
A Critical Approach: A Comprehensive Analysis of Socially Constructed Factors for Trafficking of Women in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper explores socially constructed root causes of trafficking of women and children exploited in sex trade using the case of Nepal. As of yet no single study has attempted to examine gender violence that has escalated the trafficking of women and children from a social justice approach. Recognizing the dearth of literature and the need for further study to explore the multi-layer risk factors, as well as the increasingly oppressive culture and vulnerability for women and girls to trafficking, this research was initiated in collaboration with trafficking survivors exploited in sex trade. Employing a Participatory Action Research (PAR), focus groups, peer interviews and photo-voices were used as collective knowledge generation methods. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted to understand the issue of trafficking in depth. A comprehensive analysis of causal factors of trafficking of women and children as substantive outcomes of the study process are presented, grounded in individual narratives. Implications for social work education and practice are briefly highlighted in this paper.

Keywords: Critical analyses, gender oppression, root causes of trafficking, trafficking survivors

This study primarily focuses on the examination of socially constructed root causes of trafficking of women and children in Nepal, grounded in the collective voices of trafficking survivors. The terms “trafficking survivors,” “co-researchers,” and “women” are interchangeably used throughout this paper. This paper is structured into six sections: (1) introduction; (2) theoretical framework/ methodology; (3) a process for critical analyses of intersectional oppression; (4) a comprehensive analysis of socially constructed root causes of trafficking; and (5) implications for social work education and practice; and (6) discussion/conclusion.

Introduction

Nepal is known as a source country for sex trafficking, especially for women and children (Child Workers in Nepal, 2016; Sharma, 2014; U.S. Department of State, 2016). No accurate figure of sex trafficking of women and children exists in Nepal since trafficking is an illegal activity and done secretly (Buet, Bashford, & Basnyat, 2012; Frederick, Basnyat, & Aguetant, 2010).

However, in the Human Trafficking Assessment Tool Report, the American Bar Association (2011) estimates that 5,000 – 15,000 women and girls are trafficked annually to India for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation. Indeed, the open border between the two countries has contributed to the growing numbers of women and children being trafficked in Nepal (Richardson, Poudel, & Laurie, 2009; Sharma, 2014; Simkhada, 2008). It is reported that the trafficking situation in Nepal has been gradually changing (Frederick, Basnyat, & Aguetant, 2010). For instance, the traditional trend of international trafficking of women and children for sex trade to India has shifted to some Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, Thailand, China, and the Middle East; domestic trafficking for labor exploitations have significantly been increased, mainly in restaurants and massage parlors. Frederick, Basnyat, and Aguetant (2010) further present three areas of trafficking of women and children in Nepal including internal trafficking (domestic trafficking); trafficking to India; and international trafficking (outside the region). However, for the purpose of the study, this paper has primarily focused on the area of trafficking to India for sexual exploitation.

The determinants of human trafficking are complex and, often mutually reinforce each other (Chaulagai, 2009; Locke, 2010; Sharma, 2014; U.S Department of State, 2016). Trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation is inextricably linked to poverty (Poudel & Smyth, 2002; Sen, 2006). Frederick (1998) suggests two types of trafficking: *soft* and *hard*. Soft trafficking is when families and relatives including parents, husbands, or uncles/aunts sell women and children to traffickers who promise to provide them a better life, whereas hard trafficking is when women are “unwillingly and unknowingly abducted, drugged, duped or otherwise dragged to the brothels” (p. 3).

Some common causal factors of trafficking of women and children, include gender-based discriminatory practices, traditional cultural practices, armed conflict, inadequate anti-trafficking laws lengthened criminal justice procedures, and corruption and family dysfunction (Buet, Bashford & Basnyat, 2012; Chaulagai, 2009; Frederick, Basnyat, & Aguetant, 2010; Hennink & Simkhada, 2008; Locke, 2010; McNeill, 2008; Parker, 2011; Poudel & Carryer, 2000; Sharma, 2014; U.S Department of State, 2016). The United States Department of State (2016) further outlines that “many Nepalis living in areas affected by an earthquake that struck Nepal in April 2015 are vulnerable to trafficking” (p. 281).

