"Selling Girls in Kuwait": Domestic Labour Migration and Trafficking Discourse in Nepal

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Abstract: The pace of economic globalization is accelerating, ironically, at a time when the movement of human capital is becoming more restricted. As the potential for legal migration is denied by states to would-be migrants, illegal networks form that place them at greater risk of exploitation. This paper examines a scheme by which Nepalese girls were "trafficked" to Kuwait to work as domestic workers, and how this was constructed as their immoral objectification by the Nepalese media and an anti-child exploitation NGO. I argue that "discourses of national honour," which hold girl children as the legitimate objects of state protection places opprobrium on those who facilitate illegal migration and ignores the decision-making of the migrants and their families. A meaningful discourse on the nature of a "new world order" for migrant workers must balance risk and autonomy for all migrants, regardless of gender or age.

Résumé: Le tempo de la mondialisation s'accélère, ironiquement, à un moment où le capital humain est de plus en plus restreint. À mesure que le potentiel pour la migration légale est refusé à des aspirants migrants par les États, se forment des réseaux illégaux qui les exposent à de plus grand risques d'exploitation. Cet article examine un système dans lequel de jeunes népalaises étaient «vendues» au Koweit pour oeuvrer comme travailleuses domestiques, et comment cet arrangement a été construit comme une objectification immorale par les média du Népal et une organisation non-gouvernementale consacrée à la défense des enfants. Je soutiens que «les discours de l'honneur national» qui considèrent des fillettes comme objet légitime de la protection de l'État jettent le blâme sur ceux qui facilitent la migration illégale et ignorent les décisions des migrants et de leurs familles. Un discours sensé sur la nature d'un «nouvel ordre mondial» pour les travailleurs migrants doit obtenir un équilibre entre le risque et l'autonomie pour tous les migrants, sans égard pour l'âge ou le sexe.

One defining aspect of globalization is the movement of economic migrants across national boundaries. Even though states regulate and control that flow thousands of migrants resort to illegal or extra-legal methods to access distant labour markets. The price that these migrants pay for remaining concealed from state regulation is the forfeit of legal protection against the physical, psychological or economic exploitation and abuse that may arise from illegal or extra-legal employment. Where those migrants are young and female, states and other agents intervene in their movement to labour markets under the pretext that they require more protection because of their age and gender status. However, efforts to protect young female migrants are articulated through discourses that are aimed, intentionally or not, to keep culturally subordinate people in their place by limiting their access to global labour markets. State protection thus conflicts with the interests of households where migration decisions are made.

In this paper I will discuss the "rescue" of 15 Nepalese teenage girls from a scheme to traffic them to work in Kuwait as domestic workers, and how this was constructed in the media and by agencies mandated to protect women and children. These girls were from a poor Tamang village located north of Kathmandu that I have been studying as a source of migrant carpet labourers, an occupation that was formerly accessible to female youth.[1] With the decline of that industry since the mid-1990s, people in that village have been searching for alternative sources of employment and, as few opportunities exist within Nepal, that search has expanded beyond its borders. While the "rescue" of these teenagers was consistent with a Nepalese government ban on all female migration to the Gulf, it contradicted the interests of their respective households. By conflating this trafficking scheme with forced prostitution and constructing the "rescue" as a legitimate act of intervention against the sexual violation of these girls, Nepalese media and NGOs deployed a compelling discourse that both ignores the

collective migration decisions of these Buddhist villagers and implicates the sexual morality of Tamang women, which departs from the conservative practices of Nepal's dominant Hindu majority.

The protection and "rescue" of these young domestic workers was considered necessary by the Nepalese state because of their potential physical and sexual exploitation by their Arab employers. Purnima Mankekar, writing about a similar case of child rescue in India, argued that it is motivated in part by a "synecdochic relationship between the purity of the girl child and the purity of the nation" (1997: 29). The violation of Indian women during the 1947 partition, interpreted by the Indian state as a violation of "national honour" in the context of political and cultural struggle rendered women's bodies as signs through which men communicated (Das, 1995: 56). The rescue of the Nepalese girls was justified in Nepal with recourse to similar discourses of physical and sexual violation, making them signs in an emerging struggle over human movement in an increasingly borderless world.

