work (see Figure 6).

The informality of the working arrangements and the precarious legal status of migrant girls and young women abroad can restrict their access to justice. In one study, for example, Nepalese female migrant domestic workers in Lebanon reported high rates of violence, long hours, threats, verbal abuse, and lack of basic rights such as privacy in their accommodation, medical treatment or sick leave. The same study found that 83 per cent of Nepalese migrant domestic workers would not have migrated to Lebanon if they had known the reality of the working conditions.⁷⁶

Adolescent girls and young women in the SWiFT survey commonly reported abusive and poor working conditions at their destination. The means of control experienced by adolescent girls and young women are shown in Figure 7.

The asymmetry of power in the relationship between employer and workers often impedes workers from openly negotiating their rights, especially when the worker is a child.⁷⁷ There are many other anecdotal narratives in empirical research and NGO reports about girls who are deceived by recruiters in the migration process or employers at their destination in India, ending up trafficked to urban areas such as Mumbai and exploited in prostitution.⁷⁸ Girls and women who participated in the SWiFT survey, however, did not report sexual exploitation.

Figure 2 Means of control: Nepal SWiFT data



Most of the adolescent girls and young women interviewed for this research reported working long hours, some as many as 18-20 hours in a day, many without a day off. Despite their economic motivations to migrate for work, few of the adolescent girls and young women interviewed ever saw their

promised wages. Those that did receive a wage were sending most of it home to their mothers or family.

“I was expecting to earn some money, but they did not pay me.”

Adolescent girl, 18 years old

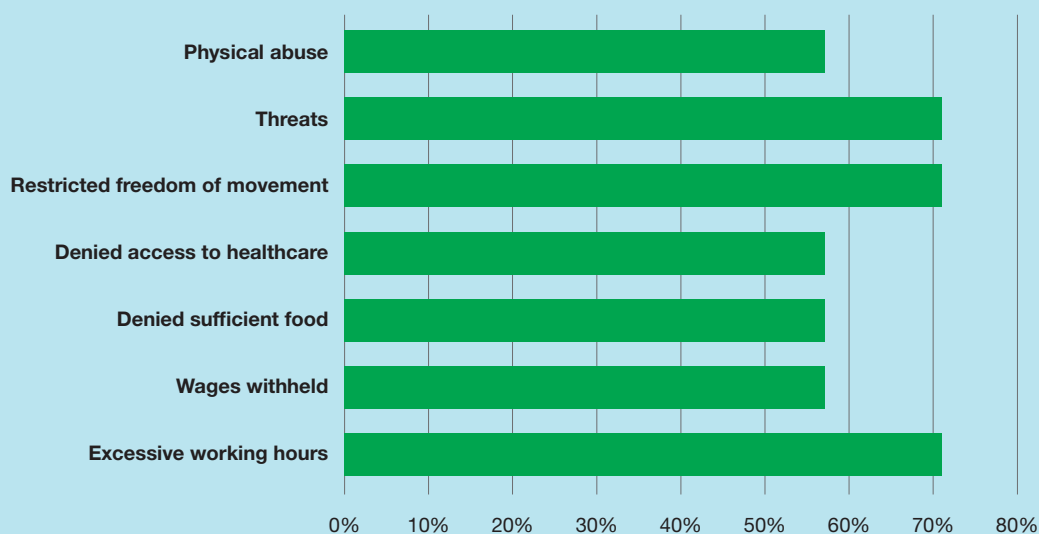
Box 2 IOM's Global Victim of Trafficking Database cases for Nepal

Among victims from Nepal in IOM's Global Victim of Trafficking Database (VOTD), 74 per cent are female. The VOTD contained records for 13 young women aged between 19 and 24 years old at the time of registration. The VOTD contained no cases of girls.

The most common international destinations for young women were Lebanon (**83 per cent**), Iraq (**7 per cent**), Malaysia (**7 per cent**) and Kenya (**3 per cent**). The reported duration of trafficking ranged between three days to **1,415 days**, with a mean duration of **97 days**.⁷⁹

Labour migration (**54 per cent**) was the primary means through which young women (19-24) entered the trafficking process. Most reported using a recruiter, and more than two-thirds (**72 per cent**) reported that the recruiter was a business contact.⁸⁰ The most common (**89 per cent**) purpose of trafficking was forced labour, compared with other forms of exploitation (**11 per cent**).⁸¹ **None** were trafficked for sexual exploitation.

