

S U M M A R Y O F F I N D I N G S

# A Study of Trafficked Nepalese Girls and Women in Mumbai and Kolkata, India



An abbreviated version of  
*Slavery, Debt Bondage and Sex Work:  
A Study of Trafficked Nepalese Girls  
and Women in Mumbai and Kolkata, India*



Terre des hommes

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# Preface

**A**lthough the phenomenon of human trafficking has for more than ten years attracted considerable interest among non-governmental organizations and donors, programming has often been developed without a proper understanding of the mechanisms employed by traffickers, and the economics behind the brothel business. Much of the anti-trafficking programming in Nepal has been founded on assumptions, myths and moral values, and has been fuelled largely by good intentions rather than by strategic thinking. Media in Nepal and around the world have tended to focus on the sensational and insidious aspects of human trafficking, and avoided the ambiguities that development agencies must confront, such as the involvement of relatives of victims in the trafficking process. The impact of 'rescue' programmes has been disappointing with respect to the modest number of Nepalese girls and young women who have been returned to their communities and reintegrated with their families. Furthermore, border interception programmes have often interfered with the right of adult Nepalese women to travel independently, and to make their own decisions.

This study of trafficked Nepalese girls and young women in Mumbai and Kolkata is therefore long overdue. John Frederick, an authority on trafficking in Asia, told me about the need for such a study when we first met almost three years ago. John made clear that significant knowledge gaps about how brothel owners operate, and how Nepalese girls and young women end up in their hands, was impeding the efforts of government, border and law enforcement officials, and non-governmental organizations to prevent the trafficking of women and children from Nepal. He underlined the need to know more about what goes on inside brothels in India, how traffickers and brothel owners conduct their business, and about the community of Nepalese sex workers who choose to remain in India. For example, what keeps former sex workers from returning to Nepal despite the best efforts of non-governmental organizations?

The result is a study that is both revealing and disturbing, and that will inevitably cause donors to rethink tried and true anti-trafficking methods. One finding is that after finally winning their freedom from brothel owners, virtually all of the women eventually returned to sex work. Of these, approximately one-third had permanently severed relations with their families. 'They are dead for me, and I am dead for them,' stated one Nepalese sex worker. Women who did make the journey back to their home communities in Nepal encountered such virulent opposition from neighbours and relatives that it was impossible for them to stay. They told the researchers of being forbidden to enter their family's house or to share food with family members.



Carrying out the study in a way that balanced the need for information with the right to confidentiality of the respondents, and the need to ensure the security of the researchers, presented unique challenges for our research partner, the Centre for Research on Environment, Health and Population Activities (CREHPA). It required the support and close cooperation of associates in India who shared our goal of protecting women and children from abuse and exploitation—and whose experience in the brothel communities of Mumbai and Kolkata had won them the trust and respect of sex workers. We are profoundly grateful for their support and guidance along the way.

This study is part of Terre des hommes Foundation's global campaign to prevent child trafficking, and to provide rehabilitation and reintegration to children affected by trafficking. It is our hope that the findings and the recommendations will lead to new approaches to helping some of the world's most vulnerable girls and boys, and that other countries can learn from Nepal's experience in addressing a complex problem that defies easy solutions.



**Reinhard Fichtl**

Delegate

Terre des hommes Nepal

# Introduction

This is a study of Nepalese girls and women after they have been sold for prostitution into brothels in Mumbai and Kolkata, India—a study of their first days, their years of confinement and their years in sex work after their release. The study investigates the economic forces that drive trafficking from Nepal: the demand of the client, and more important, the demand of the brothel owner. This is not a study of the trafficking process *per se*—that is, the abduction or purchase of Nepalese girls in Nepal by traffickers and the transportation and sale of girls to the brothels of Mumbai and Kolkata—it is a study of the economic and social system that engenders the trafficking process.

The study uses two strong, globally important and imprecise terms to designate the two alternative situations in which trafficked Nepalese girls and women spend their first two to ten years in the brothel: *slavery* and *debt bondage*. Girls or women who are placed against their will in a situation of forced labour, unremunerated and confined under penalty of severe punishment, are in *slavery*, according to the *Slavery Convention of 1926*. Girls or women who, or whose families, incur a debt directly to the brothel owner and are placed in a similar situation in order to repay the debt are in *debt bondage*, according to the *Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, 1956*, and the *Government of India Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 (amended 1985)*. The overwhelming majority of Nepalese girls who enter brothel-based prostitution in Mumbai and Kolkata enter as trafficked persons, and enter into situations of either slavery or debt bondage.

This is also a study of the living conditions of the greater population of Nepalese sex workers in Mumbai and Kolkata: those who have been given their freedom and, unable or unwilling to return to Nepal, continue their lives as sex workers in India; and a study of Nepalese brothel society—independent, resilient and professional—imbedded in the Indian urban environment.

The purpose of this study is to identify ways to prevent the trafficking of girls and women from Nepal. The study leads to recommendations—not included in this summary—to address the demand for trafficked persons at the root: at the level of the brothel owner. Trafficking is a business, and two tiers of profit generate the demand for trafficked Nepalese girls: the profits made by the trafficker, and considerably larger, the profits made by the brothel owner. The profits made by the brothel owner through the use of enslaved or bonded labourers, whether child or adult, are immense, and

range from four to 20 times the profits made by the trafficker. Thus, it is argued that the demand of the brothel owner, not the demand of the trafficker, accounts for the trafficking of Nepalese women and girls to India, and that prevention of trafficking must be predicated upon ending the system of slavery and debt bondage in the brothels.

Clients in both Mumbai and Kolkata have a demand for Nepalese, and for girls and women 15 to 20 years of age. However, this is secondary to the demand of the brothel owner. Clients showed no demand for enslaved or bonded labourers, and their demand for young persons is primarily filled by free agent sex workers 18 years or older. The vast majority of clients in Mumbai and Kolkata are not serviced by persons in slavery or debt bondage.

The use of enslaved and bonded labourers is on the wane in the brothel areas studied. In Mumbai, the majority of middle-class clients—the primary clients for trafficked persons—have shifted to the use of free agent sex workers in bars and hotels. In Kolkata, middle-class clients are increasingly serviced by free agent ‘flying’ sex workers, those who commute from their homes to conduct sex work in the metropolitan area. In both cities, the remaining clients—working-class men—seek services in inexpensive free agent brothels or from the rapidly expanding number of Bangladeshi street sex workers.

Two ‘models’ of trafficking prevention on the demand side were investigated in this study: in Mumbai, police raids on the brothels to rescue minors; and in Kolkata, ‘self-regulation’ of the use of minors and trafficked persons by members of the brothel community. In the primary brothel areas of Mumbai, police raids have reduced the use of girls below 16-17 years, while having a pronounced negative impact on the well-being of free agent brothel sex workers and their children, and on existing HIV/AIDS prevention activities. In the primary brothel areas of Kolkata, self-regulation conducted by the sex workers’ organization, the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, has reduced the use of girls below 16-17 years, while significantly improving the well-being of free agent brothel sex workers and their children. However, the use of enslaved or debt bonded Nepalese prostitutes in both cities is still evident.

Despite the effectiveness of these two strategies of trafficking prevention from the demand side, there is no evidence that trafficking of Nepalese for enslaved or bonded labour in prostitution has diminished in India as a whole. Brothels in Mumbai and Kolkata who use trafficked Nepalese have either ‘gone underground’ or have shifted to other cities, and thus the demand for trafficked persons remains. While this study can provide recommendations that could assist in preventing trafficking to the primary brothel areas of Mumbai and Kolkata, research on prostitution and sex work in other cities of India is necessary to provide recommendations for interventions that would significantly reduce the overall trafficking of persons from Nepal to India.

# Terminology

## slavery, debt bondage, *tsukri*

The terms *slavery* and *debt bondage*, while having important significance in advocacy, legislation, law enforcement and prosecution, carry an unfortunate burden of imprecision as well as a long history of emotional and sensationalistic usage. For this reason, the term *slave* is used sparingly in this text. As well, it is recognized that the term *slavery*, as defined in international instruments, has limitations, including the omission of psychological and social coercion that may keep a person in a slavery-like situation.

With some linguistic license, the personal noun used in this text for a person in either slavery or debt bondage is the Bengali word *tsukri*, a traditional term for a child in slavery or debt bondage, and the common word in Kolkata used for trafficked persons in prostitution. Common parlance in Mumbai has no correlative personal noun, and such persons are referred to as being 'in debt' (Hindi: *karja* or *pura*).

## prostitution, sex work

Similarly, the terms *prostitution* and *sex work* have been rendered threadbare by political argument. Their use in this text is not intended to stimulate more of the ideological confrontation that has been so deleterious to the war against the mutual enemies: traffickers and those brothel owners who use enslaved and bonded labourers.

Although the terms sometimes overlap in the authors' attempt to preserve the clarity and simplicity of the language, this text uses the term *sex worker* for adults engaged in prostitution with full knowledge and consent, and the term *prostitute* for persons under the age of 18, and for adults who are engaged in prostitution in a situation of slavery or debt bondage. At the same time, it is not intended that the term *prostitution*, in its more general use in public and media discourse, should be invariably equated with the terms trafficking or coercion. Its use in this text is not intended to displace the valid term *voluntary prostitution*.

The term *sex worker* is used in recognition of those adults who assert their rights to engage in prostitution as an occupation, with all the rights of other working persons, with protection by law and obligation to law, and with the same freedom from stigma and discrimination as other professions. At the same time, the term *sex worker* is not used to excuse or obscure the venality or oppression of much of the sex industry in India.

## child, girl, woman

The terms *child* or *girl* are used for all females under the age of 18. Two age levels of ‘child prostitutes’ were distinguished in the study: pre-pubescent or recently pubescent girls (below c. 13-14 years) and girls aged c. 15 to 18. Although international law designates persons under the age of 18 as ‘children,’ for most informants the term *child* meant a pre-pubescent or recently pubescent female and the term *woman* meant any fully pubescent female. Thus, investigation of ‘child prostitution’ necessitated asking separate questions regarding pre-pubescent children and post-pubescent children.

## child vs. *tsukri*

In the understanding of most respondents, the terms *child* and *tsukri* (or a person in *karja*, debt) were almost synonymous. Almost all Nepalese children in prostitution in Mumbai and Kolkata were enslaved or bonded labourers, and many—though not all—of the *tsukris* were children, that is, under 18 years. Most informants assumed that all child prostitutes were *tsukris* and vice versa. Often, field researchers had to provide clarification to informants in their questions about *tsukris* who were legally adults.

## girl vs. *tsukri*

Similarly, the terms *girl* and *tsukri* were almost synonymous. In common parlance, the term *girl* generally meant a female below the age of 20. Most *tsukris* remain in slavery or debt bondage until the age of 18 to 22 years.

## Key Terms in Hindi and Bengali

For clarity and simplicity of language, certain Bengali or Hindi words are routinely used where English vocabulary is lacking. For the same reason, at times Hindi terms common in Mumbai are used for correlative Bengali words common in Kolkata, and vice versa.

*adhiya*. The Hindi term *adhiya* (English: one-half) refers to a system in which free agent sex workers pay one-half of the clients’ fees to the brothel owner for use of the brothel facility. With linguistic license, in this text *adhiya* is also used as a personal noun for those working under the *adhiya* system.

*tenancy* (English). A system in which free agent sex workers occupy brothels by paying the brothel owner fixed daily or monthly fees for room rent, utilities and payments to the police.

*gharwali*. A Hindi word used in Mumbai generally for the brothel owner, sometimes for the manager of a brothel. Its correlative in Bengali is *malkin*. In this text *gharwali* is used for both Mumbai and Kolkata, and for both brothel owner and brothel manager. Where the latter are to be distinguished, English is used.

*bungalow* (Gujarati: *bangalo*). A word used in Mumbai for a brothel that services middle-class clients primarily through *tsukri* prostitutes and *adhiya* sex workers. The term is also used for similar establishments in Kolkata.

