

Testimony
of
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On

Out of the Shadows: The Global Fight Against Human Trafficking

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Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you and other members of the Committee for inviting me to testify today. I feel I am here representing not only the two organizations that I'm affiliated with: Rural Health and Education Service Trust (RHEST) and American Himalayan Foundation but my entire Nepalese brothers and sisters working on anti-trafficking issues in Nepal. It is a real honor to be able to participate in today's hearing and share with you some information on Nepal, the human trafficking problem focused on sexual trafficking of young girls and women, and the work of my affiliate organizations.

My organization, RHEST, is a small Non-Governmental Organization based in Kathmandu and we focus on anti-trafficking programs through education and health. Our partner organization, American Himalayan Foundation (AHF), is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization with over twenty five years of experience in helping the people and ecology of the Himalaya. It specializes in supporting and leveraging projects related to basic health care, education, anti-trafficking, economic development and cultural preservation.

Our two organizations have been partnering since 1998 on an innovative anti-trafficking program called STOP Girl Trafficking. This Program addresses the pervasive problem of trafficking of young girls in Nepal by combating trafficking at its source – preventing girls from becoming victims. The program currently supports 7500 girls and since its inception, not a single girl has been lost to trafficking. The program has become a model, whose success is rooted in community involvement and empowerment of poor at-risk and vulnerable girls through the simple mechanism of identifying the girls and keeping them in school.

Country Background

Until Nepal became a republic in May 2008, it was ruled by monarchs, for most of its modern history, in relative isolation. A brief experiment with multi-party politics in 1959 ended with King Mahendra suspending parliament and taking sole charge in 1962. Democratic politics were introduced in 1991 after popular protests, but were marked by frequent changes of government. The last king of Nepal, Gyanendra, assumed executive powers in 2002 and 2005. Maoist rebels waged a decade-long campaign against the monarchy, leaving more than 12,000 people dead and over 100,000 displaced according to UN figures. When King Gyanendra's direct rule ended under public pressure in April 2006, the rebels entered talks with the parliamentary government on how to end the civil war. A peace deal was signed in November, although the Maoists continued to press for abolition of the monarchy. Parliament agreed to the condition in December 2007, and the Maoists emerged as the largest parliamentary party after the historic election in April 2008. The monarchy was abolished a month later, and a Maoist-dominated government took office in August. The Maoist-led coalition government disintegrated in May 2009, and was succeeded by another coalition excluding the Maoists. Nepal continues to be riven by political factions and feudal enmities. Today a fragile government is operating without a written constitution and there is no clear resolution in sight.

Nepal is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world and its economy is heavily dependent on India. The UN estimates close to 30% of Nepalis live in poverty. Illiteracy rates are nearly twice as high in rural areas as urban ones, and the literacy rate for women is only 35%. The overwhelming poverty leads many families to consider education somewhat of a luxury, and

to prefer their children to perform wage labor and supplement the family income. According to *World Vision International Nepal*, three out of five girls do not enroll in secondary school. Drop out rates are high and completion rates are low in rural regions and only 46% of public secondary school students pass their School Leaving Exam (SLC) after grade 10. The combination of poverty and illiteracy makes girls not in school at much higher risk of being trafficked.

Trafficking Overview

The US State Department's Annual TIP (Trafficking in Persons) Report has identified Nepal as a source country for girls and women trafficked to India and other countries for commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor. The period of Maoist insurgency exacerbated the situation and resulted in an increase in trafficking as many rural women and children were forced to flee to the safety of urban havens. Another serious and growing problem is that of child sex tourism and Nepal is cited as a hotspot.

Cheli beti bech bekhan (literally, "girls/women being bought and sold") is the Nepalese Expression for girl trafficking. According to U.S. Department of State's 2009 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, 22,500 Nepalese women, girls and children are trafficked annually for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Girls in the age group 12-18 years are at most risk, and girls from marginalized groups such as the *Dalits* are most vulnerable. Nepal is categorized as a Tier 2 country in the 2009 TIP Report meaning that the Nepalese government does not fully comply with the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act's (TVPRA) minimum standards for combating trafficking, but is making significant efforts to comply with the minimal standards for the elimination of trafficking. The government of Nepal has comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation, but a weak judicial and regulatory system and inadequate resources leads to weak enforcement. For example, the Ministry of Women, Children, and Social Welfare, the government agency primarily responsible for dealing with trafficking, has formed anti-trafficking task forces at both the national and district levels. But the annual budget for the District Task Force is just \$535.