Figure 3 Means of control: Nepal VOTD



Violence, abuse and exploitation

The experiences of the 150 Nepalese adolescent girls and young women in the SWiFT survey show that migrants remain susceptible to experiences of violence, abuse and exploitation throughout the migration cycle. The majority reported experiencing forced labour at their destination.

One of the adolescent girls interviewed for this research reported being forcefully given alcohol before being sexually exploited and beaten. Others were aware of the potential risks of sex trafficking and sexual violence faced by migrant girls and young women. Although experiences of sexual abuse are frequently reported among female migrant workers,⁸³ including Nepalese workers in the Gulf States,⁸⁴ **none** of the adolescent

girls or young women in the SWiFT survey sample reported sexual exploitation or sexual abuse by employers.⁸⁵ Sexual exploitation is a sensitive and often stigmatised experience and it is possible that this form of violence has been under-reported.

Other forms of violence and abuse were reported, however. **Thirty-eight per cent** of adolescent girls and a **similar number** of young women reported that their employer or someone responsible for their job yelled at, insulted or humiliated them. **Four per cent** of adolescent girls and **2 per cent** of young women had their clothes intentionally damaged or ripped. **Seven per cent** of adolescent girls and **9 per cent** of young women were hit with a fist, slapped or had something thrown at them that could hurt. **Two** adolescent girls and **eight** young women were

Fictional case example 2 – Sanjana

Sanjana⁸² used to live with her parents in a populous town in Nepal. Her father only worked part time and used to spend most of the money he earned on alcohol. Her mother worked outside the house, while Sanjana worked in a restaurant washing dishes. Sanjana's father was violent towards her and her mother. Sanjana was scared of him and wanted to leave home. Her parents were not supportive of her decision.

A friend arranged a job for her as a domestic worker in Kathmandu. She used to work from 5am to 9pm every day. Her employers were verbally abusive and did not pay any of her wages. She was not allowed out of the house at any time. She did not have enough food to eat.

She managed to contact the friend who had arranged the job for her and he took her out of there. When she returned to her parents' house, she shared her experience with a neighbour who worked at a post-trafficking assistance service. At the time of the interview, Sanjana was learning to read and receiving skills training. She hopes to open her own small business sewing clothes.

