



# Human Traffic

In the time it will take to read this article – about 20 minutes – 44 children around the world will be trafficked, the majority of them into sexual slavery. In the time it takes to eat breakfast all of these children will lose their innocence and in some cases their lives just because they are an easy target for people wanting to make money. We investigate the shocking reality of child trafficking in the world today.

Words by **Wendy Champagne** | Photography by **Kiran Ambwani**



Divya and Sapna at the Rescue Foundation in Mumbai, India, in *BAS: Beyond Red Light*.

**T**hirteen-year old Geeta Thapa was waiting to fill her bucket at a communal well in a quiet suburb of Kathmandu, Nepal, when a young man began chatting with her. He was likable enough and in the days that followed that initial meeting 'Bibek' was often at the well or sitting outside the gates of the missionary school where Geeta worked as a cleaner.

It was 2003 and Geeta – the youngest of five children of a subsistence farming family from Nuwakot in the spectacular Himalayan foothills – had been living in Kathmandu with her sister for six months.

Weeks passed, yet Geeta did not respond well to Bibek's attention. She had seen him in the street with a woman she suspected was his wife so one afternoon when he turned up at the well yet again she told him flatly: "Stay away from me!" The next day Bibek arrived with his 'sister' Rupa – *didi*, the Nepali word for sister or aunty, often refers to kinship rather than blood relationships. Rupa told Geeta she was travelling out of town for the school holidays and needed someone to take care of her children on the journey. She would pay, she said. Geeta agreed.

Two days later, after multiple drowsy and drugged bus and train rides, Geeta found herself in a squalid locked room in the highway town of Turbhe in Mumbai's sprawling outer suburbs. This was her new home she was told by a shrill Nepali woman called Aarti Tamang. "Rupa Aunty has sold you for thousands of rupees. You are going to have to sleep with men and if you try to escape, the police will catch you and put you in jail for the rest of your life."

Geeta tried the doors and windows. They were locked from the outside. She began screaming hysterically. She wailed and wailed until the brothel owner was forced to crank up her CD player to cover the terrible noise ... that lasted for three days and nights.

**WHAT IS CHILD TRAFFICKING?**

An estimated 7000 young girls were trafficked from Nepal to India and the Middle East for commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) that same year and a similar number each year since then.



**GEETA'S STORY**

"[The woman] told Geeta she was travelling out of town for the school holidays and needed someone to take care of her children on the journey. She would pay, she said."

Like many, Geeta was beaten, raped and forced to have unprotected sex. She was a sex slave, sold to a brothel owner who kept her locked in a room for six months until she was trusted not to escape. In Mumbai the period of brothel bondage for a virgin lasts from three to five years. After this time her 'debt' is considered to have been paid and she is free to return to her home.

The same week Geeta was taken to the brothel there was a police raid and 21 girls were rescued. Geeta was hidden under the floorboards and soon after she was re-sold to a nearby brothel. Two years later, Indian anti-trafficking police working with a Mumbai NGO, the Rescue Foundation, rescued her. She was 15 years old.

That was more than five years ago. Yet according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) 2009 report on trafficking, despite growing international awareness, improvements in legal frameworks used to prosecute traffickers and numerous UN conventions and protocols, more young girls are trafficked both within and across international borders than ever before. And traffickers are rarely prosecuted.

Child trafficking is not a high priority for many of the world's governments. Even the term is confusing, as the act of trafficking may not have anything to do with transport – that is smuggling, and can take place with an individual's consent. It wasn't until 2000 that global experts agreed on a definition. In the Palermo Protocol, trafficking is described as the non-consensual "recruitment, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons ... for the purpose of exploitation ..."

**THE BUSINESS SIDE**

The visitor's area of Kathmandu Central Jail is rather oddly situated just outside the prison's front gate. It is a rectangular concrete shed approximately three metres long and just wide enough to contain two benches on either side of a fixed stone table. There are about 20 people already squeezed into the space when I am ushered in. A young inmate sits down opposite me and rather grandly motions to a guard to bring cold drinks for his guest. Mr Fisty, as the police refer to him, was just 21 years old at the height of his career as a trafficker. He doesn't look much older today, at 28.



The Rescue Foundation, a non-profit NGO provides victims of human trafficking with a safe place to live, healthcare and counselling, and they are taught skills such as tailoring, embroidery and vocational training.



He seems to like my attention and clearly gets a kick out of hearing his "trafficking" exploits, even if he is the one telling them. "Some months I was delivering 150 girls," he tells me with a crooked smile. "I was running a network that stretched from Bangladesh to Saudi Arabia." Mr Fisty had three passports, a couple of million rupees and certain members of the CBI (India's Central Bureau of Investigation) on his payroll before he gave himself up to Nepalese authorities during a sting operation. He now lives in the Kathmandu Central Jail where he will be until 2012. During his incarceration a local NGO funded his passage through a degree in sociology and another in international studies. Clearly he has political ambitions. Yet he also seems like a sensitive guy so I ask him how he felt about the torture and the rapes that happened to the girls once they were delivered to the brothels. "That wasn't my business," he replied.