Trafficking of Nepalese girls and women has been part of Nepalese history for many years. Deep poverty coupled with a cultural bias against women, makes rural Nepal a prime target for sex traffickers who lure young girls into the lucrative slave trade. The Nepali quote, "educating your daughters is like watering a flower in another man's garden" sums up the cultural attitude towards girls. The best a girl can hope for is to be married off very young, and spend her life working in the fields. It makes the girls very vulnerable to traffickers who promise the parents that their daughters will have good jobs, marriage and better lives.

Domestic violence against women is high in Nepal. Even in well-educated families, women are seldom given full freedom to decide about their lives. The patriarchal society discriminates against women and they do the bulk of the domestic work: cleaning, cooking and tending the fields.

The caste system still plays a very prominent role in Nepalese society. Most rural Nepalese villages remain physically divided along caste lines. Similar to segregation in the southern

United States or apartheid in South Africa, the law, until very recently, required that lower caste communities like the *Dalits* (untouchables) and the *Janjatis* (indigenous people), live and work separately from those of other castes. Laws were reformed in 1990, but historical, social and economic factors still result in segregation, especially in rural Nepal. The Dalit and other low-caste communities are ideal hunting grounds for predators looking for uneducated and unaware families with young daughters.

Nepalese girls and women are being trafficked primarily for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation. Most go to India and work mainly in brothels where they become debt bonded and essentially enslaved. Some 7,500 children are also trafficked domestically for the ever-growing Nepali adult industry and sent to work in massage parlors, dance bars and local bars. Nepal's National Centre for AIDS and STD Control estimates more than 32,000 women work in the sex industry in Nepal, with girls under 18 comprising around half of all women involved.

Government Response

The Nepalese government has adopted various measures to combat trafficking of women and girls. Measures include:

- Formation of special Women Police Cell in Kathmandu and other cities to deal specifically with crime against women and children.
- Establishment of the Office of the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Women and Children (ONRT) at the National Human Rights Commission in 2002. One of the objectives of this Office is to coordinate national, regional and international efforts to combat trafficking in Nepal.
- Establishment of special Anti-Trafficking Task Forces in collaboration with Non-Governmental and community-based organizations and at both the national and district levels.
- Enhanced collaboration with International Non-Governmental Organizations and UN agencies on trafficking issues.
- Joining the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution. The convention was signed in Kathmandu in 2002.
- Strengthening laws and policies to combat trafficking issues and imposing harsher punishment for agents involved in trafficking.
- Initiating special shelter program for victims of trafficking and sexual abuse.

STOP Girl Trafficking (SGT)

The UN Palermo Protocol gave us the “3P” paradigm: prevention, protection of victims and prosecution of traffickers. Within protection are the 4Rs: rescue, repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration. When RHEST and the American Himalayan Foundation came together in 1995, we realized early on that there were enough organizations involved in the important work of rescuing, repatriating, rehabilitating and reintegrating trafficked women. There were organizations doing wonderful and needed work, but they were all tackling the consequences of trafficking. We saw a bigger lever for change by addressing the cause: combating trafficking at its source - preventing girls from becoming victims. Hence, we launched our STOP Girl Trafficking (SGT) initiative in 1998 to prevent trafficking by identifying and helping keep at-risk girls in schools.

SGT prevents at-risk girls from being trafficked and empowers them to have a better future through education. For only \$100 per year, the program is able to keep a girl in school and prevent her from being yet another sex trafficking statistic. SGT has pioneered education as the most successful way of preventing girls from being sold and to date has put over 10,000 at-risk girls in school.

A hallmark of the SGT model is the long-term commitment made to each girl. Once an at-risk girl is identified, financial assistance and other activities support her right from entry into the program in the early grades onward until graduation from high school. A key characteristic is its focus on those most at risk: the poorest families, girls in alcoholic and abusive family situations and girls from oppressed communities like the *Dalits*. The program package of \$100 per girl covers: school fees, books, uniforms, school kit, mentoring, tutoring and classes in awareness of the tactics of traffickers.

