

6th July 2010, Kathmandu - Lax government enforcement of human anti-trafficking laws has led to an increase in the trafficking of young Nepalese women and girls, mainly for exploitation in Indian brothels, local activists say.

Nepal's 2008 Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act stipulates punishment for traffickers of up to 20 years in prison and US\$2,600 in fines, and provides for the compensation of victims. But it seems the new law has done nothing to reduce the phenomenon.

"The crucial problem is weak implementation of anti-trafficking laws allowing the traffickers to operate easily," said Shyam Kumar Pokharel, managing director of Samrakshak Samuha Nepal (SASANE), an NGO supporting trafficked victims. "Although thousands of traffickers have been arrested, only a few hundred have been convicted."

"These traffickers are all from local criminal gangs and have strong links with brothel owners in the Indian cities," said Pokharel, who did research on imprisoned traffickers. He found that the traffickers sourced the girls and young women mostly from villages close to their own, before enticing them to Kathmandu with false promises of jobs and marriage.

In the early 1990s, the government estimated that at least 5,000-7,000 girls and women were trafficked annually to brothels in India, but NGOs say this number has gone up significantly. In the past year, Maiti Nepal, the first local NGO to attempt to combat human trafficking, has stopped over 17,000 young women crossing the border with traffickers. The NGO has a 36-member border surveillance team, all whom are victims of human trafficking and trained to identify vulnerable girls.

Local NGOs reckon that more than three quarters of the women and girls being trafficked end up in Indian brothels with most of the rest ending up in similar establishments in the Middle East.

"Unfortunately, there is a lack of official data because no studies have been done to get an accurate estimate, but the situation has worsened," Januka Bhattarai, project coordinator of Shakti Samuha, an NGO that helps to rehabilitate trafficked victims rescued from Indian brothels, told IRIN.

Until the 1990s traffickers targeted a handful of districts, namely Sindupalchowk and Nuwakot (some 50km south of the capital). These districts, inhabited mostly by ethnic Tamang, were among the poorest in the country and yet readily accessible from Kathmandu.

These days, with a somewhat better road system, traffickers have been able to penetrate the whole country, according to Maiti Nepal.

Negligent?

Monitoring the traffickers is not easy given the 1,800km-long border with India and the fact that over 100,000 female migrant workers go to India every year. They do not need travel documents or work visas. The government has not been intervening in this migration process or attempting to identify traffickers or trafficked people.

“It is often the NGOs who are involved in checking the borders, investigating the crimes, protecting the witnesses and following up cases in court,” Biswo Khadga, director of Maiti Nepal, said.

Many cases go unreported: The legal system has registered only 123 cases so far in 2010 - a tiny fraction of the real number of trafficked women and girls, according to SASANE.

Government officials who preferred anonymity said they had been hobbled by political instability and weak governance.

The Trafficking Act requires the government to set up rehabilitation centres, but so far only three are operational - all run by NGOs.

“We’re getting tired of seeking financial aid from the government. It remains very negligent on this issue,” said Bhattarai from Shakti Samuha, which runs a rehabilitation centre in Sindupalchok District.

The government’s lack of progress on this issue has drawn criticism from the US State Department: Its annual trafficking report released in June called the “complicity” of the Nepalese government a “serious problem” and suggested strengthening the National Human-Trafficking Task Force, as well as establishing more effective ways to monitor trafficking cases.

Source: [IRIN](#)