*pinjara*. A Hindi word in common use in Mumbai for a working-class brothel in which sex work is conducted by free agent sex workers. The term is also used for similar establishments in Kolkata.

## Other Terms Used Frequently in the Text

*aai* (Hindi). A cleaning woman or servant in the brothel, usually an older former prostitute.

*babu* (Bengali). A long-term companion of a sex worker.

*bhaiya* (Hindi). A term used in Kolkata for local boys in the community, usually from Bihar or Uttar Pradesh, who frequently support and defend sex workers.

*dada* (Hindi, Nepali). A local 'strong man,' sometimes a gang leader, in the brothel area.

*dalal* (Hindi, Nepali). Trafficker, criminal.

*Durbar*. Abbreviation for the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, the organization of sex workers in Kolkata.

*fixed* client (English term in local use). A client who repeatedly returns to the same sex worker.

*flying* sex worker (English term in local use). Sex workers who commute to and from their homes to conduct sex work in rented rooms and brothels.

*free agent* (English term used by the authors). An adult sex worker conducting sex work by her own agency, with control over her earnings, her working situation and her venue of business.

*hapta* (Hindi). Weekly or monthly payment from sex workers or brothel owners to the police to prevent them from raiding the establishment.

*karja* (Hindi). Debt.

*pura* (Bengali). Debt.

## Key Findings

- Almost all Nepalese who conducted brothel-based prostitution in the study areas had been trafficked under the age of 18 and had entered into a situation of either slavery or debt bondage (according to international definitions).
- The majority of Nepalese are trafficked by Nepalese and sold to Nepalese brothel owners.
- Nepalese girls enter slavery or debt bondage at an average age of 14 to 16 years. They are totally confined within the brothel for an average of two years, after which they are allowed to leave the brothel only with guardians. They end their period of bondage at 18 to 22 years of age.
- The length of time spent in slavery or debt bondage ranges from two to ten years, averaging three to five years.
- The profit to the brothel owner during this period of time ranges from four to 20 times that of the purchase price of the trafficked person.
- Demand on the destination side is two tiered:
  - Very high profits from the use of enslaved or bonded labourers create brothel owner demand for trafficked persons, both adults and children.
  - Client demand for girls who are young (15 to 20), and their demand for 'new girls,' fuel brothel owner demand for girls under 18 and for new labourers.
- There is very low client demand for, and noted client resistance to, the use of pre-pubescent girls for prostitution.
- There is no direct client demand for persons in slavery or debt bondage situations. However, there is little awareness of and no resistance to the use of those persons.
- According to the respondents, very few Nepalese voluntarily return to Nepal after freedom from slavery or debt bondage, primarily due to stigma and discrimination from the family and community in Nepal, and to lack of income-generation options.

# The Study

## Background

**T**his study is supported by Terre des hommes Foundation, as part of its world-wide campaign to prevent child trafficking and to provide rehabilitation and reintegration to children affected by trafficking.

Underlying this study is the assumption that the use of trafficked and coerced persons, the use of children, and the use of enslaved or bonded labour for prostitution is an abuse of human rights and should be ended. This study takes no stand on the legalization, decriminalization or abolition of prostitution. However, it recognizes that those who are engaged in prostitution have the right to an environment that ensures their physical, psychological and social well-being, and the right of choice, agency and life options with which to better their living situation.

For more than 40 years, thousands of Nepalese girls and women have been forcibly trafficked and have voluntarily migrated to Mumbai and Kolkata to conduct sex work. While the numbers of Nepalese females conducting sex work in these two urban areas are only 'guess-timates,' it is evident that the number of girls and women forcibly trafficked to India has dramatically increased in the last decade. Although considerable funding has been provided to Nepal to prevent trafficking and to rehabilitate/reintegrate trafficked persons, very little comprehensive research has been conducted on their living and working situation.

Although essential to the development of policies and the design of interventions, adequate research is conspicuously lacking in:

- at-risk indicators (vulnerability factors) for the trafficking of Nepalese girls and women;
- strategies and methods used by traffickers of Nepalese from Nepal to India; and
- the situation of Nepalese girls and women in the primary 'destination' environment (i.e., India), and the 'demand' for Nepalese sex workers in India.

This study addresses the third research need: the situation of Nepalese girls and women in the destination environment, and the demand for Nepalese sex workers in India.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to provide information that will assist Terre des hommes Foundation, governments and other national and international organizations to design and implement activities that will:



- prevent the use of children, trafficked and coerced persons, and enslaved or bonded labourers in prostitution
- withdraw from prostitution all children, enslaved labourers, bonded labourers, and those with an expressed intention to leave prostitution, with all respect for the rights of those adults who choose to conduct prostitution
- facilitate the social reintegration of children, enslaved labourers, bonded labourers, and those who wish to leave prostitution

## Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to investigate in selected brothel-based prostitution venues in Mumbai and Kolkata:

- the economics and the demand forces underlying the trafficking, enslavement and debt bondage of Nepalese children and women for prostitution
- the social, physical and economic situation of Nepalese girls and women held as enslaved or bonded labourers
- the social, physical and economic situation of Nepalese women working as free agent sex workers
- the demand, attitudes and practices of clients regarding Nepalese sex workers
- the demand, attitudes and practices of brothel owners and brothel managers regarding Nepalese sex workers
- the structure of and the recent changes in brothel-based prostitution vis-à-vis other forms of sex work
- the attitudes, perceptions and intentions of Nepalese sex workers regarding social integration as non-sex workers in India and Nepal

## Areas Not Addressed by the Study

Due to the research design, limitations of time and budget, and considerations of protection for informants and field researchers, it was necessary to set clear parameters for the scope of data collected. Although data were collected indirectly, the following topics were intentionally not addressed by the study.

**Trafficking.** The study did not investigate the mechanisms or economics of trafficking *per se*, that is, the purchase or abduction of persons at source, or their transportation to point of sale to the brothel owner. The study focused on the 'outcome' of trafficking, that is, the purchase and use of enslaved persons or bonded labourers in the sex industry.

**Quantitative data.** This is a qualitative study, and no attempt was made to assess numbers or sources of persons trafficked, numbers of persons in slavery or debt bondage, numbers of persons in prostitution, or to collect other quantitative data.

**Non-brothel-based prostitution.** The study did not investigate prostitution in which sex workers contacted clients at bars, restaurants, hotels or on the street, and did not investigate prostitution conducted by flying sex workers, that is, those who commute from their homes to sex access points, including brothel areas, to contact clients.

**HIV/AIDS, STIs and health-related behaviours.** Investigation of the health of sex workers, including the impact of HIV/AIDS, was not an objective of the study, as this has been, will be, or should be covered by other research. However, data were collected, and are included in the findings.

**Children of sex workers.** Investigation of the children of sex workers was not an objective of the study, as this has been, will be, or should be covered by other research.

**Criminal networks.** Research design, time limitations and the protection of informants and field researchers did not permit the study of criminal networks, political/business linkages, payoffs, extortion or other illegal activities associated with the purchase and use of enslaved persons or bonded labourers in the sex industry. However, some data were collected, and are included in the findings.

**Situation of Indian and Bangladeshi sex workers.** The study focused only on Nepalese in the sex industry of the target areas.

**Males and transgendered persons in prostitution.** The study focused only on females in the sex industry in the target areas.

**Police activities.** For the protection of informants and field researchers and in consideration for organizations working in the brothel areas, direct questions regarding police activities were not asked. However, considerable information was voluntarily provided by the informants, and is included in the findings.

**Psychological impact and resiliency.** In preparation for the study, the research team worked with psychologists from the Centre for Victims of Torture, Kathmandu, Nepal to develop instruments to identify symptoms of trauma and to assess the resiliency of sex workers. The field researchers were trained in these instruments. However, due to constraints in the field researchers' ability to spend sufficiently long periods of time with the informants and within the brothels (as discussed in Limitations of the Study below), these instruments could not be used effectively. Viable data on the psychological impact of prostitution and the resiliency of sex workers could not be collected.

**NGO and government activities.** Although activities by local organizations and government were investigated as a foundation for the field research, evaluation of the objectives, strategies, interventions and impact of NGOs and government was not conducted.

## Research Design

### Summary

The study was conducted in Mumbai with 84 days of fieldwork, between 7 June and 19 September 2004, and in Kolkata with 52 days of fieldwork, between 24 November 2004 and 14 January 2005.

This was a qualitative study. In-depth interviews, ranging from one to three hours in length, were conducted in one to three sessions using memorized instruments. Interviews with sex workers and brothel owners/managers were preceded by weeks of ice-breaking interaction.

In-depth interviews with Nepalese sex workers and brothel owners/managers were conducted by female Nepalese field researchers from CREHPA. In-depth interviews with clients and local key informants were conducted by male Indian field researchers from Mumbai and Kolkata. Both male and female researchers conducted interviews with organizational informants, and field observations of brothel communities ('community observations') and individual brothels ('brothel observations').

### Study Area

City: Mumbai and urban environs

Area: Selected locations with high concentrations of Nepalese sex workers: Kamathipura, Khetwadi/Falkland Road, Ghatkopar

City: Kolkata and urban environs

Area: Selected locations with high concentrations of Nepalese sex workers: Sonagachi, Kalighat, Khidderpore

### Study Population

The study population included Nepalese females 18 years or older who had previously been trafficked to brothels in Mumbai and Kolkata and were presently conducting sex work, clients, brothel owners/managers, local key informants and informants from organizations that work directly with sex workers.

Local key informants were those living and working in the immediate brothel communities and included, among others: restaurant owners and workers, doctors, pimps, taxi drivers, and local shopkeepers.

Organizational informants included programme managers, researchers, outreach health workers, peer animators and others who had direct knowledge of and street experience in the local Nepalese sex worker communities.

### Sample

Nepalese sex workers: 27 in Mumbai, 23 in Kolkata

Clients: 22 in Mumbai, 29 in Kolkata

Brothel owners/managers: 10 in Mumbai, 0 in Kolkata

Local key informants: 12 in Mumbai, 11 in Kolkata

Organizational informants: 9 in Mumbai, 8 in Kolkata

Brothel observations: 6 in Mumbai, 15 in Kolkata

Community observations (for each brothel community): 3 in Mumbai, 3 in Kolkata

## Methodology

### Review of literature

A review of literature regarding South Asian sex work, trafficking, migration, research methodologies and protection concerns was conducted prior to the design of the instruments.

### Site selection

To select target areas, information was collected in Mumbai and Kolkata on:

- the concentrations of Nepalese girls and women in brothel communities, according to geographical location, type of brothel and other criteria
- the concentrations and primary locations of client populations and non-sex worker Nepalese
- organizations, agencies and individuals working directly with sex workers

### Qualitative investigation

The following strategies, among others, were followed:

- field researchers received training to assess protection concerns and data validity, and to prepare and debrief respondents and surrounding persons
- for interviews with sex workers and *gharwalis*, several weeks of non-intrusive 'ice-breaking' and confidence-building activities preceded one month or more of focused in-depth interviews
- field researchers conducted only memorized interviews and did not use tape recorders or written notes

### Brothel observation and community observation

Checklists were developed for the observation of individual brothels and brothel communities during working hours and off hours.

## Protection and Confidentiality

In the sensitive environment in which the research was conducted, for the protection of respondents and field researchers, it was necessary to guarantee the confidentiality of the information collected, and to ensure that the presence of field researchers did not impact the activities of organizations working in those environments. A strategy for protection, confidentiality and minimization of impact was developed. Interviews were preceded by Witnessed Verbal Informed Consent procedures and were conducted according to the *WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women*. Protection activities were based on the *Terre des hommes Child Protection Policy and Code of Conduct* and other documents.

## Limitations of the Research

In general, the primary limitation of the study was time. Ice-breaking and in-depth interviews took more days than planned because of difficulties in accessing sex workers and brothel owners/managers during off-work hours. As sex worker interviews were lengthy (two to three hours), repeat meetings needed to be scheduled. Due to their work obligations, sex workers frequently did not arrive for interviews, and it sometimes took days to complete a single interview. Clients were particularly challenging to access as they were difficult to identify, reluctant to be identified as clients, reluctant to spend time in interviews, and venues for taking interviews were difficult to obtain. Transportation in the large metropolitan areas was unreliable and time-consuming. One week of field research in Mumbai was lost due to floods during the monsoon.