Another distinguishing aspect of the SGT model is that it empowers the community to participate in the operation of the program. School Management Committees in the 400 schools that SGT girls attend actively participate in identifying at-risk girls. Committee members work closely with program staff and their input is also sought in designing of programs and activities to create more awareness on trafficking issues in the school, family and community.

Key Accomplishments

Key accomplishments include:

- From 54 girls the first year, SGT’s footprint now covers 18 districts and 400 government schools in some of the poorest and most vulnerable areas of Nepal. 10,000 girls at risk of being trafficked are safe; 7,500 are in school and 2,700 have graduated.
- The graduation rate of these girls is 82%: double the national average of those who pass School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exams conducted by Nepal’s Ministry of Education for grade 10 students. Nepalese call this exam the “iron barrier” as students who fail cannot proceed further in their study.

- The program's drop-out rate is less than 1%.
- Since its inception, the program has not lost a single girl to trafficking.
- The program has a solid network of coordinators and field workers who maintain close relationships with the students, parents and teachers through regular visits and meetings that counsel students on the value of education and raise their awareness about trafficking.
- New and promising data on secondary effects are beginning to emerge. Villages are now approaching the program for inclusion as the value of education for girls is better understood. Educating only the most at-risk girls in a village appears to protect all the girls in that village, and sometimes even villages near it. And in a few villages where we have been operating longest, parents are beginning to enroll at-risk girls into schools on their own and without the program's support.
- Lastly, many organizations intervene and leave within a few years, but SGT has stayed with the girls and their families. This is recognized and appreciated by all and has contributed materially to the program's success.

Profile of SGT Girls

STOP Girl Trafficking works with poor and marginalized girls who are at risk of being trafficked. Here are profiles of three SGT girls:

Laxmi Adhikari: Laxmi's father passed away and her mother remarried and abandoned her when she was ten. She was forced to drop out of school and a woman promised her a private education and moved her from her village of Miya Patar, near Pokhara in mid-west Nepal, to Kathmandu. The promise of a better life soon turned into a nightmare as Laxmi had to endure four hellish years of work with no pay and physical and psychological abuse from the woman and her teenage son. In 2008, Laxmi was finally able to persuade the woman to take her back to her village to the family where she was working as a domestic servant prior to her slavery in Kathmandu. The host family in her village accepted Laxmi back even though they and the community in Miya Patar at large are mostly Muslims and Laxmi is a Hindu. The community approached Dr. Uprety and SGT for help. Laxmi is now in 4th grade at the local Muslim school. At 16 years of age, she is twice as old as most of the children in her class, but Laxmi is determined to stay in school. "RHEST and SGT are my family now. I trust them. I know they will look after me," says Laxmi.

Nirasa Pariyar: When SGT staff went on their visits to distribute school materials to Shree Maidan Secondary School in the Syangja district of Nepal, they came across a nervous looking little girl in tattered clothes. The girl's name was "Nirasa" which means sadness in Nepalese. Nirasa has two older sisters. The staff asked the mother why she gave such a name to her daughter. The mother, who craved a son, replied "I was sad when I gave birth to yet another daughter. So, I named her Nirasa." However, Nirasa's attitude towards her studies and life in general belies her name and she has blossomed during her years in the program.

Sarita B.K: Sarita is a 10th grade student at the Shree Bindabasini Higher Secondary School in Kaski. Sarita has been in the SGT program since 4th grade. Her father died when she was very young and it was hard for her mother to take care of a family of five daughters. Sarita's mother married off two of her sisters before they could finish their schooling. She feels that if the program had not supported her education then she would have been exploited. Sarita wants to be a nurse and serve her community.