Perceptions of the risk of violation that young women working in Kuwait would suffer was sufficient for the Government of Nepal to ban all female migration to the Gulf in the fall of 1998 at a time when male migration to that region was being encouraged.[2] Nepal at this time instituted one of the most restrictive migration policies in the region; by state decree Bangladeshi women may not work in the Gulf unless accompanied by their husbands, India restricts those under the age of 30, and Pakistan sets the minimum age at 35.

The well-publicized death of Kani Sherpa, a Nepalese female domestic worker in Kuwait on November 9, 1998 illustrated for many in Nepal the physical and sexual dangers of female migrant labour. Sherpa, a native of the Sindhupalchok region, where these teenagers are also from, had been working as a domestic worker in a Kuwaiti household, cooking, cleaning and caring for children. She travelled there through a Kathmandu employment agency in 1997, when Nepalese law restricted female migration only to those over the age of 21. According to Nepalese media accounts, Sherpa had been raped and abused by the men of the family for whom she worked and was hospitalized after one of them threw her from a third-floor balcony in a fit of jealousy. Hospital authorities informed her that she was either going to be jailed as an illegal migrant, or be returned to the offending family. Sherpa became despondent and swallowed enough sleeping tablets to end her life (*Kathmandu Post*, 1998a). In this paper, I would like to look beyond Sherpa's death as a real event, and focus instead on how it was narrated into accounts of the "trafficking" of other girls to Kuwait.

In the first part of this paper, I review some of the literature on Asian domestic work. I then examine conditions in Sindhupalchok that compelled migration to Kuwait, and examine the social context in which decisions are made. I will then discuss how representations in local media and in informal gossip deploy a "trafficking discourse" that conflates illegal and extra-legal migration and employment of young women with forced prostitution and slavery. This discourse, I will argue, under-values the role that migrant families play in making these decisions by placing blame instead on shadowy middlemen and syndicates from whom their "rescue" is required. I will conclude by reflecting on how the fate of these teenagers contributes to the development of what Christine Chin (1997) describes as a "discourse on the kind of values and morals that are to inform social relations and interactions in the construction of a new world order."

Domestic Workers in a Transnational Economy

Paid domestic work is a growing phenomenon that draws female migrant labour from less developed countries to the newly industrialized countries of Asia and the oil-rich Arab Gulf States. In Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong, for example, women have entered formal sector employment, leaving their own unpaid domestic work to other domestic workers, often drawn from poorer regions. This work is tightly controlled by government visa regulations, and careful attention is given to mechanisms that prevent domestic labour migrants from settling permanently in the country. In addition, local discourses about foreign maids also constrain their ability to integrate into the host country.

Descriptions of female domestic workers in other parts of the Asian region resonate with many of the discursive constructs encountered in the story of Kani Sherpa's death, and how the events of that death were narrated into accounts of the attempted migration of the girls from Sindhupalchok. Many of these women are perceived to be dangerously "out of place," not only because they are working in a foreign country but also because they are working for wages in an occupation that was formerly unwaged, and as a result are regarded as morally suspect by their employers. Single, unattached women who work outside of their own household and country frequently elicit fears about uncontrolled sexuality, promiscuity and prostitution. According to Nicole Constable (1996), for example, Filipina maids compare unfavourably to celibate Chinese *sohei* matrons of the prewar period as well as to the often-abused *mui tsai*, or bonded "little sisters"

who were forced into domestic work in the past to repay family debts. Constable adds that Filipina maids are "out of place" in cosmopolitan Hong Kong, and are thus believed to be potential thieves and prostitutes (1996: 12). Her account focuses on the formation of identity through community participation and cooperation among Filipina women in Hong Kong, but she concludes that their resistance to the powers that constrain their lives is limited to adjustment, and does not extend to solidarity and activism in efforts to make for better job conditions.