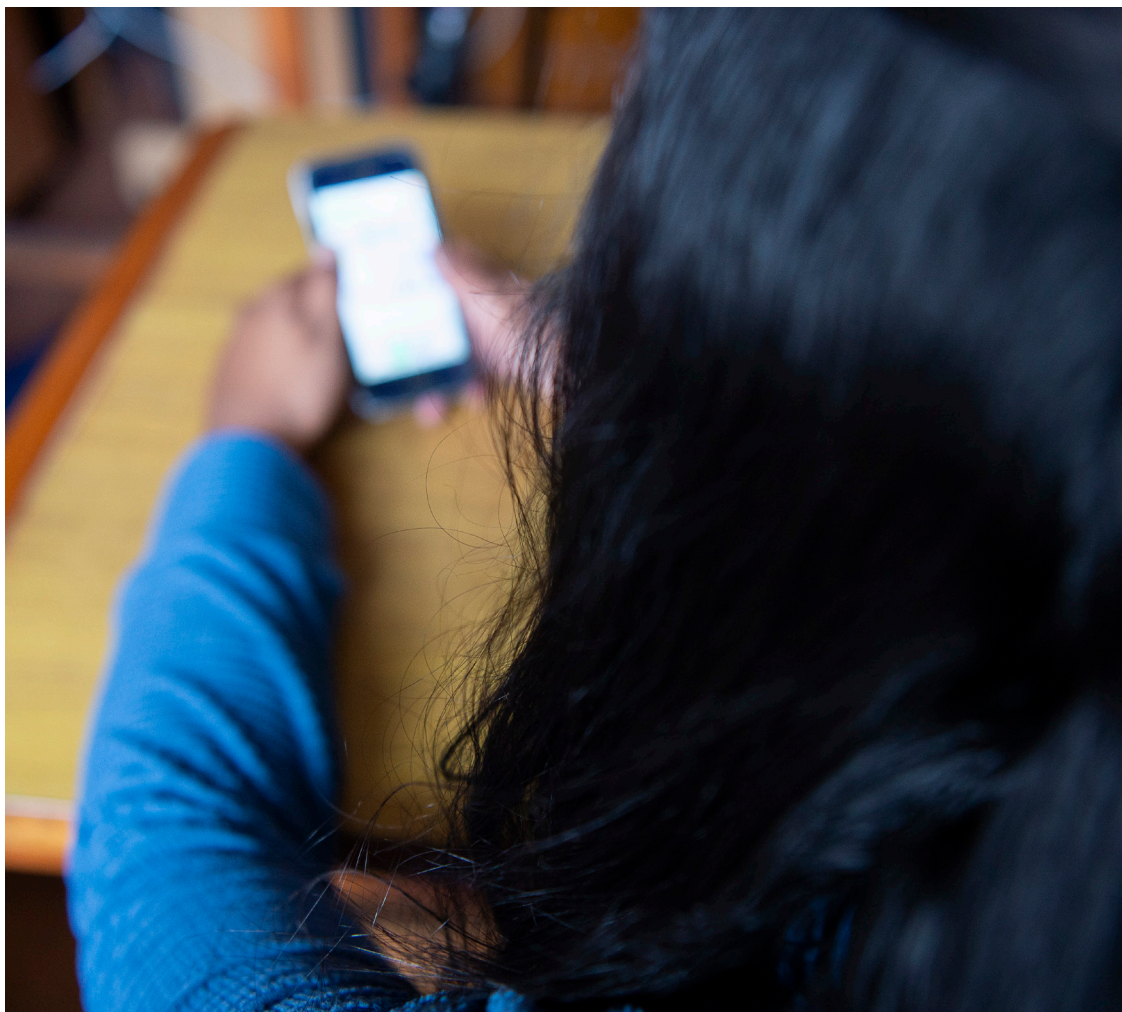


pushed, shoved, kicked, dragged or beaten. **Two** young women were tied, chained or choked on purpose, and **one** was threatened with a weapon. **Four** young women reported that the employer or a member of their family threatened to use a gun, knife or other weapon against them, and **two** were chained, tied or choked on purpose.

There is a common feature across the sample: **all** the adolescent girls and **91 per cent** of young women reported that the perpetrator was the employer. **Half** of the

adolescent girls and **almost a third** of the young women also reported the employer's family members as perpetrators. This reinforces findings from previous research with Nepalese domestic workers abroad who reported abuse from their employer or their employer's family members.⁸⁶

These findings, while not claiming to be representative of the experiences of all Nepalese migrants, demonstrate that serious gaps remain in the prevention of exploitation during the migration process.



Plan International UK interviewed adolescent girls in Nepal who are survivors of trafficking for its Because I am a Girl campaign

ANTI-TRAFFICKING POLICY AND INTERVENTIONS IN NEPAL

The Government of Nepal has shown political commitment to achieving SDG 8.7 through its endorsement of the *Call to Action to End Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking* and its agreement to become a 'Pathfinder Country' of the global Alliance 8.7 initiative.⁸⁷ These recent commitments reinforce longstanding efforts by the Nepalese government to address human trafficking and promote decent work. However, gaps remain, including through the government's failure to ratify the Palermo Protocol.⁸⁸

Prevention

This research has demonstrated that more needs to be done to ensure girls complete a quality education, have access to decent work, and are able to make informed migration choices. Education and skills training for groups at risk of trafficking was seen by key informants as an important prevention strategy:

"Those girls who have been dropped out from the school and want to learn some skills, skills-based training programmes are also effective to develop interest and they are motivated to advanced skills-based training and contributing for self-employment."

Key Informant

In the past decade, the government and NGOs have invested a considerable amount in awareness-raising and rights training across the country, including for adolescent girls. The Ministry of Education has also integrated content on trafficking into the social studies curriculum from Grades 6-10.⁸⁹ Key informants to this study believed such

activities should continue to be prioritised:

"Our Ministry should give priority in awareness programmes, and interaction programmes with the communities should be focused."