In Mumbai, the brothel areas of Kamathipura and Khetwadi/Falkland Road resembled a 'state of siege' due to daily police raids on the brothels. Informants and community members were suspicious, frightened and reluctant to participate. Many brothels were under tight security and entry was forbidden to anyone except known regular clients. Initially, most of the sex workers were reluctant to provide interviews, as they doubted the researchers' motives for coming to Mumbai.

In Kolkata, the brothel areas were generally peaceful and open, and informants were willing to participate. However, while providing valuable support and assistance to the study, the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee restricted access of the field researchers to brothels and did not allow field researchers to screen and select informants. Brothel venues, and sex worker, client and local key informants were generally pre-selected by the Durbar. Brothel owners and managers could not be interviewed. Field researchers were constantly accompanied and observed by Durbar staff who, while often being very helpful, sometimes caused client and local key informants to withhold information. Because interviews with Nepalese sex workers were conducted in Nepali language, in most cases respondents could provide information freely, without concern for being overheard by Bengali speakers.

# Sex Work and Prostitution in Mumbai and Kolkata

## Prostitution in Mumbai

**M**umbai is India's most populous city and one of the fastest-growing cities in the world. A construction boom starting in the late 1970s fueled massive immigration, and Mumbai and its outlying suburbs have grown from approximately eight million people in 1981 to an estimated 17 million people in 2005. Much of this new population is working men without families: 10% of India's factory labourers are located in Mumbai and its environs; and there are approximately 820-840 females for every 1000 males.

The immense population of single adult men is a magnet for sex workers as well as a market for trafficked persons from all over India and from Bangladesh and Nepal. The forms of sex work vary widely throughout the metropolitan area and are rapidly changing at this time, as are the geographical sources of the sex workers. The number of girls and women in brothel-based prostitution has in recent years been superceded by the number of girls and women in street-based and bar-based prostitution and by flying sex workers, those who commute from their homes to conduct sex work in other parts of the metropolitan area.

Brothel-based sex work, the focus of this study, has a long history in Mumbai. The brothel area of Kamathipura (investigated in this study) was first established in Mumbai in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to service British troops. Until approximately 20 years ago, brothel prostitution was primarily focused in Kamathipura and neighboring Khetwadi/Falkland Road (investigated in this study) in the old peninsular city. As modern Mumbai expanded to occupy the present 'suburbs,' new brothel areas have arisen in industrialized areas such as Nava Mumbai, Sonapur-Bhandup and Ghatkopar (investigated in this study) to service in-migrant factory and workshop labourers. The demand for sex workers in the less industrialized middle- and working-class neighborhoods of the rest of metropolitan Mumbai is met primarily through bar-based, street-based and flying sex workers.

The last decade has seen significant changes in prostitution in Mumbai. The impact of HIV/AIDS has been devastating (the HIV-positive rate of sex workers in central Mumbai is around 60%). Business in the old brothel areas of Kamathipura and Khetwadi/Falkland

Road has diminished due to clients' fear of HIV/AIDS, police raids on the brothels, and the shift of middle-class clients from brothels to beer bars, dance bars and similar public sex access points. Within the brothel areas, the income of brothel-based sex workers has diminished due to loss of clients and competition from a rapidly expanding number of street-based sex workers, primarily Bangladeshis.

“Due to repeated raids by the police, many brothels have closed, existing brothels operate with strict security systems, and a climate of fear prevails.

For a number of reasons, brothel-based sex work is eroding in Mumbai. Until the government of Maharashtra took steps to abolish sex work in bars in the spring of 2005, after the fieldwork for this study was completed, it appeared that the predominantly expanding forms of sex work in the city were

bar-based and street-based sex work. The government ban, while unlikely to reduce prostitution, may stimulate a growth in flying sex work as well as street-based sex work. In the last five to seven years, the sex worker communities of Kamathipura and Khetwadi/Falkland Road have deteriorated significantly. Sex workers have serious problems earning a living, feeding and educating their children and affording health care. Due to repeated raids by the police, many brothels have closed, existing brothels operate with strict security systems, and a climate of fear prevails. HIV/AIDS prevention and other activities for the well-being of sex workers and their children have deteriorated due to the police raids, and an increase in HIV infection is suspected.

In the brothel areas of Mumbai, the dominant populations of brothel-based sex workers are from Karnataka, Nepal, West Bengal and Bangladesh. The remainder are primarily from northern and eastern Indian states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Goa and Harayana. Sex workers of different states and nations occupy various tiers of cost according to client demand. In Mumbai, Gujaratis and West Bengalis comprise the majority of higher-priced sex workers. The Nepalese, West Bengalis and a mix of women from other states occupy the middle-priced tier, while girls and women from Karnataka and Bangladesh occupy the lowest-priced tier.

## Prostitution in Kolkata

Prostitution likely accompanied the founding of Kolkata as a British trading colony in 1690. The capital of British India until 1910, Kolkata prides itself on its culture and political activism, both of which have contributed to the unique evolution of sex work in the city. The old city and its suburbs are the third largest metropolitan city in India and the 14th largest metropolitan city in the world, at a population of about 13-14 million people.



Kolkata has not seen the rapid industrial growth of Mumbai, with its accompanying population of single men, and the ratio of females to males is an estimated 956:1000.

Kolkata has a number of long-established brothel areas, some existing relatively unchanged for a couple of hundred years. As in Mumbai, the brothel areas arose in response to the presence of the British Raj, as well as (in the case of Kalighat, investigated in this study) to service religious pilgrims. Two of the brothel areas of this study (Kalighat and Sonagachi) are among the oldest in the city. The brothel area of Khidderpore (the third brothel area investigated in Kolkata) is more than one hundred years old, and was established near the (then) Kolkata dockyards to service sailors and merchant seamen. Modern times have not affected the location of the traditional brothel areas of Kolkata.

Unlike Mumbai, Kolkata has not seen a significant growth of suburban brothel areas. As well, bar-based prostitution has not developed in the proudly traditional (though certainly not conservative) climate of the city. In the last five to seven years, the income of brothel-based sex workers in some brothel areas has significantly dropped: in Khidderpore, due to the movement of Kolkata's port activities to a location south of the city; in other brothel areas, due to competition from a rapidly expanding number of flying sex workers and an influx of street-based sex workers, primarily Bangladeshis.

The last decade has seen notable changes in the sex worker community of Kolkata. In the mid-1990s, the Sonagachi HIV/AIDS Intervention Project (SHIP) developed peer-based awareness and condom distribution activities first in Sonagachi, then throughout the city. The HIV

The Durbar has made profound positive changes in the health and well-being of Kolkata sex workers and their children, including the reduction in the number of young children (those below 15 years) in the brothels.

rate of sex workers in Kolkata is low compared to other Indian cities. The peer-based activities of SHIP resulted in the collectivization of sex workers and the formation of the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (hence, 'the Durbar'), an organization of sex workers. The Durbar has made profound positive changes in the health and well-being of Kolkata sex workers and their children, including the reduction in the number of young children (those below 15 years) in the brothels.



In Kolkata brothels, girls and women from West Bengal and Bangladesh predominate, followed by those from Nepal and the nearby states of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. In the eyes of the informants, Nepali-speaking girls and women from northern West Bengal, Bhutan and the northeastern states of India are considered to be Nepalese. In Kolkata, girls and women from Uttar Pradesh (called *Agrawalis*) occupy the highest tier of cost for sex workers. The Nepalese and West Bengalis generally comprise the majority of middle-priced sex workers, and women from other states and from Bangladesh comprise the majority of lower-priced sex workers.

## Brothel Typology

The physical presentation of the brothels studied in Mumbai and Kolkata varies extensively and, with some overlap, reflects the economic system under which the brothel operates. For the purpose of the study two basic varieties of brothels were typified according to the perceptions of the informants and are used throughout this text: the *bungalow* and the *pinjara* (English: *cages*, derived from the usual thief-protection bars on the windows, not from the confinement of the sex workers). Physically, *bungalow* generally refers to a brothel that occupies a flat, usually on the first or higher floors of a building, often with a shop on the ground floor. At the other extreme, *pinjara* generally refers to a one- or two-story slum dwelling, often with mud walls and a tin roof. Naturally, amidst the eclectic architecture of Kolkata and Mumbai, a wide range of hybrids occurs. A number of semi-modern buildings and larger complexes, called *sada ghar* in Mumbai, have a physical resemblance to the bungalow, but operate under the economic system typically found in the *pinjara* brothel.

“Girls and women solicit from the doors, and the client enters directly into the room for sex, often separated by only a curtain from a couple in an adjoining bed.

More than the physical structure, the differentiation between the *bungalow* and the *pinjara* is found in the brothel economics and the clientele. The key feature of a bungalow is security, which generally indicates the confinement of *tsukris*, that is, persons in slavery or debt bondage. The bun-

galow is distinguished by the ‘channel gate’ (a sliding iron accordion gate) at the entrance to the brothel. When locked, the channel gate is virtually impenetrable. (The channel gate was frequently mentioned disparagingly by the sex worker respondents, as almost a symbol of their confinement.) At the time of the study, due to police vigilance, many brothels kept their channel gates locked even during working hours, admitting only known clients.

The bungalow is generally an establishment for middle-class clients. Often, the client enters into a sitting room with couches, chairs and a television. Interior decoration varies from presentable to rudimentary. Drinks can be purchased and the girls present themselves for selection. Sex takes place in adjoining rooms, and the client may spend 15 minutes to one-half hour or more with the girl. The atmosphere is subdued and a feeling of control pervades.

At the other end of the spectrum, the *pinjara* is the working man's brothel. Although prevalent in slum brothel areas like Ghatkopar (Mumbai) and Khidderpore (Kolkata), *pinjaras* can also be found near bungalows. In Kamathipura (Mumbai), for example, *pinjaras* and bungalows occupy the same and adjoining lanes. Physically, *pinjaras* range from crude one-room huts to old, eccentric buildings from the British Raj to ground floor flats of modern buildings. The key feature of a *pinjara* is lack of security, which generally indicates that the sex workers are free agents.

The atmosphere of the *pinjara* is relaxed, casual and, during working hours, efficient. Girls and women solicit from the doors, and the client enters directly into the room for sex, often separated by only a curtain from a couple in an adjoining bed. The interior decoration is rough and colourful and the sanitation is often poor. Clients don't spend time in conversation and selection of girls, the sexual act is brief (seldom more than 10-15 minutes), and the price is low. Unlike those in the bungalows, sex workers and brothel personnel mingle with the surrounding community, and during the day sex workers, fixed clients and local men hang out in the brothels, eating, chatting and passing time.

There are numerous variations on bungalows and *pinjaras*, and apart from general physical appearance, the distinction is not firm. Some bungalows have entirely free agent sex workers but are designated 'bungalows' by informants due to their physical appearance, cost of services and appeal to middle-class clients. On the other hand, many brothels with a low-class, rough appearance have locked rooms hidden in the back in which *tsukris* are kept in confinement, often in very dismal circumstances. Generally, however, most informants stated that bungalows were brothels that contained confined *tsukris* as well as younger free agent sex workers, and *pinjaras* were brothels with older, inexpensive, free agent sex workers.

## The Brothel Areas Studied in Mumbai

### Kamathipura, Central Mumbai

Kamathipura is a small, primarily Muslim, community imbedded in an old but modernizing commercial and residential section of central Mumbai. It is a discrete area, comprising a rectangle of 14 lanes by 3-4 blocks wide, primarily of one- and two-story

In contrast with the brothel areas of urban Mumbai, Ghatkopar has a peaceful village-like atmosphere. During the day, the most evident signs of activity are women washing clothes, chatting and tending to children.

buildings. Lanes 1 to 9 are mostly working class residences, small workshops and godowns for iron and metal products, interspersed with a few brothels. Lanes 10 to 14 are a mix of small workshops, teashops, beer bars, restaurants, pharmacies, *pinjara* brothels and bungalows. Although scarcely recognizable as a brothel area by day, in the evening the lanes are filled with street sex workers and girls and women soliciting from doorways, and the atmosphere is cool and businesslike.