Conditions of domination and docility are joined in an occupation that few people, including the workers themselves, see as a legitimate form of wage labour. Domestic labour is labour in the household, replacing the role played by women who formerly did unpaid domestic work but who now work in the wage economy. Even as paid domestic workers, migrants suffer from a characterization of domestic work as non-productive. According to Christine Chin, for example, Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in newly industrialized Malaysia are not vigorously regulated because the work that they do is considered fundamentally unproductive, and thus until recently unworthy of the State's attention (1997). In Malaysia, state oversight has led to unchecked abuses; women who suffer at the hands of their employers have little legal recourse beyond returning to their home country. In the Malaysian media, moreover, moral panic against foreign domestics has been fomented.

Julian Groves and Kimberly Chan (1999) show how Filipina maids respond to a similar threat of moral stigma in Hong Kong; their professional organisations are more preoccupied with ensuring that the moral behaviour of domestic workers is beyond reproach than with advocating for better wages or working conditions. Domestic "professionalism" is aimed at undermining the association of domestic work with prostitution. The association between domestic work and prostitution is widespread and permeates treatment of this subject even in the most erudite social scientific journals. Lucie Cheng (1999), for example, discusses domestic labour in the same section as entertainment work and the sex trade in a recent review of women's employment and globalization in such a way that does not deconstruct this link. Filipina maids are not deconstructing this link either; they see it as a real threat against which they must maintain diligence.

Young single women are regarded as potential prostitutes in many Asian contexts because they are unsupervised by their own family and represent sexual competition for women in the host family. It is also feared that domestic labourers will resort to illegal prostitution if they lose their legal jobs. Globalization in the sex trade is apparent in the Asian region, with Thai prostitutes in Japan, Burmese in Thailand, and Nepalese in Bombay (Skeldon, 2000; Johnston and Khan, 1998). The exotic "Other" is sexually desirable for potential customers throughout the Asian region and foreign domestic workers fall into this category. Said's (1977) analysis of the Orientalist discourse as a "tension between the admired and despised parts of Asian otherness" applies not only to the broad cultural divide of Orient and Occident, but also to internal evaluations of difference (Lyons, 1998: 109).

In most of the studies described above, the domestic worker appears as someone who autonomously decided to risk foreign employment for material gain. The central dynamic of power that is evaluated is the one in the host country—in the families that contract and exploit domestic labour, governments who limit access to this kind of work and agencies that contract and often strictly control the movements of their workers. Despite these constraints hundreds of thousands of women continue to migrate to do work that others no longer want, or cannot do. The new prosperity and changing economies of the newly industrialized world continue to inspire migration, even if a new position as a domestic worker carries the risk of servitude and/or sexual and physical abuse.

Defining "Trafficking and the "Trafficker"

The main problem in any discussion of informal networks is untangling different informal modes of migration, as the labels commonly employed to describe them are frequently imprecise and misleading (Skeldon, 2000). Singhanetra-Renard (1992), for example, in a discussion of migration between the Middle East and Thailand distinguishes between three types of networks; (1) patron-client relationships, where earlier migrants sponsored family members or fellow villagers as clients; (2) agents and labour recruiters, and (3) illegal syndicates. The third type grew exponentially after the Thai government regulated and limited legal agencies in the late 1980s. Most of these migrants were male; it was not until the late 1980s that the Thai government legalized female migration to other countries, partly in response for the demand for domestic labour (1992: 193).