Nepal has demonstrated significant anti-trafficking efforts by developing national plans, laws, policies, and a variety of approaches including preventive, protective, and prosecution. However, most intervention models adopt a welfare approach, specifically in the prevention of trafficking, which does not address structural violence and women’s oppression. Furthermore, a number of publications, mostly from local agencies and government, present the contributing factors of trafficking women and children through a program development lens. Few, if any, provide trafficking survivors with an opportunity to critically analyze their own issues with trafficking. Overall, the evidence in literature has exemplified the need for a meaningful participation of trafficking survivors to critically analyze the issues of trafficking of women and children exploited in sex trade.

The purpose of this study is to address gaps and construct knowledge in the limited body of literature on root causes of trafficking. The research question of the study is: what are the socially constructed factors that make women and children vulnerable to trafficking for sexual

exploitation in Nepal? For the purpose of this study, this research used a Feminist Participatory Actions Research (FPAR) approach that provided co-researchers (trafficking survivors) with an opportunity to get critically involved in investigating socially constructed factors of trafficking.

Theoretical Framework/ Methodology

Feminist Critical Pedagogy (Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 1994; Wieler, 1991) was used as a key theory to provide trafficking survivors with an opportunity to critically analyze gender violence and oppression, and also to develop trafficking prevention strategies from a social justice lens. Reinharz (1992) highlights that “feminist social research utilizes feminist theory in part because other theoretical traditions ignore or downplay the interaction of gender and power” (p. 249). FPAR encourages participants to get collaboratively engaged in praxis (action-reflection-action) in assessing problems, developing strategies, and planning and implementing the strategies to address the identified issues (Maguire, 1987; Reid & Frisby, 2008). FPAR also advances opportunities for participants as researchers not only in constructing knowledge but also by informing theory and practice (Lorenzetti & Walsh, 2014). In order to understand power and its role in contributing gender violence and intersectional oppression based in social locations, the FPAR theory was used as a critical pedagogy (Htun & Weldon, 2012).

Hanskivsky and Cormier (2011) suggest that the intersectionality approach focuses on “numerous differences and complex realities using a multilevel analysis to uncover exclusion and vulnerabilities” (p. 217). The lack of understanding how multi-layered factors promote a climate of violence and perpetuate the vulnerability of women and children to trafficking exemplifies the need to use FPAR approach for intersectional analysis of trafficking issues. In order to understand intersection oppression on trafficking issues with a focus on socially constructed categories such as gender, race, class and cast, an FPAR methodology as transformational and experiential learning tool was used in this study.

FPAR involves collaboration between participants and a researcher in which the participants must be involved in every stage, ranging from problem formulation to the application and assessment of findings (Park, 1993; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Through this approach, the subject-object relationship of traditional research is transformed into a more democratic subject-subject relationship through critical dialogues (Fals-Borda, 1988; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Schneider, 2010). Dhungel (2017a) argues that “PAR is an educational process that helps both researchers and co-researchers critically understand the social processes and structures of human trafficking and reintegration within both a historical and a contemporary context (p. 243).

Co-researchers/Participants

A combination of criterion and convenience sampling strategies was used for the recruitment of participants who are also recognized as co-researchers in this paper. Through Shakti Samuha, one of the first agencies run by trafficking survivors in the world, eight female adult trafficking survivors ranging from 25 to 40 years of age were recruited who met the following criteria: (1) were 18 years or older; (2) had been trafficked to India for sexual trade; (3) had returned from India and were currently working/living in a rehabilitation shelter for more than two months and/or used to live in a shelter in Kathmandu (Dhungel, 2017a).

For the purpose of this study, the co-researchers were provided with an opportunity to choose methods and subsequently, a number of different methods including focus groups, photo-voice, peer interviews and semi-structured interviews were selected. The women were meaningfully involved in data analyses that began simultaneously with data collection. By coding and categorizing the data, the group developed themes and also shared with the larger communities including the media, elected officials, and academia (Dhungel, 2017a). The following section will briefly present how the selected methods were employed in the process of action-reflection-action.