#### Khetwadi/Falkland Road, Central Mumbai

This is not a discrete brothel area, but rather a large section of old central Mumbai comprised of large and small buildings housing businesses, workshops, restaurants, beer bars, clothing stores and residential flats, as well as numerous buildings of uncertain purpose. Brothels are scattered individually or in small groups throughout the area, and range from simple hut-like establishments to large buildings with hundreds of sex workers. Certain lanes and designated areas along particular streets, while indistinguishable from the surrounding community during the day, are occupied in the evening by sex workers soliciting on the street and from doorways.

#### Ghatkopar, suburban Mumbai

This brothel area is a single narrow lane leading from a small railway station into a slum community primarily comprised of small, tin-roofed mud houses. The *pinjara* brothels are indistinguishable from the surrounding slum dwellings. There are no bungalows in Ghatkopar. In contrast with the brothel areas of urban Mumbai, Ghatkopar has a peaceful village-like atmosphere. During the day, the most evident signs of activity are women washing clothes, chatting and tending to children. There is little change in the evening, although sex workers stand in the doorways of the brothels and along the lanes, soliciting clients in a relaxed manner.

## The Brothel Areas Studied in Kolkata

### Sonagachi, North Kolkata

Sonagachi, one of the oldest and busiest brothel areas in India, is a discrete sex worker community of numerous lanes winding among old buildings, surrounded by a predominantly Muslim population. Most of the brothels are first- or second-floor estab-

lishments, with small shops on the ground floor. Unlike other brothel areas in the study, the business of the area is evident during the day as well as the evening, and sex workers freely move about conversing and conducting off-work activities. In the evening, the area is congested and businesslike. Many pimps present themselves at the entrances to the brothel area.

#### Kalighat, South Kolkata

Like Sonagachi, Kalighat is one of the oldest brothel areas in Kolkata. Due to its proximity to the important temple of Kali Ma nearby, the brothel area has a long history of servicing religious pilgrims as well as local clients. The brothel area comprises a few lanes off the old city streets leading from the temple. It is imbedded in a traditional Bengali neighborhood, and is not readily identified from the surrounding community. In respect for the presence of the temple of Kali Ma and its visiting pilgrims, sex workers are allowed to dress only in *saris*.

#### Khidderpore, South Kolkata

The brothel area known as Khidderpore is properly located in the adjoining areas of Munshigunj and Watgunj. It is set a few hundred yards from the Hoogley River and arose to service sailors and merchant seamen at the now-abandoned Khidderpore Docks. After the establishment of the new port of Haldiya, south of Kolkata, the brothel area has declined. Khidderpore is beyond the periphery of busy, urban Kolkata and the brothels are mostly small one-story *pinjaras*. Like Ghatkopar (Mumbai), the Khidderpore brothel area is unobtrusive and quiet during the day. At night, the brothel area is relaxed, with street sex workers idling along the lanes and women standing somewhat indifferently in the brothel doors.

# The Clients

## The Client Population

In most studies on prostitution, clients are elusive figures, for good reason: they are difficult to catch. Clients may spend as little as ten minutes in a brothel, they commute from all parts of the metropolis, they are afraid of the police, and they dislike recognition as clients. Much of this study focused on the attitudes and demand of clients for sex workers in general, Nepalese sex workers, children, and enslaved or bonded labourers, as well as on the relationships between sex workers and clients.

At present, in both Mumbai and Kolkata, the majority of clients for brothel-based prostitution are working class men, including factory workers, craftsmen, casual labourers, truck drivers, taxi drivers and rickshaw pullers. In both cities, the number of middle-class clients coming to brothels has been rapidly decreasing in the last five to seven years.

In Mumbai, this is primarily due to the fear of HIV/AIDS (clients believe the epicenter to be the Kamathipura and Khetwadi/Falkland Road brothel areas), police raids on the brothels (during which clients are sometimes arrested) and the rapid growth of 'beer bars', hotel bars and discos that provide clients with a more entertaining ambience, a wider selection of sex workers and, in the clients' belief, less risk of HIV infection. In Kolkata as well, the decline of middle-class clients in the brothels is due to the fear of HIV/AIDS and police raids, and is also due to the rapid increase in the number of flying sex workers.

In both cities in the last three or four years, the number of working-class clients going to brothels has also diminished, largely due to the recent influx of Bangladeshi street sex workers who dominate the streets and aggressively solicit clients, and whose low prices undercut those of the brothel girls and women.

## Why Men Seek Sex Workers

Investigation as to why men seek sex with sex workers was revealing. The majority of clients for the brothels investigated in this study were men who had left their wives in the villages, and as expected, went to prostitutes because they were 'horny' (to use an informal but precise term). Teenaged boys and young men such as students, said sex worker and *gharwali* respondents, came to sex workers less out of sexual need than for adventure, experience and fun, and most started attending sex workers due to peer influence.

The study collected considerable data on the reasons why local married men go to sex workers, and revealed a considerable awareness among sex workers of their clients' marital problems. Abundant respondents, including clients, sex workers and *gharwalis*, noted that many clients go to sex workers because of their frustration with their lives and because of interpersonal problems with their wives. Arguments and tension in the home were as frequently mentioned to be a cause of attending prostitutes as the wife's sexual conservatism or her reluctance to have sex because of pregnancy or other reasons.

Older men, respondents said, often came to sex workers because they could share their problems freely, because they were widowed, or because their wives were no longer sexually attractive. A number of sex workers noted that men came to sex workers because of personal grief—because their wives had recently died or had

“The majority of Nepalese sex workers showed few ill feelings towards the clients. They recognized their sexual needs, empathized with their poverty and marital problems, and commented sympathetically on the weakness of clients who fall in love with sex workers.”

run off with another man. The majority of Nepalese sex workers showed few ill feelings towards the clients (with the exception of Nepalese clients, whom they disliked for their drunkenness and rudeness). They recognized their sexual needs, empathized with their poverty and marital problems, and commented sympathetically on the weakness of clients who fall in love with sex workers. As one Nepalese sex worker said, 'They are also human beings.'

### Criteria for Client Demand

Clients' most common criteria for selecting a girl or woman (or seeking a brothel that might provide such) can be summarized in three adjectives: 'young', 'fresh' and 'different'. To the clients, 'young' meant from age 15 to 20. In keeping with the attitudes regarding 'child' and 'woman' prevalent in South Asia, a female of 15-16 (i.e., somewhat post-pubescent) was considered by clients to be an adult, not a child. No moral censure was found regarding having sex with a 15-year-old, although clients (as well as sex workers) frequently showed extreme revulsion and negativity about prostitution with pubescent and pre-pubescent girls. Many clients recommended severe legal penalties for clients who had sex with 'young-young' girls, while considering sex with a 16-year-old girl to be okay.

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To clients, ‘fresh’ was a positive quality of personality meaning ‘not yet hardened by the trade.’ By ‘fresh’, clients did not imply ‘naïve’, ‘innocent’ or ‘compliant’ (although a few clients demanded those qualities). Rather, the term designated the friendliness and openness of the new prostitute, as opposed to the tough, businesslike, ‘get it over with’ attitude of the more experienced sex worker.

‘Different’ meant ‘a new face’. Although clients preferred to return to the same brothels, they hoped to have sex with someone they hadn’t had sex with before. Most clients, except for fixed clients, purchased sex with the same person no more than two or three times.

## Client Demand for Nepalese

Clients, including those who preferred Indian women and girls, were almost unanimous in stating that Nepalese were in high demand because of their beauty, fair complexions and youthful appearance, even as they grew older. At the same time, as informants said repeatedly, beauty and youth were primary demand criteria that could apply—or not—to women from any state or country. Much depended on the client’s personal attraction to an individual sex worker and much on the ethnic tastes of the client.

Notably, in the opinion of almost all informants, the characteristics that set Nepalese women and girls apart from all others were (in approximate order) their honesty, politeness and cleanliness. These attributes, as well as being moderately priced, superceded beauty and youth as criteria for client demand of Nepalese vis-à-vis other sex workers.

Clients as well as other informants repeatedly told stories of the honesty and ‘fair business practices’ of the Nepalese sex worker, an important and sensitive topic for clients. In most brothel situations, the price of sex is agreed upon between the client and the sex worker or *gharwali* prior to the sexual act. Clients admitted a respect for the business practices of the Nepalese, noting that while they charged only a moderate fee for services, they could not be haggled by clients to reduce their prices nor did they try to haggle for higher prices. Clients expressed considerable irritation that nearly all Indian and Bangladeshi sex workers attempted to re-negotiate the price or demanded tips when sex was finished. Nepalese invariably respected the price agreed upon with the client.

Clients placed a high premium on honesty as a criterion for demand, doubtless because they are highly vulnerable to theft in a brothel situation, particularly when intoxi-



cated. Unsolicited, they recounted numerous instances of theft by Indian and Bangladeshi sex workers. In contrast, they told stories of times when, due to intoxication or carelessness, they had left their money or possessions in a Nepalese brothel, only to have them returned by the sex worker even weeks later.

“Politeness and ‘soft speaking’ were repeatedly mentioned as unique traits of the Nepalese sex worker.”

Unlike other sex workers, except in the highest-priced brothels, the Nepalese consciously seek to develop good customer relations. This is due to both business sense and national character. Politeness and ‘soft speaking’ were repeatedly mentioned as unique traits of the Nepalese sex worker. Nepalese are widely known among clients (including those who frequent non-Nepalese sex workers) for not quarreling with the clients, for speaking softly and for being friendly. Unlike Indian and Bangladeshi sex workers, Nepalese frequently offer clients a cup of tea, a soda or a glass of water—a gesture of politeness important in South Asian culture. In particular, clients valued Nepalese sex workers because they would not rush the sexual act (which could sometimes be prolonged if the client was intoxicated). Clients spoke of their annoyance with Indian sex workers who would ‘watch the clock’ and tell them ‘hurry up, hurry up’. As clients said, Indian sex workers didn’t care if the client returned again.

Although, as stated above, beauty and youth are demand criteria that cut across state and nationality, the Nepalese sex workers have additional ‘attractions’ for clients, many of which they share with the higher-priced Gujarati sex workers of Mumbai and the Agrawali sex workers of Kolkata. Nepalese are known for being clean and having slender, ‘tight’ bodies. Most particularly, Nepalese women are able to maintain their attractiveness as they get older, giving Nepalese sex workers a longer ‘working life’ than their Indian and Bangladeshi counterparts. Organizational informants, including health care workers, noted the Nepalese sex workers’ concern for their health and appearance. Many clients stated that Nepalese wear better makeup and finer clothing than other sex workers (and some organizational informants commented that many Nepalese spend an excessive amount of their income buying clothing).

Somewhat paradoxically, clients valued Nepalese sex workers because they did not ‘act like prostitutes.’ Many noted that Nepalese did not actively solicit clients, did not exhibit ‘lewd postures’ when in public and did not use dirty language when talking with clients. At the same time, clients noted that Nepalese were active sexual partners who sought to ‘satisfy their customers.’ Informants were divided as to whether Nepalese would conduct sexual acts, such as oral or anal sex, that Indian sex workers would



“Nepalese brothels have always been able to maintain a fairly constant input of new clients vis-à-vis brothels of other states and nationalities, and this continues despite the loss of clients to bar sex workers, flying sex workers and street sex workers.

not. These differing opinions might be attributed less to the willingness of Nepalese to conduct such acts than to the fact that many young Nepalese are *tsukris* under control of the brothel owner, and are forced to provide oral and anal sex (as well as sex without condoms) to clients for an additional fee. Free agent Nepalese sex workers repeatedly said that they disliked and refused to conduct oral or anal sex.