Illegal syndicates are often labelled as trafficking operations in the international media and in the NGO literature. A distinction between exploitative and abusive trafficking and other more benign social networks is rarely drawn. Widgren (1995), for example, defines labour trafficking as a significant threat to "orderly migration," thus characterizing any form of migration that is extra-legal as "disorderly" and, thus, "trafficking." Many peo-

ple living in less developed regions lack the financial and social capital required to surmount legal barriers to migration. What appears as "disorderly" migration from the perspective of those who wish to control human flows can be a highly organized effort to convey these people to new labour markets. Indeed, Van Hear (1998), argues that trafficking is an ambiguous activity where new labour markets are identified and travel to them is illegally or extra-legally facilitated.

Human trafficking is often understood as the total commoditization of human beings traded across borders, as is the case with any other good. Even though the employment contract is a kind of value transaction, human beings transported and traded for value violates an aspect of the liberal ideology implicit to globalization, that workers are free to sell their labour on regulated labour markets (Kopytoff, 1986). Employment agencies that are formally recognized and taxed can legitimately profit from this trade, but those who operate outside legal channels constitute "trafficking" because they evade state regulation and tax and are thus analogous to smuggling illegal contraband. One significant dissimilarity is that smuggled migrants often arrange for their own "sale" because, however risky or exploitative travel to foreign labour markets may be, they anticipate that they will personally benefit from migration.

Clearly, some traffickers prey upon and profit from the disorderly demand for employment opportunity by those who have little power to effect migration decisions themselves. But anyone who is involved in illegal or extra-legal means to facilitate migration is forced into the same category, whether they obtain passports or visas through bureaucratic loopholes or they are extorting long-term debt and exposing their clients to life threatening risks. The boundary between trafficking syndicates and social networks is blurred, and marked by state definitions of the legitimacy of migration. At the same time in discourses of migrant trafficking the autonomy of migrant decisions are displaced by the opprobrium directed towards the trafficker.

Nasra Shah and Indu Menon (1996) provide some information about how illegal networks function in Kuwait. In one case, for example, Turkish labourers were brought in by a long term Turkish resident in Kuwait who had local language skills and a large network of business associates. Kuwaiti nationals are issued visa permits for foreign migrant workers by the government, based on the size of their business and their demonstrated need. These sponsors (*kafeel*) are able to legally import cheap manual labour from the rest of Asia, but there are additional illegal means of doing so. Many businesses do not utilize all of the visas they have been allocated, and surplus visas are often sold illegally on the black market. A Turkish national who collaborates with his Kuwaiti partners may be able to purchase unused visa permits and bring in his own people with them. Once inside Kuwait, illegal Turkish migrants are directed to employers, but have no legal recourse to either the Turkish embassy or the Government of Kuwait, as the visa they have travelled on was illegally obtained.

Many South Asian countries have gender and age restrictions that restrict young female migrants. These constraints, however, do not completely curtail the flow of workers to the Gulf. Despite the regulatory control of the State, there were over 40,000 Indian women at work in 1996 in Kuwait, many of whom were under the legal age of 30. Domestic labour is one of the major forms of work for young women in Kuwait, and the demand for foreign domestics continues to grow (Shah and Menon, 1997). In the next section, I will discuss the social and cultural contexts in which families decided to send their daughters to work as domestic labourers in Kuwait, even though this meant resorting to illegal means of doing so.

Female Labour and Tamang Households in Helambu, Sindhupalchok

The village in the Helambu district of Sindhupalchok where the 15 teenage girls began their attempted migration to Kuwait is located in the Himalayan foothills, north of Kathmandu.[3] It is relatively well connected to the capital city and, by extension, to the world outside by a poorly maintained road, something that most other villages in Nepal lack. Most of the people there call themselves "Lamas" and are members of one of three Tamang clans with one cluster of households higher up on the ridge claiming to be Yolmo, or Helambu "Sherpa."[4] The Tamang are a predominantly Buddhist minority group who live in the hills immediately adjacent to the Kathmandu Valley and have a long history of isolation and cultural involution in relation to the dominant Hindu elites of the capital (Holmberg, 1989; Tamang, 1992). The Helambu region came to my attention during my fieldwork in 1995, when I discovered that a significant number of people were employed in the carpet industry in Kathmandu, both as migrant carpet weavers and as small-scale petty capitalist manufacturers who continued to maintain strong links to their native region.