Testimonies

Here are three testimonies that we'd like to share from girls who have graduated from the SGT program:

"I am from an indigenous community and live in Sindhupalchowk, Bhotechaur. SGT supported me from grade 9-12. I also completed my 29 months ANM course from Jiri Technical Institute. I am now working at the Shankarapur Polyclinic. There are lots of cases of trafficking in the Sindhupalchowk area. The girls and women are trapped by traffickers and are sold into sexual slavery. SGT not only started a scholarship program in Sindhupalchowk for the girls but it also launched a program to raise awareness about trafficking and the negative impact of early marriages amongst the student community. I would like to thank the SGT Program for their support and help." - Aaiti Maya Tamang

"I live in Barsing, Shyangja District. I got scholarship from SGT when I was in the third grade and the program supported me through grade twelve. Now I have completed my bachelors and am teaching at the government school where I studied. This credit goes to SGT. I am from the dalit (untouchable) community and in our community girls are not sent to schools but SGT helped me get an education. I would like to thank the program for supporting girl's education. I request the program to continue supporting girls from marginalized communities like mine and bring happiness in their lives." - Khem Kumari B.K

"I am Januka Shrestha from Sindhupalchow where trafficking of girls is one of the challenges in our community. Most of the girls do not go to schools and hence are very innocent and very easily trapped by trafficking agents. But I got the opportunity to go to school and graduate. I passed my school exams with distinction from Shree Kakaling Harisiddhi in the year 2010. SGT support has motivated me to do something for my community. I would like to study nursing and serve my community. I am very happy to get to this level." - Januka Shrestha:

Challenges

The prevention approach to combating trafficking by keeping at-risk girls at schools takes time and will continue to require patient investment. The gains of a prevention approach may diminish over time if such interventions are not accompanied by measures to overcome poverty, address discrimination and marginalization, and programs that offer employment and job skills development for vulnerable groups.

Another challenge is the difficulty of monitoring and evaluating current trafficking interventions.

The fact that sexual trafficking of girls is such a taboo subject in countries like Nepal represents another significant impediment to a successful intervention. Most families and community members are reticent to discuss the topic or acknowledge that trafficking is a problem in their community. This makes data collection and implementing various aspects of an intervention program difficult. We and others in the field need to develop appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Finally, the relative political instability of Nepal with frequent strikes and the wide geographic spread of our program where some towns are not fully accessible by road, make operation of our program difficult from a logistical standpoint.

Prevention Works

RHEST and The American Himalayan Foundation have chosen to focus on a specific aspect of human trafficking, namely, trafficking of young Nepalese girls and women into sexual or domestic slavery. Furthermore, within the broad menu of preventative programs – providing education for high-risk groups; awareness raising and social mobilization, improvement of livelihood opportunities through income generation and vocational training; and interception of potential trafficking victims – we have to date focused largely on providing education opportunities for at-risk girls through scholarships and have combined this with a trafficking awareness program. We are considering expanding the program in the future by adding a microcredit and technical skills program for current and former girls of our SGT Program.

Mr. Chairman, notwithstanding the challenges I've described, a preventative approach to tackling trafficking of girls into sexual and domestic slavery works. Although rescuing girls is important, experience has shown that relatively few are able to return to normal lives in their villages. The spectre of HIV/AIDS follows the rescued girls. Even the few who are not HIV positive are shunned because they are viewed as “soiled” and “unclean.” They also arouse suspicion as many become traffickers themselves. More germane, rescue is not effective as a method of preventing trafficking. Intervening at a point of high leverage – before the girls are trafficked – has the highest impact and is most efficient and effective because it stops trafficking from happening in the first place.

I would urge the U.S. Government to increase support for trafficking prevention programs in Nepal and elsewhere. In this regard, it would be good if the following best practices were encouraged:

- Supplement media and information campaigns aimed at prevention with economic development and educational initiatives targeted at those most at risk.
- Empower local nonprofits and community-based organizations working on preventing trafficking, and help build up their capacity and know-how.
- Improve the perceived value of girls in rural, poor communities in developing countries such as Nepal.

- Offer practical skills training for people working in the field. Trafficking is still a taboo subject in countries like Nepal. How can those working in the field create opportunities in communities to talk about the issue with those who are most vulnerable?
- Encourage rescued girls and women to become the public face and voice of preventative campaigns. Elevate them to leadership positions as their stories and experiences will resonate strongest with those most at risk.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for allowing me this opportunity to speak. I would be happy to answer any questions you or members of the Committee may have.