A Process for Critical Analyses of Intersectional Oppression

Nine focus groups and photovoice as collective knowledge generation tools were used by the co-researchers in the process of praxis. The focus groups allowed the women to get critically engaged in understanding their oppression at a broader level and linking them to their own trafficking issues. This also provided the women with an opportunity to share the photographs taken and explore collective experiences towards understanding root causes of trafficking of women and children. More importantly, the co-researchers were significantly involved in developing surveys and then administered the surveys for peer interviews (Dhungel, 2017b). The co-researchers as a group first began to explore trafficking issues in general which later led them to uncover the realities of gender violence and intersection as sources of their vulnerability to trafficking through praxis. Subsequently, the co-researchers documented the major causes of trafficking of women and children in a flip chart for the purpose of data analyses. The researcher also conducted semi-structured interviews with the co-researchers based on the themes that emerged from other data collection methods such as focus groups and photovoice.

Through the process of action-reflection-action, the co-researchers identified street dramas and a press conference as the impactful tools to educate larger communities on trafficking. Subsequently, they performed street dramas in different forums, aimed to capture a variety of audiences such as teachers/students, professors/graduate students, and elected officials/local leaders and citizens. In addition, the co-researchers shared the identified key findings and invited the media as allies to support them in their collective journey of anti-trafficking interventions.

The women were involved in data analyses by uncovering causal factors of trafficking and investigating comprehensive intersectionality analyses from social justice and human rights lenses. The co-researchers then recognized that the contributing factors were interlinked to each other, making women and children vulnerable to trafficking, which were further developed into themes. The following section will discuss a comprehensive critical analysis that focuses on root causes of trafficking of women and children.

A Comprehensive Analysis: Socially Constructed Root Causes of Trafficking

The co-researchers collectively identified five root factors elevating their vulnerability to trafficking: (1) poverty/class; (2) social divisions of cast and ethnicity; (3) gender inequality/patriarchal norms; (4) neo-colonialism/global capitalism; and (5) globalization/urbanization.

Poverty/Class

The study identified poverty/class as major root causes of trafficking of women and children. However, poverty is more than a lack of financial well-being; the relationships of poverty and health and well-being of people is significant. Poverty and class demark people in binary terms such as rich and poor people but also create practices of and justification for exclusion and inclusion. For instance, one of the co-researchers narrated:

One day my teacher asked me to go out of a classroom because I was not in school uniforms. My family was not in position to buy the uniforms for me so I did stay outside of the classroom and watched the inside activities from windows for a few days as I wanted to learn. I felt bad for doing this. I then stopped going to the school and started working for others as a cowherd. One day, a couple of my neighbors proposed me to get involved in their sari business and asked me to come to India with them to learn the business. I do only remember I was on a train and then...After a couple of days, I found myself in a very dark room and later I found it was a brothel, not a sari shop.

Another woman shared:

Since we lost our home and land due to my father's involvement in drink and playing cards. We then moved from our community and started living in a cowshed in a new community... I did not go to school after grade 3 due to the difficulties in balancing my household workload and school assignments. I found that no one seemed to be interested in talking to me in my neighborhood/community as we were labeled as poor class family. One of my neighbors approached me to come to Kathmandu with her and work as a nani. We needed money for food and shelter. With the permission of my parents, I left my home for Kathmandu but I reached India instead of.

Social Divisions of Cast and Ethnicity

The social divisions of caste and ethnicity also serve to increase women' and children's vulnerability to trafficking. The study found that these social divisions are deeply rooted and deeply impactful on people's lives. Critical discussions in focus groups centered on social divisions: how higher caste people are privileged with power and access to resources and how lower caste people have less social power, virtually no access to resources, and are shut out of socio-economic participation. Members of disparaged ethnic groups face similar challenges. Socially constructed divisions divide people into dominant and subordinate groups (Ngo, 2008). The study found that the subordinate group labeled as *untouchables* in the local context experience what is commonly known as an inferiority complex. When exploitations of a dominant group upon an oppressed people based on their social locations are heightened, the oppressed people feel powerless and begin to search for an alternative settlement for their survival. For instance, one co-researcher shared:

As you know I belong to low cast and what I did in order to avoid the discrimination against me. I was discriminated everywhere like in school and social gatherings in my community several times, actually almost every day which made me feel that I should leave this community and go somewhere that no one knows me. One of my relatives from my own neighborhood, who was working in India, asked me to come with her in India where I could get many jobs. I was looking forward to escaping from my village so I left without informing my parents.