### The Nepalese Niche

The Nepalese have carved a profitable niche in the sex industry of Kolkata and Mumbai. Unlike the sex workers of other nationalities, Nepalese sex workers consciously encourage ‘return customers.’ Among all brothels, the Nepalese brothels have the highest proportion of fixed clients, that is, men who return to the same brothel (and sometimes the same sex worker) for months or years.

Nepalese brothels have always been able to maintain a fairly constant input of new clients vis-à-vis brothels of other states and nationalities, and this continues despite the loss of clients to bar sex workers, flying sex workers and street sex workers. The reputation of Nepalese sex workers—for beauty, honesty, politeness and fair prices—is readily communicated between clients. While most clients are only concerned with relieving their sexual urges, informants stated that many new clients visit Nepalese brothels with an expectation not only of good sexual service, but also of a personal element lacking in other brothels.

The recent downturn in brothel-based prostitution notwithstanding, informants stated that Nepalese brothels have more consistent business than other brothels. For many years, the Nepalese sex worker community has shown an ability to consistently generate new clients and maintain an economic base of returning clients through honest business practices, good customer relations and moderate prices.

# The Brothel Business

## The Presence of Slavery and Debt Bondage

The study found that the overwhelming majority of Nepalese girls and women in the brothels of Mumbai and Kolkata entered prostitution under the age of 18 and had been trafficked and sold into slavery or debt bondage. Respondents noted only a few instances of Nepalese ‘voluntarily’ entering into prostitution. The majority of brothels that use Nepalese *tsukris* are managed by Nepalese, and many—likely most—are owned by Nepalese.

The study found evidence of the existence of Nepalese girls and women in either slavery or debt bondage in all brothel areas studied except Ghatkopar (Mumbai) and Khidderpore (Kolkata). While particularly in Kolkata, sex worker and client informants were afraid to discuss the presence of *tsukris* in the brothels, many nonetheless admitted their presence and much additional data were collected outside formal interviews.

In the Mumbai study areas, informants stated that many *tsukris* were present in bungalows in Kamathipura, with fewer in Khetwadi/Falkland Road. However, all informants stated that the number of bungalows operating with *tsukris* had greatly diminished in the past three to four years. Informants stated that these operations had shifted to other parts of Mumbai outside the brothel areas or to other cities in India.

In the Kolkata study areas, the presence of *tsukris* in Sonagachi was ‘common knowledge’ to all informants and other persons whom the field researchers contacted. Although many informants were reluctant to state so in the formal interviews, often due to observation by others, many stated so in informal settings. Both direct and indirect enquiry indicated that some *tsukris* were present in Kalighat, although the number was not significant. There was no direct evidence of *tsukris* remaining in Khidderpore, although informants said that many were present five or six years before.

There was no evidence of client demand for persons in slavery or debt bondage. The majority of client

There was no evidence of client demand for persons in slavery or debt bondage. Clients who were aware that some prostitutes were ‘indebted’ considered the matter to be an ‘economic problem’ and showed little awareness of or concern about their situation.

respondents expressed ignorance of girls and women in slavery or debt bondage. Those who were aware that some prostitutes were ‘indebted’ considered the matter to be an ‘economic problem’ and showed little awareness of or concern about their situation.

## The Presence of Child Prostitution

Despite the efforts of the police in Mumbai and the Durbar and the police in Kolkata, the prostitution of children from 16 to 18 years old remains prevalent in the brothel areas studied. According to all informants, the presence of children 15 years and below has diminished significantly, even in brothels known to use enslaved or bonded labourers. Informants stated that in both Mumbai and Kolkata three or four years ago, children aged 15 or younger were common.

“While police and self-regulation activities have reduced the presence of younger children, they have had little impact on freeing older girls and adult women from their existing situations as *tsukris*.

Many children from 16 to 18 years are working in all brothel areas except Ghatkopar (Mumbai) and Khidderpore (Kolkata). While most are kept in confinement in bungalows, those who present themselves at brothel doorways are usually girls who are more physically mature and who with makeup, dress and false identification papers can ‘pass’ as older women.

The study showed that while there is a strong client demand for girls aged 15 and above, there is little client demand for—and evidence of considerable client resistance to—sex with children below the age of 15.

Regarding interventions to prevent child prostitution, it should be noted that while police and self-regulation activities have reduced the presence of younger children and have curtailed the entry of girls into slavery and debt bondage in the brothel areas, they have had little impact on freeing older girls and adult women from their existing situations as *tsukris*. A significant number of Nepalese adults from 18 to 22 years remain *tsukris*, but are not targeted by interventions to prevent child prostitution.

## Brothel Economics: the *Tsukri* System

The trafficking of Nepalese girls and women is generated by their sale by the trafficker to brothel owners, who profit from their use as slaves or bonded labourers. If all sex workers entered prostitution as adult free agents, brothel owners would have no demand for trafficked persons, and traffickers would be out of business. While the major-

ity of Nepalese presently conducting sex work in Mumbai and Kolkata are adult free agents, almost all Nepalese still enter brothel-based prostitution in those cities as *tsukris*. The study found almost no voluntary entry of Nepalese into brothel-based prostitution. Thus, although the number of brothels in Mumbai and Kolkata that use *tsukris* appears to be diminishing, the use of enslaved and bonded labourers remains the economic foundation of Nepalese in brothel-based prostitution.

Brothel economics (here, the manner in which profit is accumulated by the brothel owner) is complex and takes a number of forms, according to the relative freedom and agency of the prostitute or sex worker. There are three basic forms of brothel economy from the perspective of the brothel owner: the *tsukri* system, i.e., the use of enslaved or bonded labourers, in which the brothel

owner retains all of the fees paid for the prostitute's services; the *adhiya* system, in which a free agent sex worker pays one-half (Hindi: *adhiya*) of client fees to the brothel owner; and the tenancy system, in which a free agent sex worker pays the brothel owner rent, utilities and other expenses for the use of brothel facilities, and retains all fees for herself.

The greatest profits accrue to the brothel owner from the use of enslaved or bonded labourers, followed by the use of free agent sex workers on the *adhiya* system, and distantly followed by renting facilities to sex workers on the tenancy system or to flying sex workers. Few brothels are operated with prostitutes or sex workers working under a single system. Brothel owners utilize different forms of labour to their best advantage for the greatest profit, depending on the resources and skills of the brothel owner and the restrictions on illegal labour in the brothel community.

A simplified, typical example of brothel economics may be taken as a departure point. A brothel owner rents a flat with eight rooms from a landlord. Eight girls and women reside and conduct prostitution in the establishment: six *tsukris* purchased by the brothel owner, who work without salary, but are provided food and clothing; and two women who work on the *adhiya* system.

In this example, the operating expenses required from the brothel owner include rent, utilities, food, clothing, payment for support staff (perhaps a brothel manager, at least an *aai* or cleaning person), and payment of money or favours to peripheral persons such as restau-

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rant workers, pimps and local boys to run errands, solicit clients, guard the premises, etc. The brothel owner's other expenses include payments to various levels of police, *dadas* (local strong men), government officials and others for protection from legal reprisal and harassment, and interest on loans if he or she has borrowed from moneylenders to purchase *tsukris*.

Many of the brothels observed in this study were owned and operated by a female brothel owner, usually a former sex worker, and could be considered a viable, if morally dubious, model of women's entrepreneurship. For many sex workers and *tsukris*, 'having a few girls' is a hope for the future, when age reduces client demand, return home is unwelcome, and other work options are generally limited to becoming a servant in a brothel, begging and minor peddling.

This example is brothel entrepreneurship in its simplest form, and the complexity of the business was only touched upon in this study. Two or more women may co-own and operate a brothel. Some brothel owners are male, and operate the business through female managers. Many female brothel owners have a husband, boyfriend or long-term companion (Bengali: *babu*) whose involvement in the business covers a wide range, including: full control and ownership of the business; brothel discipline, guarding and intermediation with local *dadas* and police; support through influence at higher levels with police, government officials and landlords; and an uninvolved parasitical relationship with the brothel owner and inhabitants. Sons, sisters and other relatives of the brothel owner may play a similar range of roles.

Brothel owners frequently own more than one brothel, and like most entrepreneurs seek to expand their enterprise or shift locations depending on the business climate of a particular area. In Mumbai, for example, in the last few years many brothel owners have shut down their brothels in Kamathipura due to incessant police raids and loss of clientele and have shifted to Bhivandi, Nava Mumbai and other growing industrial areas in the suburbs. Similarly, the brothel owners of Khidderpore have moved with their *tsukris* to other Indian cities, leaving primarily free agent tenancy brothels in the area. In the case of Nepalese brothel owners, many successful entrepreneurs own and operate multiple brothels in India while maintaining houses in Nepal that serve as tran-

“Brothel owners frequently own more than one brothel, and like most entrepreneurs seek to expand their enterprise or shift locations depending on the business climate of a particular area.

sit points for trafficked Nepalese girls. Often these entrepreneurs have a 'good face' in the Nepalese and Indian community, operating other businesses and rental property, educating their children at good schools and living like other middle-class citizens.

Considerable profits accrue from the use of *tsukris*. The study found that the brothel owners earn from four to 20 times the purchase price of the *tsukri* over her period of servitude. However, this is only a rough estimate, and the range of profit and length of servitude varies considerably. How quickly the brothel owner can recover the purchase price of the *tsukri* and accumulate profit depends on the number of clients serviced by the *tsukri*, the fees charged to the clients and the overhead for keeping the *tsukri*.

Limited data on the sale price of *tsukris* were available. Informants suggested that the present price of a Nepalese *tsukri* in Kolkata is approximately 60,000 to 70,000 IC (Indian currency, approximately US\$ 1360 to 1590), and in Mumbai approximately 100,000 to 120,000 IC (US\$ 2270 to 2720). As a low estimate, a *tsukri* entertaining four clients per day at 200 IC per client would earn for the brothel owner 24,000 IC per month. Thus, if a brothel owner purchased a *tsukri* from a trafficker for 100,000 IC and if one-quarter of the *tsukri's* gross earnings were brothel operating expenses, the brothel owner would recover her purchase price in a little over five and one-half months.

The total accumulated profit from the use of an individual *tsukri* depends on the years that the brothel owner can keep her in slavery or debt bondage. As found in the study, the length of confinement varied from two to ten years. Longer confinement is unlikely for obvious reasons: the brothel owner has control over the girl during the years of her peak health and saleability; after seven or eight years (generally over the age of 25) most girls or women would be less in demand from clients, would provide less income to the brothel owner, and may be a burden from illness due to HIV/AIDS.

The brothel owner has several other means of increasing her income through the *tsukri*. The *tsukri's* virginity can be sold for as much as several thousand Indian rupees. 'Special' clients pay considerably more than usual fees for girls below 13 or 14 years of age. Because the *tsukri* has no negotiation power, the brothel owner can force her to conduct oral or anal sex, or have sex without a condom, both of which cost the client more.

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Purchasing a *tsukri* is an investment, for which the owner may take a loan from local moneylenders. Considerable effort and expense are taken by the brothel owner to protect her investment, that is, to ensure that the *tsukri* does not run away. This includes guarding the *tsukri* 24 hours a day for the years of her confinement, renting a (usually more expensive) house or flat that can be physically secured, paying police not to raid the brothel and ‘rescue’ the investment, and paying local politicians, landlords and others to ‘turn a blind eye’ on the activities.

## Brothel Economics: the *Adhiya* and Tenancy Systems

Not all brothel owners conduct business using *tsukris*. In fact, most of the brothels in the study areas did not use *tsukris*, but rather women working as free agents. This is not due to anti-trafficking measures, but due to the fact that most sex workers must continue to work after they gain their freedom. While the more expensive *tsukris* service a middle-class clientele, former *tsukris* remain in the brothel areas to service the much larger population of working-class clients.

When a woman finishes her term of servitude, she gains control of her mobility, income and ability to negotiate fees, condom use and sexual acts. While she can choose to leave prostitution, few, particularly Nepalese, have the options to do so. Usually, following slavery or debt bondage, a woman either remains in the same brothel or enters another brothel on the *adhiya* system.