Key Informant

"They do not have knowledge and education [on] how to protect themselves from being trafficked, and they also do not have knowledge on existing provision of law and regulation; these are the factors that are increasing risk of trafficking."

Key Informant

"Our community is looking at overseas employment, human trafficking, gender violence, sexual harassment etc. and if we include these things in our education system, we will be aware and updated on these things."

Key Informant

Given that many at-risk girls and boys are in rural areas and likely not to be in education, it will be important to couple this with wider efforts to target this vulnerable group. Key informants were keen to stress that large-scale approaches to the prevention of human trafficking should be rolled-out in rural areas. A bottom-up approach and strategies to identify and address the root causes of human trafficking were also raised as important:

"Regarding the NGOs, they should not limit their activities at the centre, but they should go down to the grass roots level and find out the real problem and the root cause."

Key Informant

“While developing plans, we should not be confined to Kathmandu; rather, should go to the working district, consult with the women and adolescents or other persons and discuss with them, [to understand] what type of programme will support them... Taking their views, proposals should be developed but just [the] opposite [is happening] in practice; the proposals are developed in Kathmandu, while implemented in the rural areas. Some of the programmes are failing.”

Key Informant

“On top of that, controlling human trafficking, or identifying vulnerability – how many of them are vulnerable, where are they vulnerable – we have no such actual data recorded.”

Key Informant

The National Committee for Controlling Human Trafficking (NCCHT) oversees nationwide anti-trafficking efforts, with support from both district- and local-level committees. The NCCHT trains members of the district-level committees funded by the Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizens (MWCS) to support awareness campaigns, meeting expenses, emergency victim services, and the local committees in line with the government’s 2012-2022 anti-trafficking National Plan of Action. There are 732 local committees in operation, overseeing local efforts and identifying and screening for trafficking within their communities.⁹⁰

Evaluating the effectiveness of counter-trafficking interventions and analysing the mechanisms through which these programmes can protect girls and young women can help increase value for money in NGO and government interventions. Indeed, the need for evidence-based interventions was highlighted by one key informant:

“Now that a new structure (state structure) has been established this might be a golden opportunity... They need evidence-based information like, for example, which places there are problems of trafficking of girls, problems of sexual exploitation etc.”

Key Informant

Protection

In 2017 the Government of Nepal doubled the dedicated budget for assistance to female victims of violence, including trafficking survivors.⁹¹ The MWCS also supports NGO-run shelters for female victims of violence, including trafficking, with funding for staff members, running costs, and legal and psychosocial support for victims.⁹² Furthermore, efforts have been made by Nepalese embassies to expand the provision of legal support in destination countries.⁹³

Overall, however, stakeholders still consider prevention efforts to be more valued by donors than protection.

“Sometimes we must face unexpected events, like natural disasters, which are adding new challenges. Sometimes what happens, most of the donors want to support prevention, because outcomes can be seen there. But the donors are not interested in the protection theme, because the clients are just living and eating, it takes very long time to produce outcomes or outputs; those who expect outcomes in short time, they do not like investing in this theme.”

Key Informant

This finding is in line with recent research on anti-trafficking policies in more than 180 countries,⁹⁴ which indicates that protection of survivors is usually the weakest area of

governmental investments, especially in developing countries.

“We are happy to receive the remittance and a large portion of our national budget is from this remittance, but we do not have any mechanism to trace the labour migrant, where is s/he? What is s/he doing? Or is s/he in any trouble? Nobody is there to look after [him/her].”

Key Informant

Girls and young women often face intense stigma and are ostracised when they return home, leaving them further vulnerable to marginalisation and exploitation.⁹⁵ There remains a significant unmet need for psychosocial support and other services to meet the immediate needs of adolescent girls, despite the opening of 19 emergency shelters and the same number of community service shelters in 2018. There are now still only ten rehabilitation homes, 36 emergency shelters, and 36 community service centres for female victims of gender-based violence, including trafficking, in the whole country.⁹⁶

Services available to men and boys are even more limited and the referral of all victims of trafficking is inadequate and inconsistent.⁹⁷ Furthermore, there is a lack of services targeting adolescent survivors of trafficking, and wider related services are not often child-friendly. The government also lacks an adequate national repatriation policy and system, including an efficient repatriation information management system.