Gender Inequality/Patriarchal Norms

This study identified the pervasive nature of gender violence as a key factor in maintaining gender inequality and normalizing violence. The research team critically analyzed patriarchal norms and values that perpetuate gender violence and oppression, for instance, one of the women reported:

Being born as a girl, I had to take care of my brothers and work at home which reduced my desire to go to school and one day I quit. No one in my family encouraged me to go back to school. I was even told that you have to go to other's house after getting married so you rather learn household chores.

She further added:

I later ended up leaving my home and going outside the country. If I had gone to school, I would have been smart and learned about trafficking and also would have become aware of this. I never thought one human being can also sell another human being. Who can I blame for this situation? Sometimes I blamed myself who was born as a girl and sometimes I got mad at my family who did not want me to go to school just because I was not a boy.

The group also identified policies and legislation that maintain and perpetuate gender inequality. For instance, one co-researcher narrated, "According to our law, a parental property is inherited to sons, not daughters, so the society, even our family, sees us we are burden to them." Another co-researcher added:

This cruel society sees women as commodity who are born for entertaining men and providing services to them. What ashamed values! We are the ones who give them lots of power, which are being exercised upon us, escalating our vulnerability to trafficking. If we were treated in the same ways as our brothers were treated, our situations would be different now.

Neo-Colonialism/Global Capitalism

This study identified Neo-Colonialism or Global Capitalism as another contributing factor to vulnerability to trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation. The research team recognized that the unequal relationship between India and Nepal meant that it is Nepalese children and women who are trafficked to Indian brothels, and not the other way around. The traffickers usually take Nepalese children and girls to those parts of India where prostitution is legal, subjecting one nationality to the laws of another nation, with insufficient intervention by the Nepalese government on behalf of their own citizens. One of the co-researchers stated:

The Government of Nepal is aware that our girls are trafficking to Indian brothels but unfortunately in order to prevent trafficking and repatriate trafficking victims, our Government does not take any initiatives to discuss this issue with Indian Government. This is just because of power that Indian Government has.

Another woman concurred and narrated:

I still remember the day when Indian Government released us who were under 18 from Indian brothels and asked Nepalese Government to take us from India but it took almost 6 months for

our government to come and bring us back to Nepal. Further I heard that Government did not want to bring us back and they did later just because of the pressure from Indian Government.

Globalization/Urbanization

This study recognized that globalization and urbanization are contributing factors that expose women and children to trafficking. O'Brien (2008/2009) argues that "globalization, part of a market-driven, monoculture global economy, has contributed to the collapse of economies and a destruction of the environment in developing nations, thus supplying a pool of poor women and children for the sex industry" (p. 14). In the Nepalese context, globalization and urbanization operate hand-in-hand to make village life more difficult, city life more enticing, and women and children from the villages less able to recognize the risks posed by traffickers. One of the co-researchers affirmed this analysis when she stated:

I came to Kathmandu after I finished grade 10. I saw very beautiful girls in western clothes that I never even imagined I could wear these types of clothes. I was always in our tradition clothes so this means a completely new thing to me. Also, I saw people talking on a cell phone and I did not even know what it was until I came to Kathmandu. I badly wanted to buy a cell phone and wear nice clothes and in the meantime, somebody offered me a job – to take something to India – and I thought it was one-time job but I could buy all the things that I want from this work, and I accepted the job even though I knew I was not doing right thing. Taking some illegal things with you was a dangerous job but I did not know that after the completion of the work I would be ended up in the sex slavery.

Another woman echoed this point and she added:

I was born in a village. If you are not in a school for whatever reasons, you have no choices – either you do household things or leave the village. I meant if want to make your life better you have to move somewhere where lots of opportunities are available. I heard several times that only lucky people can go to Kathmandu and I wanted to prove that I was one of them. Going to Kathmandu became my dream and one day I left my village for Kathmandu. If I had everything in my village I would not have come to Kathmandu.