Siddharth Kara, abolitionist and author of *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery* (Columbia University Press, 2008) makes the case that sex trafficking is a

tremendously profitable, low-risk enterprise. In his book, which he says was conceived as an attempt to "unify outrage with economics", he makes the following mathematical assumptions: "There are more than 1.2 million sex slaves trafficked in the world (each year), generating a global weighted average US\$29,210 in profits per slave per year at net profit margins of 65-75 per cent (profitability), with a global growth rate of 3.6 per cent (growth) ... Sex slaves generate more than US\$40 billion annually for their owners."

Others, including author, anti-trafficking activist and *New York Times* Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nicholas Kristof also believe that focusing on

*A disproportionate number of women are involved in trafficking not only as victims, but also as traffickers.*

– UNODC GLOBAL REPORT ON TRAFFICKING 2009

the economics is the key to defeating traffickers. They look at it as a business of supply and demand – a pernicious, unlawful, inhumane practice driven by common market forces. "If the trafficking business model in India relies on virgin girls, which it does," says Kristof, "you go after the demand. Crack down on the buyers and it will undermine the profitability of the traffickers and reduce trafficking as a consequence."

In India customers favour fair-skinned (Nepali) virgins; about one quarter of all the sex workers in Mumbai are Nepali girls like Geeta. Around the globe traffickers target naive young girls and boys from poor, displaced or remote families with promises of marriage or work. Kustori, a friend of Geeta's who now lives at the Rescue Foundation in Mumbai, was told by her trafficker she could get work in a Bollywood film. She was 15 and her grandmother was relieved to be free of the burden of care.

Sixteen-year-old Deepa was sold to a trafficker by her sister-in-law. It is quite common for a distant member of the family to be implicated. Deepa became ►



Aarti (left) and friend. Below left: Nancy Leduc, dance choreographer from the documentary *BAS! Beyond Red Light*, speaks with Aarti, one of the girls from the Rescue Foundation.



Every girl has a different experience yet Geeta's story offers a micro-view of the major dilemma facing victims of child trafficking. How do girls who have endured so much at such a young age successfully rehabilitate into society, families and workplaces? This is the forgotten front of child trafficking. Whatever global will and resources exist are being directed towards the legal and law enforcement aspects of the atrocity, not towards creating futures for the victims.


pregnant at the Mumbai brothel, was then saved by the Rescue Foundation and then re-trafficked by a local boy who targeted her on trips to and from a clinic after the birth of her child.

Whether it is penury, persecution or just misplaced curiosity, hundreds of young girls every day end up as prisoners in major cities such as Sydney, London, Bangkok or Mumbai, with its vast network of brothels and dancing bars.

**SUPPORTING RESILIENCE**

The lucky ones are rescued. Although the big question remains: what next? Geeta chose to go back to the scene of her exploitation and help other girls to escape. She is a victim turned vigilante who now works at the Rescue Foundation accompanying its director, Triveni Acharya, on brothel raids. She is a real heroine yet her commitment to rescuing others is driven by a desperate will to restore what she calls her "lost prestige" and a personal obsession to see her brothel owner face justice. "I am here," she says, "because I want to arrest that brothel owner and bring other Nepali girls home to Nepal. I don't want them to fall into the same trap as me."

Given the extraordinarily high incidence of re-trafficking – about 65 per cent of children will be re-trafficked after rescue – the limited choices for girls with little or no education and the stigma of the brothels hanging over them, there is an urgent need for a more enlightened approach, one that aims to provide tools for the girls to heal and empower themselves, to build a future of their own making, to acquire adult independent living and job skills that can support them in a life outside institutional care. Yet this approach requires an individual, step-by-step focus, just like parenting. The girls need to be given the time and the tools to reclaim their bodies, build self-esteem and develop the skills they can use to become self-reliant in the modern world. Aarti, one of the girls at the Rescue Foundation who is just about to turn 18 says: "I only want to make a little money and have a 'name' as well. I don't want more than that."

For Geeta, the road forward is not so clear. She still agonises over her deepest secret. After her childhood slavery in Mumbai's red light area she became a prisoner of a different sort and is currently living with HIV/AIDS. 

**FILMMAKING & ACTIVISM**



There are many moments as a journalist when stories move you to write engaging pieces, and then there are a few that ignite a passion to jump into an active engagement with the subjects.

I was living in India in 2005 when I first came across a news item on child trafficking that really made me wake up. Then quite by chance I was given the opportunity to pursue research on illegal international adoption in Nepal. During that visit I met Geeta and her story compelled me to investigate child trafficking more comprehensively. Then I met my daughter Lhola – she was five months old and living in a shelter in Kathmandu. Somehow because of the confluence of those two events I wrote my first funding proposal for a film on child trafficking.

Four years later I completed the film *Bas! Beyond the Red Light*. It was entirely a process of trust and risk backed up with a solid commitment to breaking through compassion fatigue and helping people create relationships with actual children who have survived this experience. Activism is engagement with life.



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