Law enforcement and prosecution

The Government of Nepal has criminalised a number of exploitative practices, both in the recruitment pathway and the employment context. The new constitution drafted in 2015

includes the right to not be exploited and the right to not be trafficked, both of which the government is now accountable to in annual reviews, and it has signed most international protocols and agreements to address unsafe migration and trafficking.

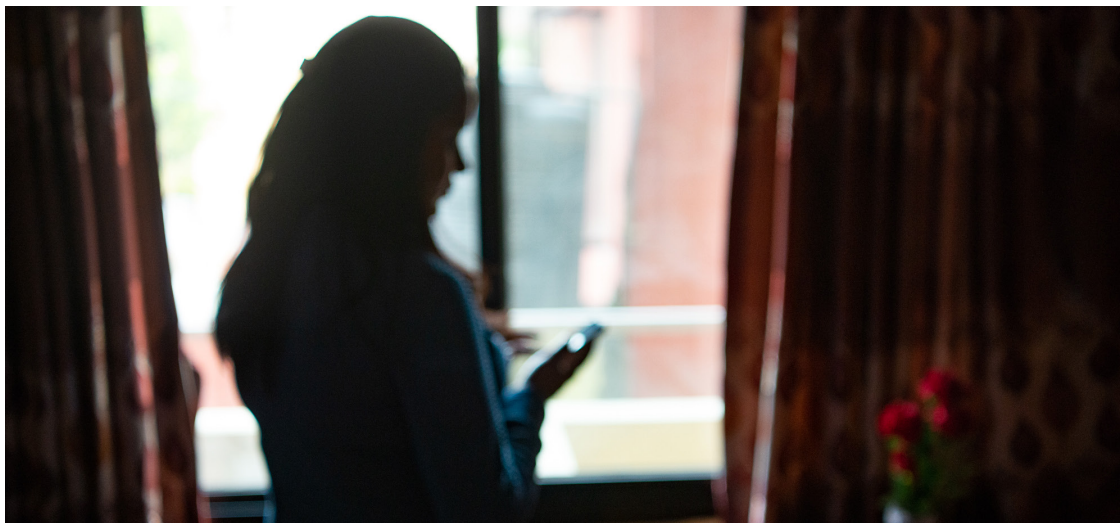
However, Nepal has not yet signed the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, or the ILO Convention 189 – Domestic Workers Convention, 2011⁹⁸ – key pieces of international law that are particularly relevant to the Nepalese context.

The government has also increased anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts to tackle some forms of labour and sex trafficking, criminalised under the 2007 Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act (HTTCA).⁹⁹ The HTTCA, however, does not include forced labour within its definition, a significant gap in the legislation that is not in line with the Palermo Protocol.¹⁰⁰ Inconsistent with international law, the HTTCA also requires a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute a child sex trafficking offence, and therefore does not provide protection against all forms of child sex trafficking.¹⁰¹

Despite this misalignment between domestic legislation and international law, key informants to this research reported that prosecution was a central part of the Nepalese government's plan to combat human trafficking:

“The matter of human trafficking is [an] inexcusable crime. Nepal being [...] one of the signatory countries of [the] international treaty against human trafficking, [it] is trying to bring all those criminal [offences] under the legal frame formulating the concerned laws.”

Key Informant



Abina* was rescued from prostitution and now works to keep other women safe

The Nepal Police Women's Cells (NPWCs) conducted 313 investigations under the HTTCA during the 2018/19 fiscal year, compared with 227 and 212 cases in the previous two.¹⁰² The majority of victims were women and girls, and prosecutions were initiated in 285 of the cases.¹⁰³

Partnerships

Key informants interviewed for this research considered collaboration with international governments and other partners important for sharing good practices, learning, having technical support, transnational surveillance and policing collaboration:

“The problem would not be solved only with the single effort of any country; rather, the whole international community should [be] aware and should work jointly. While talking in our context, records show that most of the events of human trafficking are towards India. So, we cannot move forward, without the support of Indian police, Indian

government, provincial government there or other stakeholders there. I have mentioned it here just for example. This issue is also intercontinental, so we should work collectively. And IOM, UN agencies, and international organisations can play leading role for safer migration.”