One day in 1998 one of my principal consultants from the 1995 fieldwork, Nechung Lama, showed me four letters that he said he would take with him when he travelled up to Helambu for a brief visit. I noted that the

letters were addressed in English, and bore Kuwaiti stamps. I asked about them, and he told me that a number of young women from the village had found employment in Kuwait as domestic workers; something he said was a new development that would benefit both them and their parents. These same women only a few years ago would most likely have found work as carpet weavers in Kathmandu, but a recent contraction of the carpet industry had limited employment opportunities since then, providing the incentive to search for new labour markets. I was unaware, at that time, of Kani Sherpa's death, of changes in Nepalese migration laws forbidding domestic service for women, and that the letters were from young women living and working illegally in Kuwait.

For the people of Helambu immediate economic need is the most pressing incentive for seeking foreign employment. Nechung Lama, for example, lost a lot of money when the carpet market shrank after 1995 and he could no longer count on regular subcontract orders to maintain his factory. As debt mounted and carpet orders plummeted, Nechung's domestic situation deteriorated and he commented to me, in an e-mail after I returned to Canada, that he would have to send Phulmaya, his 18-year-old daughter, "out to the foreign country" as his situation was so desperate. By "foreign country" he meant Kuwait, where Phulmaya in fact later did work as a domestic worker for a year. Phulmaya's migration is a new variation on an older pattern of supporting the household in part through wage remittances.

The Tamang practice of ultimogeniture has, over the generations, yielded smaller and smaller plot sizes, making it difficult for agriculture to support large families. Temporary chain migration has been a feature in the economy of the Sindhupalchok region since at least the middle of the twentieth century, when relative political liberalization enabled people to travel to work in the wage economy for the first time. Previously it had been the unmarried men who had migrated, and eventually moved their families to more productive parts of the country, most notably to Kathmandu. The major international destination was India, where Nepalese men could find plenty of work on road-building crews or on other infrastructure projects in the Indian Himalayas (see, for example, Bishop, 1998). Female migration began with the development of a large carpet industry in Kathmandu. Weaving and working with textiles was considered to be appropriately gendered work for women, and unmarried daughters were expected to turn over part of their earnings to the households (Fricke, 1989, 1990).

A precedent can be found in the practice of sending teenaged females out of the household to work as *kaamgarne* girls, a strategy that many poor families employ in Nepal to relieve rural poverty. *Kaamgarne* girls are usually in their early teens or younger, and perform domestic labour in urban households. Many middle-class families in Kathmandu host girls from poor rural areas to cook, clean, and take care of children in their homes. These arrangements usually involve poor rural relatives or fellow villagers who send a daughter to work with more affluent families in the Kathmandu Valley. By working in the city for meagre wages, or no wages at all, these girls relieve a financial burden from their poor family, but they may also be exposed to abusive conditions and are often denied access to their own families or to public school education because of the long hours they must work (Shah, 1993). As *kaamgarne* girls mature, their role as household servants often comes into conflict with their own desire for autonomy and for marriage.

Young women from Helambu have been in great demand as carpet weavers who are paid at the same rate as males. Girls from Helambu put to work in carpet factories were often expected to remit a portion of their own earnings back to their families, but by 1998 the high cost of living in the city has meant that carpet weavers have not been a reliable source of remittances for rural households. Young Tamang weavers whom I interviewed in 1998 reported that intermittent carpet orders meant that they often became caught in cycles of debt when they took cash advances to meet necessary expenses. In addition, the prices of basic foodstuffs had skyrocketed in the capital to the extent that food accounted for one half of their monthly wage. Sending surplus rupees home under those conditions was not easily managed, but many Tamang weavers felt the need to provide remittances. As one admitted "... we have to save a little money without eating outside. We have to be misers. If we have 500 rupees, we send 200 rupees for our parents."