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Brothel owners make less profit through the use of *adhiyas*, most obviously because they only retain half of the clients’ fees. In addition, *adhiyas*, usually not being ‘young’ (that is, under 19-20) or ‘fresh’, are in less demand from clients. As they have a say in whether to use condoms or to conduct oral or anal sex, additional profit from these might not accrue to the brothel owner. However, unless the brothel owner is using *adhiyas* in a bungalow brothel alongside *tsukris*, she has significantly less operating expenses. The brothel may be an inexpensive, tin-roofed dwelling, for there is no need for an expensive, secure dwelling as the women are free agents and do not try to escape. Overhead expenses such as food and brothel guards are eliminated. Protection fees to police, *dadas* and others,

while remaining, are significantly less because police have no legal motive to raid the brothel (although in Mumbai they frequently raid brothels on the excuse of 'rescuing' children, and illegally arrest adults from whom they take money for 'bail').

Rather than working in the *adhiya* system, a woman may opt for more agency and control over her income. Or, as she grows older and less saleable, she may not be able to obtain a position in an *adhiya* situation, as the brothel owner seeks to respond to client demand for young and 'fresh' women. She may then enter a brothel operating on the 'tenancy' system. In this system, the brothel owner charges the sex worker daily or monthly room rent, as well as the costs of electricity, water, payments to the police and sometimes a fee for each client entertained.

“With some entrepreneurial talent, some years after ending her period of slavery or debt bondage, a woman may be able to purchase her own *tsukris* and operate her own brothel at considerable profit.

Brothel owners operating tenancy brothels make significantly less income than those operating brothels with *tsukris* or *adhiyas*. Operating a tenancy brothel has the advantages of few raids by the police and, often being simple *pinjara* venues, low operating expenses. Such brothels may be operated by older women of less entrepreneurial vigour than those operating brothels with *tsukris*, or increasingly in recent years, the brothel may have been 'scaled down' from a *tsukri* system to a tenancy system due to police and other pressure in the area. In Khidderpore (Kolkata) for example, many of the present tenancy brothels formerly used *tsukris*. Some of the brothel owners have left the area, while others operate bungalows with *tsukris* in other parts of India while continuing to operate *pinjara* tenancy brothels under a local manager.

Brothel owners may also earn income from renting their premises to flying sex workers. While many bungalows use both *tsukris* and *adhiyas*, *pinjara* brothels may have a mix of *adhiyas*, tenancy sex workers and flying sex workers.

If a free agent sex worker has been able to save money or is able to secure a loan, she may purchase one or more *tsukris* for her own income. The study found instances of conflict between a free agent sex worker and a brothel manager because the sex worker used the venue to sell a *tsukri's* labour for her own profit, without sharing with the brothel manager. Thus, with some entrepreneurial talent, some years after ending her period of slavery or debt bondage, a woman may be able to purchase her own *tsukris* and operate her own brothel at considerable profit.



## Brothel Demand for Nepalese

Although the purchasing price of *tsukris* was not extensively researched, data suggest that the cost of a Nepalese *tsukri* is lower than the cost of an Indian *tsukri*, and a Nepalese *tsukri* provides a higher return on the investment. Beyond their consistent demand from clients, their ability to maintain their beauty and slimness give them longer earning power than other sex workers. For this reason among others, Nepalese *tsukris* stay in slavery or debt bondage for three to five years longer than Indian *tsukris*. Nepalese sex workers, although moderately priced, are consistently good earners, and even as free agents work longer hours and are less willing to take 'time off' than their Indian or Bangladeshi counterparts.

“Demand remains high for trafficked persons in Mumbai and Kolkata. Informants noted that whenever a *dalal* brings a new girl to Kolkata, four or five brothel owners are ready to buy her.

Nepalese are easier to keep in slavery or debt bondage than Indian or Bangladeshi prostitutes. Often from isolated rural villages, they are naïve and easy to cheat regarding their so-called 'debt repayment.' Being from a distant country and speaking a foreign language, they are less likely to run away. Nepalese are also easier to maintain. They are more obedient than Indian or Bangladeshi sex workers. As *gharwali* informants stated, they give less trouble to the brothel owner, don't steal, don't fight with the other girls, and don't argue with the clients. Because they earn well

and maintain their attractiveness to clients, they are easy to resell to other brothels if the brothel owner wishes to cash out, and their resale price remains high. There is a consistent demand for 'second hand' *tsukris*, even from Indian brothel owners (although Nepalese are generally reluctant to work under any but Nepalese *gharwalis*).

## The Procurement of Nepalese *Tsukris*

The investigation of the operations of traffickers prior to their sale of trafficked persons to the brothel owner was not an objective of this study. However, some data were collected.

It appears that almost all trafficking is conducted by Nepalese, both male and female. While there appears to be an informal network of Nepalese brothel owners in Mumbai and Kolkata and throughout India, there was no indication of extensive networks of traffickers. However, traffickers sometimes work in small groups and certainly with collaboration of community members, employers, local officials, border officials and others, such as those

who operate 'safe houses' where trafficked persons are kept prior to their sale. Traffickers appear to be either 'freelancers,' selling their product to the highest buyer among a range of brothel owners in a particular locality, or persons (usually women) mobilized by certain brothel owners to 'recruit labour.'

According to all informants except clients, demand remains high for trafficked persons in Mumbai and Kolkata. Informants noted that whenever a *dalal* brings a new girl to Kolkata, four or five brothel owners are ready to buy her, and a significant number of brothel owners in Mumbai, when asked about the problems that brothel owners face, admitted that they had difficulty getting an adequate supply of new girls these days because of police vigilance.

Notably, data suggest that the personnel and linkages for the trafficking of Nepalese are discrete from those for the trafficking of Indians or Bangladeshis. Although data were insufficient for adequate conclusions, there was no evidence of linkages of traffickers with existing Indian criminal networks. The trafficking of Nepalese is an 'independent system.' As a sex worker respondent cynically noted: 'The Nepalese are trafficked by Nepalese and sold to Nepalese.'

Although data were collected regarding the multiple brothel holdings, business relationships and pan-India networks of Nepalese brothel owners, space in this *Summary of Findings* does not permit discussion. Details may be found in the longer text: *Slavery, Debt Bondage and Sex Work: A Study of Trafficked Nepalese Girls and Women in Mumbai and Kolkata, India*.

# Life in Slavery and Debt Bondage

## Being Trafficked

**A**lthough the study did not focus on the procurement and transportation of Nepalese girls and women, the sex worker informants provided much information about the manner in which they were trafficked. In general, the popular ‘mythology’ of trafficking portrayed by the media and informal studies conducted by local organizations—both, to all appearances, highly sensationalized—was proven to be correct. Almost all of the informants had been trafficked against their will and without knowledge of their destination; only a couple had entered prostitution voluntarily.

The traffickers (Hindi/Nepali: *dala*) were male and female in approximately equal proportions. A significant number (approximately one-fourth) were trafficked directly or indirectly through someone they knew in their village or workplace. No sex worker respondents discussed being trafficked by or with the knowledge of their families, although there are ample reasons why respondents would be silent on this topic. The presence or absence of family complicity in the trafficking process was not confirmed. However, one brothel owner informant directly stated that some girls from the Tamang ethnic group came into prostitution with full knowledge because their female relatives were already in the profession, and several sex worker informants had relatives or members of the same village in sex work in India. The complicity of families and community members in the trafficking process remains in need of further study.

In this regard, mention must be made of a recent study (in draft as of September 2005) by Dr Pushpa Bhatt, director of Partnership Nepal, entitled *The Trafficking of Nepali Girls into Indian Brothels: Implications of HIV/AIDS in Nepal*. Of the sample of 144 HIV-positive Nepalese sex workers who had returned to Kathmandu from Indian brothels, nearly 50% of respondents stated that their ‘aunt’ had worked in a brothel in India, more than one-third stated that their ‘cousin’ had worked in a brothel, and almost 40% stated that ‘friends, relatives or neighbors’ had worked in a brothel in India. Allowing for considerable overlap in respondents’ references (in Nepali, ‘aunt’ or ‘cousin’ can also mean either more distant relatives or close family friends), the percentages are high enough to indicate family and community involvement in the trafficking process and to warrant further research.

The respondents were trafficked at an average age of about 14 to 16 years. Nearly one-half of the respondents had been lured by the promise of work, and approximately one-fourth had followed a man out of love. A small but significant number of girls had been trafficked from work in Kathmandu carpet factories, mostly by girls or women whom they knew.

Notable among the responses was frequent mention of girls' lack of family protection and stability prior to the trafficking incident. Many came from families in which either the mother or father was dead, the father had remarried, family members had alcohol problems, or the families were physically distant. Respondents were surprisingly candid in their interviews, and some revealed that they themselves were 'errant' and rebellious, wished to escape from family problems, and sought alternative living and working situations, even at a very young age. Very few reported the often-repeated stereotype of being abducted from a happy, bucolic life with a stable family.

“The complicity of families and community members in the trafficking process remains in need of further study.”

## Entry into the Brothels

Among the volumes of interviews collected in the study, few accounts are more graphic than the sex workers' stories of their first entry into the brothel. Respondents recounted in detail their arrival in Mumbai or Kolkata, the repeated promises of their abductors, and the ruses by which their trusted abductors would 'disappear,' leaving the girls in the hands of the brothel manager or brothel owner. Respondents repeatedly mentioned their naïveté when they entered the brothel, and their shock and revulsion upon learning the work they would have to perform. Following the lying of the traffickers, all deception stopped upon their arrival in the brothel, and the *gharwalis* were very direct with the new girls about where they were and what was expected of them.

Although it can only be surmised from the data, there are indications of trauma upon arrival in the brothel. Many recounted how they became sick, were unable to eat and/or cried for days on end. None, however, mentioned attempting suicide.

At variance with popular stories of trafficking, the *gharwalis* generally showed considerable compassion for the young girls upon their arrival. The brothel managers attempted to calm the children, giving them assurances (albeit false) that in a short time they would be freed once they 'paid their debt.' The children were provided with good food and, although confined to the premises, were generally not kept in isolation or physically abused.

“A number of respondents reported that girls are now kept up to several months in outside ‘homes’, during which time they are taught Hindi, taught to wear *saris* and makeup, and prepared to present themselves as ‘older girls’ if questioned by the police.

Almost none were forced to conduct prostitution for the first days or weeks after their arrival. Notably, of those who arrived before puberty, none were required to conduct prostitution until they had passed their first menstruation. They worked as servants either in the brothel or in one of the ‘homes’ of the brothel owner, some for as long as several years. There were no reports of pre-pubescent girls being used for sex.

Beyond three or four years ago most trafficked girls were brought directly to the brothels. Today, due to the police vigilance in Mumbai and the work of the police and the Durbar in Kolkata, it appears that few girls enter the brothels immediately upon arrival in the cities. Many are kept a minimum of a few days in a ‘home’ of the brothel owner or other person, during which time they presumably get over their shock and are less likely to draw the attention of the police and the community. A number of respondents reported that girls are now kept up to several months in outside ‘homes,’ during which time they are taught Hindi, taught to wear *saris* and makeup, and prepared to present themselves as ‘older girls’ if questioned by the police.

In Kolkata, girls below 16 are not brought to the brothels of Khidderpore or Kalighat. As numerous respondents reported, in these brothel areas there are few buildings in which young girls can be safely hidden from the police and the Durbar. Khidderpore and Kalighat have few girls under 18, and appear to have few brothels that use *tsukris*. *Tsukris* that are installed in brothels in those areas are brought only when they can ‘pass’ as adults. Minor girls are reported to be first brought to Sonagachi or Bow Bazar (*sic*, another brothel area in Kolkata) where they can be kept in security from the police and the Durbar, and where clients who seek younger girls can go for services.