Key Informant

The Government of Nepal has signed bilateral agreements with five major destination countries, including Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, the Republic of Korea and Japan.¹⁰⁴ These agreements deal with issues of recruitment procedures, contracts, accommodation and other workers' rights. This international collaboration was seen by some key informants as having the potential to help identification and protection efforts.

“This is not only issue of one state or country: it is the international issue. There must be government to government coordination and [they] should work jointly.”

Key Informant

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Human trafficking often occurs as an outcome of migration, particularly economic migration, when women and girls have limited bargaining power in their migration and work choices.¹⁰⁵

This research has found that most Nepalese trafficked women and adolescent girls had chosen or been influenced to migrate – often as a coping mechanism, livelihood strategy or aspirational endeavour. During their migration, women and girls often end up in exploitative work through deception or coercion.

While the Government of Nepal has made some progress and has made investments in the prevention of human trafficking, the country's enduring poverty and slow economic and human development continue to be important enablers of human trafficking. At a population level, mobility within Nepal has also been associated with development and often perceived as a mechanism to meet the growing aspirations of young people. Consideration is needed to devise a prevention strategy that reconciles adolescent girls' protection with economic development. While efforts are under way to achieve this in Kathmandu, clear gaps remain in rural areas of Nepal.

Understanding why and how some girls migrate and their experiences of trafficking is imperative for setting the agenda for prevention. Very little is known about the mechanisms by which adolescent girls are trafficked, although the drivers of trafficking go beyond individual determinants and are embedded within a complex and connected system of family and community members, recruitment networks and employers. The decisions, actions and interactions between these individuals influence key contextual

drivers of migration. These need to be better understood and used to inform policies and programmes so they can respond to the lived realities of girls and young women.

Furthermore, research shows that on their return home, girls and young women may face stigma associated with migration, as well as restricted opportunities. Young women's migration decisions and reintegration are often affected by gender norms that construe female migration as a threat to family honour and social cohesion.¹⁰⁶ Women and girls often prefer to keep their trafficking experience secret to avoid being stigmatised and blamed by family and community members upon their return. This may lead to those close to them misinterpreting their anxiety and trauma symptoms as aggression and hostility.^{107,108}

While an increase in the levels of support that has been made available to survivors is certainly welcome, it is not enough to meet the needs of survivors across the country. This is particularly the case for adolescents and young women who are less likely to access services that are primarily designed for older females. At a minimum, there is a need for integrated, inclusive adolescent and child-friendly services to be available to survivors of trafficking. Sustainable and long-term programmes are also needed to address the stigma associated with trafficking and support the successful reintegration of survivors.

Please refer to the overall research report, *The trafficking of girls and young women: evidence for prevention and assistance*, for recommendations for improved policy and practice counter-trafficking responses that are applicable to all three countries in the study.

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- 99 The HTTCA criminalised slavery and bonded labour but did not criminalise the recruitment, transportation, harbouring, or receipt of persons by force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of forced labour. It criminalised forced prostitution but, inconsistent with international law, required a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute a child sex trafficking offence, and therefore did not criminalise all forms of child sex trafficking. Prescribed penalties ranged from ten to 20 years imprisonment, which were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape.
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About Plan International UK

Plan International UK is a global children's charity. We work to give every child the same chance in life. Plan International UK is an independent development and humanitarian children's charity, with no religious, political or government affiliation.

About IOM

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental organisation, established in 1951 and, as of September 2016 a United Nations related organisation, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration; advance understanding of migration issues; encourage social and economic development through migration; and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

IOM routinely generates statistics relating to its operational programmes and projects in over 133 countries. These cover a range of different migratory movements including repatriation and resettlement of refugees, and the voluntary returns of such migrant categories as highly qualified persons, victims of trafficking, stranded transit migrants, internally displaced persons, unsuccessful asylum seekers, and soldiers, as part of demobilisation programmes. In addition, data is collected on cases of redressing consequences of forced displacement through the claims and compensation programme.

About the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) has an international presence and collaborative ethos, and is uniquely placed to help shape health policy and translate research findings into tangible impact. LSHTM's collective purpose is to improve health worldwide. LSHTM is focussed on working in partnership to achieve excellence in public and global health research, education and translation of knowledge into policy and practice.

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