The flow of young Tamang labourers between Kathmandu and Helambu is partly due to their obligation to contribute to their households, as well as the lack of employment opportunity outside of subsistence agriculture. In the fall of 1998, in order to investigate this phenomenon, I travelled to Helambu with Nechung's daughter, Phulmaya, serving as my guide. When we arrived at the frontier town of Melemchi Pul we met a party of her relatives travelling in the opposite direction to catch the bus to Kathmandu. At a teashop we chatted about our travels and learned that three of the young women, ranging in age from 16 to 18, were on their way to Kathmandu to

join 12 others who would travel to New Delhi, India, and from there to Kuwait, where they were to work as domestic workers for two years. We spoke with the three girls and their families, who were accompanying them to Kathmandu. They told us that the girls had to travel to Kuwait via India, as this was no longer possible from Kathmandu. A *dalal* (middleman, or broker) had arranged for travel documents, and the families had to raise the hefty fee that he charged.

The village chairman told me that the families needed to pay the costs of the airfare, passport, visa and "administrative services," to a sum of 20,000 rupees, but their daughter's entire wage could be electronically conveyed to a Kathmandu branch of an Arab bank located in Kathmandu and put to use at home, initially to recover these investment costs. No one in the village questioned the legitimacy of the domestic labour scheme, but most could put the amount of the monthly salaries of the migrant girls precisely at 8,000 Nepalese rupees, whether or not their daughters were included in it. 8,000 rupees is a substantial sum for most villagers in Helambu; a carpet weaver working in Kathmandu in 1998 could expect to earn only about 2,000 to 2,500 rupees in a month, and most of that needed to be spent on living costs in Kathmandu. Everyone I spoke with expected that most of the 8,000 rupees would be remitted home, as this was above their daily living costs in Kuwait.

Another point on which most people agreed was that the *dalal* or broker who obtained passports, visas and airfares for these 15 girls, was a local person, but no one would reveal who he/she was. People also knew that the girls were flying to Kuwait by way of New Delhi because the government of Nepal would not permit girls to travel to Kuwait from Kathmandu, but no one really understood why, or, if they did, they did not wish to discuss it with me. Phulmaya told us that the passport applications were altered to report the age of the girls as 21, even though the girls we had spoken to enroute to Kathmandu a few days previously were well under that age. They also told us that an official who was co-operating with the scheme processed their passport applications in the district headquarters at Chautara. The age of 21 was the cut-off age for Nepalese women travelling to the Gulf through registered manpower agencies prior to Kani Sherpa's death and the general ban on all female migration to the Gulf was announced late in 1998.

Although the villagers I spoke with may not have understood the illegality of the enterprise, they shared enough knowledge of the details to indicate that its illegitimacy was of small concern. This knowledge seemed limited to the rupee value of the transactions, but the villagers I spoke with were unaware of Kani Sherpa's death, as was I at the time, and no one admitted to any fear for the girls' safety, nor did they question the *dalal's* fee. In interview, Pema Lama, who already had a daughter in Kuwait, described some of the elements of the Kuwait network and the methods of gaining passage:

> Tom: I heard that many girls went to Kuwait a few days ago. For how long?
> Pema: For two years.
> Tom: Did they get a visa easily? How did they get the visa? Did a broker (*dalal*) get it for them?
> Pema: Yes. They get visas from the district headquarters. From Chautara.
> Tom: Then they have to go to New Delhi? They cannot go from Kathmandu, right?
> Pema: They have to go to India.
> Tom: Why can't they go from Kathmandu?
> Pema: People went from Kathmandu before, but we have heard that people go from India now. We don't know about it.
> Tom: Did the Government stop them (going from Kathmandu)? Why?
> Pema: We heard the Government stopped them, but we don't know why.