In Mumbai, although there are buildings with adequate security to confine children in the brothel areas of Kamathipura and Khetwadi/Falkland Road (although none in Ghatkopar), intense police vigilance has required the brothel owners to introduce arrivals to ‘homes’ and brothel flats scattered invisibly throughout the vast metropolitan area. Although data are incomplete, there is evidence that many young girls (ages 13-15) conduct their first years of prostitution in affiliate brothels in the suburbs or other cities before being brought to the brothels of central Mumbai. Although girls from 16 to 18 years service

clients in both Kamathipura and Khetwadi/Falkland Road, they are carefully confined, and girls aged 15 and below are reported to be now quite rare.

## The Life

The fiction of ‘indebtedness’ dominates the discourse of the *tsukris* and the brothel owners, much as it dominates the discourse of anti-trafficking organizations working in South Asia. From the beginning, girls are told that they are in the brothel ‘to repay their debt,’ and ‘being in debt’ (Hindi: *karja*, *pura*) was the common term by which sex workers in Mumbai referred to their situation. (Those in Kolkata referred to the situation as being a *tsukri*.)

“The brothel owner recoups the purchase price of the girl within an estimated one-half year at the most, and the girl remains working under force, in confinement and under penalty of punishment for an additional one to nine years.

The term ‘debt’ is inappropriate for all *tsukris* who or whose families have not directly incurred a debt to the brothel owner—in this study, all respondents. The appropriate term is ‘slavery’, as neither the girl nor her family has incurred a debt, yet the girl is forced to work against her will, in confinement, and under penalty of severe physical punishment. For those whose families have sold them directly to the brothel owner, the term ‘debt bondage’ is appropriate. However, it should be noted that the brothel owner recoups the purchase price (the ‘debt’) of the girl within an estimated one-half year at the most, and the girl remains working under force, in confinement and under penalty of punishment for an additional one to nine years.

For both the brothel owner and the girl in slavery or debt bondage, the fiction of debt serves an important purpose. It legitimates the confinement, the non-payment of salary, and the punishment dealt on girls and women who try to escape. As a means to force girls to work longer hours, serve more customers and have sex without condoms, they are told that they can ‘pay off their debt sooner’ and gain their freedom. The fabrication that the *tsukris* are ‘paying off their debt’ may also ease the psychological burden of slavery on the girls—the day when their ‘debt’ is paid off and they can return home is a small ray of hope in an otherwise dark and difficult life.

During the first weeks and months of slavery or debt bondage, girls are trained for their new lives and their physical identities are changed, similar to military service or imprisonment. Respondents told of having their hair cut short, learning to wear lipstick and *kajal*

“Many respondents spoke of appealing to other girls to help them, and the other girls telling them that nothing could be done, that they were best off if they accepted their lot and worked until they ‘paid off their debt.’

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(also *kohl*, a substance used to darken the lower eyelids), and being outfitted with short skirts and revealing blouses. Many spoke of their shock at their transformation (‘I didn’t recognize myself.’). Peers appear to play an important role in acclimatizing the new girl to her situation. Many respondents spoke of appealing to other girls to help them, and the other girls telling them that nothing could be done, that they were best off if

Clear portraits of the *gharwalis* emerge from the respondents. The *gharwali* may be the brothel owner or a brothel manager, and in either case is almost invariably a former sex worker. Almost no respondents were ambivalent about the qualities of their *gharwali* and there is a notable distinction between the ‘good *gharwali*’ and the ‘bad *gharwali*.’ This reflects both the personality of the individual *gharwali* and the level of security and criminality of the individual brothel. Informants stated that while some brothels were tolerable to work in, other brothels were severe in their strictness, abuse of girls and use of *dadas* to enforce discipline.

Many spoke almost fondly of their first *gharwali*, how she supported them during their first months, telling them of her own similar history, reminding them that if they performed their duty they would soon be free. Some respondents appear to have developed a surrogate mother relationship with the *gharwali*, who would scold them if they did not eat well, express concern about their health, help them choose clothing, intercede with the police or rude clients, and allow them not to serve customers if they were upset or ill.

In contrast, many respondents spoke with hatred of their first *gharwalis*, who would beat them if they left their rooms or refused to serve clients. Respondents told of long confinement in windowless rooms, and *gharwalis* forcing them to serve clients without condoms and refusing medical help unless they were severely ill.

The personalities of the girls also emerged from the interviews, and there appeared to be three responses to living in slavery: acquiescence, resistance and being *chhalak* (English: crafty). Some respondents said that they soon realized that they were helpless and ‘accepted their fate,’ sustaining themselves with the hope that they would one day ‘pay their debt’ and be released. Others fought, some to the extent of breaking up the brothel and beating the *gharwali*. These girls were severely punished, often by male thugs employed



by the brothel. Some were shifted to brothels with severe discipline and punishment, what informants termed the ‘underground brothels.’ Many of the respondents said with pride that they were *chhalak*—they quickly learned to exploit the system, pleasing the clients and befriending the *gharwali* and ‘senior girls,’ and were thus allowed freedom to leave the brothel (under guard) after only one or two years and given privileges of watching television and sleeping late.

“When sex worker respondents were asked whom girls could go to for asylum, respondents emphatically said that escapees could not go to the police. The police, they said, would only put them in jail, and then return them to the brothels.”

## Escape and Asylum

Extensive data were collected on attempted and successful escape from the brothels of Mumbai and Kolkata, although they can only be summarized here. Sex worker informants were able to recount only a few incidents of successful escape from the brothels. Confinement was regulated both physically and psychologically. Bungalows have strong security systems, including the ‘channel gate,’ barred windows, guards (usually the *gharwali* and ‘older girls’), and lookouts in the immediate brothel area, primarily *dadas*, pimps and local boys, who would apprehend an escapee.

Peers provided the primary psychological deterrent to the girl contemplating escape. They would recount incidents of attempted escape and the severe punishments inflicted on the girls, including the threat of being transferred to a ‘horrible underground brothel’ in which girls are kept in close confinement and severe discipline. Peers frequently talked others out of attempts to escape. The fear of India outside was also a strong deterrent, for many had little idea of where they were, could not speak the language and were easily recognized as ‘foreigners’ by their physical features.

A number of informants recounted unsuccessful escapes from the brothels, some their own and some others’. If girls were able to flee the bungalow, most were immediately caught by persons in the local community. Others soon became lost, not knowing where they were, who could help them, or how to find a railway station. Many of these gave up and voluntarily returned to the brothel. Notably, when sex worker respondents were asked whom girls could go to for asylum, respondents emphatically said that escapees could not go to the police. The police, they said, would only put them in jail, and then return them to the brothels. Notably as well, Kolkata informants did not say that escapees would go to the Durbar for help. When asked who could help a girl escape, most informants said no one, and a few said ‘a client who loved her.’



# Life after Slavery and Debt Bondage

## Freedom

The duration of the *tsukri*'s slavery or debt bondage appears to be at the discretion of the brothel owner. The length of time as a *tsukri* varied from two years to as long as ten years, averaging between three and five years. Many informants told of being promised by their *gharwali* that they would be freed 'next year,' only to have the *gharwali* extend the term for another year, and often yet another year. A number of respondents reported that girls were frequently penalized with from one to three years' additional labour for trying to escape. Clearly, the brothel owner's motivation for extending the working period of a slave or bonded labourer is profit. Likely, brothel owners would seek to extend the period of labour for a girl who was attractive and high earning, particularly if she had built up a number of fixed clients.

However, the brothel owner's motivation for ending the working period quickly, after only two or three years, was not determined. It is doubtful that generosity or good will was a motivating factor. Girls were immediately evicted from the brothel if they tested HIV positive. Girls who were discipline problems were sent to stricter brothels. One motivation for early termination of the slavery or debt bondage situation might be a girl's lack of attraction for clients or her unwillingness or inability to sexually satisfy clients (although the brothel owner could resell her rather than release her). Another motivation might be the girl's potential as a trafficker of other girls into the brothel. The reasons for the wide range of years in slavery or debt bondage could not be identified in the study.

It is significant that, in terms of her value as a 'saleable commodity,' the girl's greatest assets—her youth and freshness, primary demand criteria of clients—are expended for the profit of the brothel owner during her years as a *tsukri*. She leaves slavery or debt bondage not as a girl, but as a woman—older, perhaps 'shopworn,' and with less market value.

Many respondents recounted that when their day of freedom came, they were given money and gold and encouraged to return to Nepal. Girls were provided a significant sum, from 7,000 to 20,000 Indian rupees (US\$ 160 to 450) and usually one *tola* (a traditional weight measurement, approximately 21 grams) of gold ornaments. Notably, no

respondents mentioned any coercion or influence from *gharwalis* on the women's choices after their release. The *gharwalis* frequently told the girls that they were welcome to return to the brothel to work as *adhiyas*, paying 50% of their clients' fees to the *gharwali*.

A small number of the informants had not returned to Nepal after their freedom, but had stayed in the brothels. Some of these said that they feared that their families would reject them, although they expressed a hope that they could return some day. Others clearly indicated that they knew that their families were aware of their profession, and refused to go home because their families would reject them.

Although the study could not assess the proportion of women who remain in Nepal after their release from slavery or debt bondage, informants were almost unanimous in saying that almost all return to sex work. Most of the respondents had been entirely out of touch with their families for the years of their confinement. They returned to find parents passed away, brothers and sisters married, and families and communities suspicious of how they had passed the years.

Respondents told of their struggles to maintain a fabric of lies about their years in India. A few succeeded, but the majority were either suspected of conducting prostitution, and subjected to gossip, 'satire' and subtle forms of discrimination in their communities, or were directly accused of having been prostitutes and rejected by their families and their communities. Informants told of being forbidden to enter their family's house or to share food with family members. It appears that the family members who were most discriminatory were fathers and sisters-in-law. Mothers frequently defended their daughters, and in one case a mother left her family to live elsewhere so that she could be with her returned daughter. In some cases, families told their daughters that either she must leave or the family would be forced to leave the community.

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Some informants succeeded in convincing their families and communities that they had been working elsewhere during their long absence, in beauty parlours, garment factories or shops. However, many were in time discovered, sometimes because they could not shed the habits of speech and dress of the brothel environment. Many admitted that they were unaccustomed and unwilling to work in the fields. Some married and had children, later to be discovered by their husbands and thrown out.

## Return to Sex Work

All of the sex worker informants had returned to sex work, some after a few weeks, some after several years. Sex worker, *gharwali* and organizational informants alike stated that almost no girls or women stayed in Nepal when they returned after being given their freedom. Of the sex worker informants, approximately one-third had permanently severed relations with their families ('They are dead for me, and I am dead for them.'). Approximately one-third had distant and apparently uncomfortable relations with their

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families in Nepal, maintaining contact primarily for the purpose of supporting their children or out of affection and concern for their aging mothers. Many spoke of having tolerant relationships with their families but being unable to return to their villages because of discrimination from the community. In some cases, family members would travel out of the village, such as to Kathmandu, to meet their daughters.

Approximately one-third of the informants said that they maintained good relations with their families in Nepal. Of these, most said that their families were unaware of their profession, often at the same time expressing fear that their families suspected that they worked as sex workers. Although not clarified in the study, it is likely that many families were aware of their daughters' profession, and joined their daughters in presenting to the community a fabrication of their lives in India.

Upon their entry into sex work as a free agent, several economic situations are available for Nepalese sex workers. They may choose to work as an *adhiya*, paying 50% of their clients' fees to the *gharwali* in exchange for a venue with established clientele, or they may choose a more independent working environment: in a 'tenancy' situation paying rent and utilities to a brothel manager; in a collaborative cost-sharing situation with other sex workers; or renting a room or flat alone or with others and conducting work in the bars or as a flying sex worker. Neither respondents nor observations could identify Nepalese working as street sex workers.

The individual sex worker's choice depends on several factors: how much money they hope to earn, how much freedom they desire, their personal feelings about the brothel situation they are leaving, their willingness or reluctance to engage in Indian society, and the influence of their peers.