Implications for Social Work Education and Practice

Although preventative interventions using a welfare approach have reduced trafficking for sexual exploitation to India, one could argue that women and children are still exploited in sex trade. This is because the welfare approach primarily focuses on the symptoms of trafficking such as unemployment and lack of awareness and this does not adequately address the structural issues, such as poverty/class and gender inequality. Time has come for academia and practitioners in social work profession to put this issue on their agenda and draw the attentions of national and international communities towards the issues of trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Social justice is fundamental to social work research as it provides "a shared platform to the disenfranchised women with an opportunity not only to exchange ideas/insights and share transformational learning experiences but also to promote solidarity and advocate in amelioration for social injustice" (Dhungel, 2017a, p. 326). The research team, which included the survivors and the researcher, identified key implications for social work education and practice. They include four critical practices. The first is recognizing that trafficking survivors are experts in their lived experiences and their participation and contributions are vital in developing effective,

inclusive and rights-based trafficking preventative models to address the root causes of trafficking. The second implication is inviting and encouraging trafficking survivors to provide their critical insights/expertise in developing anti-trafficking prevention laws, policies, and programs. Further, survivors need to be significantly involved in anti-trafficking interventions including strategic planning, program development, and educational campaigns such as raising awareness and street dramas for high-risk communities. Third, further anti-oppressive practice research that promotes engagement with survivors including both men and women who have been exploited in labor markets such as agriculture, afforestation and organ removal is warranted. This would help governments and communities gain a better understanding of the full spectrum of human trafficking. Fourth, in order to increase awareness and help people understand how trafficking operates, incorporating the topics associated with human trafficking in middle and high school curricula and providing students with opportunities to have open discussions around the issues surrounding trafficking is critical. That is especially imperative because this study found that most survivors were trafficked in between the ages of 7 to 19 years. For instance, one of the co-researcher stated, “When I was trafficked I never thought one human being could also sell another human being.”

Discussion/Conclusions

This study illustrates that the feminization of poverty and gender violence of women and children, specifically in trafficking, is multi-faceted. The overlapping marginalization, narrations and experiences by the co-researchers exemplifies patterns of gender, cast, and poverty/class based oppression. This study affirms that the web of complementary oppressive factors is complex, increasing the risk of trafficking of women and children. More importantly, evident in this paper is that oppression intersects with the structural barriers that escalate the marginalization of women and children to trafficking. Due to the lack of critical analysis of gender violence and oppression, the three international approaches towards anti-trafficking intervention including prevention, protection, and prosecution do not adequately address the above-mentioned factors in the Nepalese context. Most anti-trafficking preventive programs are based on a welfare approach and thus they do not meet the needs/aspirations of women and children. Therefore, in collaboration with trafficking survivors, anti-trafficking preventive efforts need to be developed from a rights-based approach. Indeed, using an anti-oppressive practice theory in developing programs and policies associated with the issues of trafficking and their implementations is fundamental.

Furthermore, there also needs to be more cross-community and cross-cultural research and theory-building around the issues of human trafficking (Dhungel, 2017b). To elaborate, the national and international community including the government, academia, activists, survivors, and practitioners are required to come together in solidarity and get involved in a social justice inquiry to examine whether the identified factors discussed above are also implicated in trafficking of women and children exploited in the labor markets nationally and locally, such as restaurants, massage parlors, beauty parlors and pubs, and critically analyze the gaps in the current anti-trafficking laws, policies, and programs. For this, it is indispensable to avoid conducting quantitative and qualitative studies that focus only on individual interviews with survivors. Instead, it is important to insist upon community-based participatory inquiries that allow survivors to contribute their indigenous knowledge and wisdom and to advance their critical thinking.

Overall, this emancipatory study illuminates the enduring wisdom of the mantra from an earlier generation of feminist thinkers (see, for example, Freire, 1973; hooks, 1994; Ellsworth, 1989) that ‘the personal is political.’ It also contributes to shifting the public discourse from “trafficking issue is an individual issue” to “trafficking issue is a community issue” and from “trafficking victims are clients” to “trafficking victims are agents of change.” This study provides solid evidence that this kind of inquiry process can change how co-researchers understand their individual and collective experience of trafficking and promotes consciousness raising. As the study progressed, the co-researchers were able to let go of the blame they had interiorized for their oppression and recognize structural and social causes. They made transformative changes to their worldviews.

Oppression is a complex system. The different forms are not distinct or separate. They are intersectional and cyclical and they endure. All those invested in social change – including social work professionals, the Government of Nepal, researchers, survivors, and community members – should be conscious of how cycles of intersectional oppressions and gender violence operate and endure. In concluding, sustainable collaborations among all these players is an effective way to disrupt these cycles and build a new kind of society that embraces survivors, holds traffickers to account, and decreases the opportunities for trafficking.

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