

BOMBAY GOING

Migration, return and anti- trafficking in the lives of Nepali migrant sex workers

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Abstract

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Set against the background of a critical examination of anti-trafficking organisations' dominant discourses of sex trafficking in the Nepali context, this dissertation provides an ethnographic account of how Tamang women and men in the Sindhupalchowk district, defined by these organisations as severely affected by sex trafficking, understand what they define as "Bombay going" or migration for sex work. The main motivation for this endeavour is that very little, if anything, has been said about sex trafficking and anti-trafficking efforts from the perspective of Tamang women besides the studies based on the rehabilitation and reintegration programmes led by anti-trafficking organisations that concentrate exclusively on the women's identity as victims. This study focuses on women's agency and the meaning they ascribe to their roles as sex workers in the migratory process in the present and the past. It investigates how they carve out a space for themselves and create relatedness in the places between which they move—their house in the rural area in Nepal and the brothels in Mumbai that temporarily serve as their homes during their absence. Of central importance is the women's return to their natal or conjugal house after years of sex work in the red light district and their lived everyday lives as wives, mothers, daughters, etc.

In stark contrast to the dominant discourse among the anti-trafficking organisations, the Tamang women in this study returned of their own accord and were reintegrated into their native villages. It also demonstrates that their migration to Mumbai was driven by the intention of return from the very start. During their years abroad, the women felt a strong sense of belonging to and maintained their membership to their natal houses, through social, religious and financial contributions of "Bombay wealth", through return visits and strong and well-established networks between the brothels in Mumbai and their homes in Nepal. Moreover, through their contributions from sex work Tamang women have created significant personal and structural social changes in their places of origin regarding gendered roles, family relations, marriage practices, mortuary rituals and religious practices and inheritance rights.

The dissertation is based on multisited ethnographic fieldwork carried out over a fifteen month long period, with several return visits during the years after the fieldwork period, in both Nepal and India. However, the main part of the fieldwork was conducted in the Sindhupalchowk district, northeast of Kathmandu, mainly inhabited by the Tamang ethnic group. Additionally, fieldwork was carried out at the brothels in the red light districts of Mumbai and Kolkata, and interviews were conducted with INGOs and NGOs in Kathmandu working with anti-trafficking initiatives in Nepal.

Key words: anthropology, anti-trafficking, sex trafficking, migration for sex work, prostitution, sex work, return, remittances, house, home, belonging, relatedness, everyday life, gender, agency, death, mortuary practises, Nepal, India