Upon release from slavery or debt bondage, women often continue in the same brothel as an *adhiya*, working alongside *tsukris* who have not yet been given their freedom. This may be motivated by a wish to earn money if the brothel has sufficient, well-paying clients. Brothels with *tsukris* are generally a bungalow type, charging higher fees and directed towards middle-class clientele. On the downside, bungalow prostitutes and sex workers work long hours, have less free time and service

a high number of clients. As well, *adhiya* sex workers are often restricted in their mobility by the *gharwalis*, though not to the extent of *tsukris*. The decision to remain in the same bungalow as an *adhiya* may also be motivated by a social shyness and reluctance to confront Indian urban society, a quality of Nepalese sex workers noted by all informants. (Some Nepalese sex workers interviewed had not moved one hundred yards from their entry brothel during their entire sex work career.)

Becoming an *adhiya* in a bungalow can serve as a transition towards a more independent life as a free agent sex worker. Life as a *tsukri* does not allow a person to socialize into the surrounding urban culture, and even after years as a *tsukri*, Nepalese women are often still naïve and vulnerable to the dangers of the city. As well, a woman may wish to remain in the same brothel because of her attachments to the *gharwali* and the other sex workers. The social life of the Nepalese sex worker is generally confined to the brothel, whether bungalow or *pinjara*, with little interaction with the community outside the door, and the sex worker may be reluctant to leave her secure, if restricted, social situation.

Other Nepalese women eagerly leave the confinement of the bungalow for the freedom of the lower-paying *pinjara* type of brothel. Although some *pinjara* brothels operate on the *adhiya* system, most *pinjaras* operate either on a tenancy system (in which the sex worker pays rent and utilities to the brothel manager) or are communally run by the sex workers. In Mumbai, entering a *pinjara* at a young age (that is, soon after release from slavery or debt bondage) was frequently motivated by an intention to supplement the lower income by work in beer bars or dance bars. Often, those who left bungalows for *pinjaras* did so when they had established a network of support from other Nepalese sex workers. Some left the bungalows out of hatred for the confined setting and their *gharwali*, looking for a situation in which they could relax more, serve fewer customers,

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have more control over their lives and, as many said, 'be alone.' As a woman grows older (that is, over 25 years) and draws fewer customers, opportunities for an *adhiya* situation in a bungalow may no longer be available, as most bungalows sell 'young and fresh' girls to clients at a higher price. For older sex workers, working in a *pinjara* is often the only option.

## The Nepalese Sex Worker Community

Most free agent Nepalese sex workers live reclusive lives, seldom leaving the brothel except for occasional visits to the market or health practitioner. Frequently, Nepalese women have no interaction even with sex workers in the brothel next door. Many said that they had no friends. In contrast, Indian and Bangladeshi sex workers are highly interactive with the surrounding community.

There are several reasons for the isolation of the Nepalese sex worker in Mumbai and Kolkata. Nepalese are conscious of being 'foreigners' in India, easily distinguished by their skin colour and Mongolian features. Nepalese women are rare in India, with the exception of sex workers, and when they venture into the community, men frequently identify them as such, often in vulgar ways, calling them names such as *randi* (English: whore). Isolation and mistrust of the outside community are also inculcated in the sex workers by years of enforced confinement in the brothel as *tsukris*. In the *tsukris*' first years in confinement, as part of a strategy to prevent them from attempting to run away, both *gharwalis* and peers tell stories of Indian men who will 'rape them and sell them.'

The Nepalese sex worker community is independent, and reluctant to mix with the greater Indian and Bangladeshi sex worker community.

While the Nepalese sex worker community is independent, and reluctant to mix with the greater Indian and Bangladeshi sex worker community, the Nepalese sex worker community as a whole shows more social cohesion than the other migrant sex worker communities in Mumbai or Kolkata. This is evidenced particularly at the death of a Nepalese sex worker, when money is collected throughout the community for her funeral, and at Nepalese festivals such as Dasain (which respondents said was far more enjoyable to celebrate in India than in Nepal).

Almost all sex worker informants stated that they had no knowledge of a Nepalese community in their city and although they frequently saw Nepalese working men they had no contact—and wanted no contact—with them. The non-sex-worker Nepalese in

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Mumbai and Kolkata are primarily rough labourers, cooks in 'Chinese' restaurants, guards, watchmen, Indian army soldiers and vendors. Nepalese sex workers have the most frequent contact with the Nepalese vendors who work the brothel areas selling chicken curry, noodles, clothing, sandals and various Chinese goods. Some sex workers spoke of their shame presenting themselves in front of their compatriots, while others spoke disparagingly of Nepalese labourers in India when they came to the brothels as clients. Respondents reported many incidents of Nepalese clients coming to the brothels drunk, verbally abusing the sex workers, pounding on the gates late at night and generally being unpleasant. Most refused to service Nepalese clients, with the exception of the Nepalese men in the Indian army who frequent the brothels of Khidderpore, Kolkata, whom the sex workers liked very much.

## Return to Nepal

While extensive data were collected on the return of Nepalese sex workers to Nepal, these can only be summarized here. For most of the sex worker respondents, questions regarding their wishes to return to Nepal were answered with a painful ambivalence. While the majority retained a strong love for Nepal, they were realistic that it was not possible to return: they stated that they would be excluded from their families, stigmatized by their communities and unable to earn a living. A few had clear plans to return and were attempting (or hoping) to save money to start a small shop in Nepal, usually in Kathmandu where their history could be disguised.

Most intended to stay in India. For the respondents with children, concern for their children's future was a priority. Those who had raised their children in India thought that India would give them a better life, while those whose children were in Nepal feared the impact of their return as former prostitutes upon their children's reputations and future. Of the remainder, while many had hopes, almost none were optimistic about their future. Very few had plans or clear expectations of what lay ahead. Income in their older years was their greatest concern, and a number clearly stated that they struggled to save money so they would not be 'out on the street like a dog.' Very few sex workers in Mumbai were able to successfully save money, although many were doing so in Kolkata with the help of the savings activities of the Durbar's Usha Cooperative Society. Few could identify alternative income possibilities except small shops or working as a servant in a brothel.

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Organizational informants were very cognizant of the situation of sex workers who wanted to leave the profession. They were uniform in saying that almost invariably, return to Nepal was unsuccessful, whether for 'rescued' persons, young women or older women. As with the sex workers, they identified stigma, discrimination and lack of employment options—not the willingness of the sex workers—as the primary obstacles to return. And with the sex workers, they emphasized that the needs of Nepalese sex workers were the same whether they returned to Nepal or remained in India: the education of their children, personal savings, employment training, and facilities to support them in their illness and old age.

### Areas Not Included in This Summary of Findings

The study investigated the income, savings, expenses, mobility and time use of *tsukris* and former *tsukris* in considerable detail, as well as free agent sex workers' perceptions of their needs, in order to provide recommendations regarding ways in which sex workers could leave prostitution if they desired, and strategies by which sex workers could be mobilized to self-regulate the use of children and enslaved or bonded labourers. Relationships of sex workers with their children were investigated to identify ways in which the children of sex workers could be prevented from entering prostitution.

To assess sources of support and protection within the brothel, the study investigated the relationships of *tsukris* and former *tsukris* with *gharwalis*, clients, other sex workers and members of the local community, as well as personal relationships with boyfriends, husbands and long-term companions (Bengali: *babu*).

As well, the study collected considerable data on *tsukris*' and free agent sex workers' change in workplace for the purpose of understanding the options and agency of the sex workers and to clarify the pan-Indian brothel networks which are the foundation of the slavery and debt bondage system of the Nepalese brothel-based sex industry.

Space in this *Summary of Findings* does not permit discussion of these issues, and can be found in the longer text: *Slavery, Debt Bondage and Sex Work: A Study of Trafficked Nepalese Girls and Women in Mumbai and Kolkata, India*.

# Health-Seeking Behaviour and HIV/AIDS

Investigation of the health of Nepalese sex workers, including the impact of HIV/AIDS, was not an objective of the study, as this has been, will be, or should be covered by other research. However, some data were collected.

A significant feature of the Nepalese sex worker communities in both Mumbai and Kolkata is their autonomy, privacy and isolation. Regarding health-seeking behaviour, Nepalese sex workers attend their own medical practitioners, and are reluctant to access the health services of clinics operated by the government, NGOs, CBOs or sex worker organizations. Organizational informants noted that Nepalese sex workers had a greater concern for health and hygiene than Indian or Bangladeshi sex workers, and mentioned that the Nepalese think that they can take care of themselves better through their own health networks. In Kolkata, the Nepalese community rarely utilized the health care services provided by the Durbar. When asked why, informants said that they don't like to go to the Durbar clinics because doctors ask them 'personal questions,' such as the number of clients they service and their use of condoms.

HIV/AIDS has had a great impact on the Nepalese as well as other sex workers in Mumbai and Kolkata. In Mumbai particularly, fear of HIV/AIDS has caused many Nepalese sex workers to leave Kamathipura—thought to be the epicenter of HIV/AIDS—for outlying suburbs and other cities. Fear of HIV/AIDS, the expansion of sex work in beer bars, and particularly police raids are the three major factors in the diminished number of clients in Kamathipura and neighboring Khetwadi/Falkland Road, resulting in the severe economic problems for the remaining sex workers.

The police raids have resulted in brothels with *tsukris* 'going underground,' making it extremely difficult for outreach workers or peer educators to access the young prostitutes.

Some organizational informants in Mumbai expressed concern regarding the impact of police raids upon HIV/AIDS interventions. The police raids, they say, have resulted



in brothels with *tsukris* 'going underground,' making it extremely difficult for outreach workers or peer educators to access the young prostitutes. The raids, along with the rise of beer bars, have resulted in a decrease of clients, particularly higher-paying middle-class clients, coming to the brothels. Those remaining are poor, working-class clients with little knowledge or concern about HIV/AIDS and considerable reluctance to use condoms. The loss of clients generally has put increased pressure on sex workers to earn a living to support themselves and their children, resulting in lower power to negotiate condom use. Thus, say some organizational informants, police raids among other factors may have increased the HIV prevalence of sex workers in central Mumbai from an existing high 55% to 60%.

Organizational informants (the majority from HIV/AIDS prevention organizations) were divided as to the HIV prevalence of Nepalese sex workers relative to other sex workers, indicating a lack of reliable data. Some thought that HIV prevalence among Nepalese was lower due to their concern for health and the firm stance of free agent sex workers regarding condom use. Sex worker informants, particularly in *pinjara* brothels, confirmed the latter.

“Informants repeatedly stated that the *gharwalis* did not care about HIV/AIDS and that their only interest was making money, as they could charge clients more by forcing *tsukris* to have sex without condoms.

Other organizational informants suspected that HIV prevalence was higher among Nepalese because of their long period as *tsukris*. Sex workers as well as organizational informants repeatedly stated that the *gharwalis* did not care about HIV/AIDS and that their only interest was making money, as they could charge clients more by forcing *tsukris* to have sex without condoms. Except for diet, *gharwalis* controlling *tsukris* in bungalow brothels appeared to care little for

the health of the young prostitutes, as long as they were able to service clients. Practitioners, often of dubious quality, were brought into the brothels if the *tsukris* were sick, and *tsukris* were taken outside to health services only if extremely ill. Informants reported that girls and women were immediately evicted from the brothels if they tested HIV positive.

Although a few organizational informants expressed some encouraging thoughts about the willingness of clients to use condoms, sex worker informants repeatedly stated that clients had no concern for HIV/AIDS and recounted constant problems negotiating

condom use with clients. Many stated that client demand for minors (thus *tsukris*) was in part due to their belief that minors are free from HIV/AIDS.

In the brothels investigated in the study, sex workers were concerned about HIV/AIDS and condom use was prevalent. Many informants, however, spoke with horror of having to conduct sex without condoms for years during their period as *tsukris*, and many spoke of the urgent need to care for their peers who were now dying from AIDS. There was a consensus among sex workers and organizational informants that condom use is not prevalent in many bungalows and that the use of *tsukris* is directly linked with increased likelihood of HIV infection of both clients and prostitutes.

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