This excerpt from this interview transcript illustrates the depth of knowledge that many people in the village had of the trafficking scheme, but there is much that Pema left unsaid. Although he, like other people I spoke with, claimed not to know the *dalal*, the fact that the girls had to get their visas from the Government Headquarters for Sindhupalchok indicates that their travel plans had to be known by village authorities, as signatures were required for their visas. His claim not to know the *dalal*, moreover, is a partial truth. Although he may not have known the principal smuggler in this scheme, the villagers who negotiated most of the details between the families of the girls and the *dalal* were his own neighbours, who had previously arranged for his own daughter's travel. Finally, his claim not to have known the reasons for the Nepalese Government's ban does not indicate his ignorance so much as his disinterest in those reasons. Legal barriers to his daughter's migration were seen primarily as obstacles to be overcome in order to pursue their household interests. The daughters appeared to be willing migrants, as one of the 15 girls later commented:

> It is very hard to get enough food even though I work all day. I never see new clothes. So I thought I should go abroad to work. I said that I was willing to go. We were told that we would make 8,000 or 9,000 rupees per

month for doing housework, so I took a loan, got my citizenship (card) and passport (*Saptahik Janasatta*, 1998)

The age of the girls going to Kuwait is consistent with the age in which they had gone out to work in the past in the carpet industry in Kathmandu, and the *kaamgarne* arrangement provides a precedent for domestic labour. Few of the girls would have attended school, as, like most young women in rural areas, they did not continue past class 8, or until about the age of 12 or 13 (NESAC, 1998: 77).[5] Education was thus was not seen as an option for most of these girls, and posed no obstacle to their being sent to Kuwait. Practices of gendered and generational household labour allocation, then, were applied to a transnational network that promised much benefit for those households.

Selling Girls in Kuwait

I want to turn now from a consideration of some of the factors that produced young migrant women in Helambu towards an exploration of how that migration was constructed by other Nepalese after the events that followed my field visit. The discourse around female migration in Nepal is laden with powerful assumptions about female sexuality and who controls it. In the present case this is complicated by the fact that the young women in question were considered to be "children at risk" of total objectification and exploitation by morally corrupt adults. I take 'discourse" as an archive of knowledge from which claims about a subject are made, and out of which the unintended "effects of truth" that discipline that subject emerge (Foucault, 1972; 1980). The claim of the discourse on trafficking is that the rescue of girls from illegal or extra-legal migration is justified because these migrants are intended for sexual exploitation and bodily violation. One effect of this discourse is, however, that the sexual proclivities of young Tamang females are implicated in their own violation, and another is that they and their families are constructed as passive victims of outside coercion. A third effect is that these migrants are kept in their place as cultural, gendered and generational subordinates.

The morning after my return to Kathmandu from Helambu, I saw on the front page of the English language daily *Kathmandu Post* a photograph of a man I had previously met in Helambu standing with 15 girls, including the three whom Phulmaya and I had met in Melemchi Pul, all in custody at a police station at a suburb north of the city centre. The caption under the photograph gave the name of the man and described him as having conspired to smuggle these girls out of Nepal to Kuwait.[6] Later that morning, I telephoned the offices of the *Kathmandu Post* to request more details. When I asked why the girls had been arrested, a reporter declared emphatically in English that they were being "sold" to Kuwait. At first I thought that the reporter was only using a convenient English gloss when he told me that the girls had been "sold," but I gradually came to realize that this was how many people in Kathmandu understood such events. Female migration is broadly understood to be a form of trafficking, and the most widely known form of trafficking was of bonded prostitutes to Indian brothels. The description of female migration as the "sale" of young women appears in accounts of the female migration to the Gulf that appeared in the foreign media. In one case a European woman who worked with an anti-prostitution NGO in Kathmandu wrote:

> Information about these destinations (the Persian Gulf) is scarce. The Gulf States are totally dependent on their six million migrant labourers, of whom 20% are domestic workers. Increasing numbers of girls have been sold to Gulf countries during the past years, making a new market for "hard" trafficking. Through "manpower agencies" girls are sent to Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates to work as domestic help, a job that is not included in labour legislation so that legal protection is denied. The companies' agents are usually aware of the fate the girls might meet: hard work and long working hours, humiliation, isolation, abuse, rape, torture and forced abortion.... Cases of girls who are trafficked to the Gulf states for prostitution are not known to me. However as the described trade in girls for domestic help comprises sexual exploitation it is included here. (Schubert, 1997)

A fundamental aspect of the trafficking discourse is that migrants are treated as commodities and are stripped of their agency. Like slaves, they suffer bodily ignominies and coercive discipline. The potential for abuse in illegal migration is high and deserves international concern, but accounts such as this go further by narrating the kinds of bodily violation that these women would suffer. These same themes recur throughout both international and Nepalese accounts of prostitution, where bodily abuse, torture and sexual violation are often graphically described as a means of controlling women, and forcing them into a life that they would not otherwise have chosen for themselves.[7] The effect of this violence may be to dramatize concern for the physical safety of female victims, but an implicit effect is that their interests and by extension the interests of the households where decisions about their labour deployment are made are not taken into account as elements in the migration process.

After seeing the news item and speaking to the reporter, I attempted to find out more about the arrest of the girls and the traffickers from some of my contacts from the Sindhupalchok region who were living in Kathmandu. One of the reasons initially given for the arrests was that there was fear that more girls might suffer the fate of Kani Sherpa who, as one local rumour related to me by Nechung Lama put it, committed suicide when she discovered that she was intended for sale into an Arab brothel. Although other people from Sindupalchok also claimed that the 15 Sindhupalchok girls were involved in a straightforward visa scam, the inference of forced prostitution had considerable impact on local opinion. Rumour had it that the man in the photograph had been involved in the trade of prostitutes to Bombay in the past.

Another account of the event in the Nepali language newspaper *Saptahik Janasatta* (1998), titled "Selling Girls in Kuwait: A Gang of Dacoits Arrested, One Girl Murdered" illustrates how the trafficking discourse served as a template with which the arrest of the trafficker and the 15 girls was narrated in local media. The "murder" in the title was a reference to the case of Kani Sherpa who had arrived in Kuwait through a registered employment agency in Kathmandu the previous year and whom the *Kathmandu Post* (1998a) had reported as a suicide. The change from suicide to murder and the association of her death with the arrest of the 15 girls emphasized the risks that the girls were expected to face in Kuwait. The story also obliquely linked the Kuwait trafficking network with prostitution when it provided the detail that the police had recovered a business card for a Bombay hotel from the main trafficker, identified in the story as a "dacoit," a Hindi term for brigand or robber. Bombay is a destination for many Nepalese prostitutes, but the traffickers denied any intention of sending the girls into prostitution. Who would or should believe a "dacoit"?

The arrest of the traffickers and the girls was facilitated, according to the story, by *Maiti Nepal*, a prominent NGO in Kathmandu that works towards the elimination of child prostitution. Alerted to the scheme by a disgruntled partner in the "trafficking" organization, the director of *Maiti Nepal*, Anuradha Koirala, contacted police and herself participated in the arrest of the girls and traffickers outside a Kathmandu movie hall. There, according to *Saptahik Janasatta*, the girls were forced by gang members dressed as Buddhist monks to say that they were boarding buses to attend the 2,500-year anniversary of the birth of The Buddha at Lumbini near the Indian border. After the arrest, the 15 girls were accommodated at the home for recovered child prostitutes in Pashupatinath, north of the city, operated by *Maiti Nepal*.

On a subsequent visit to *Maiti Nepal*, I asked one of the staff why the girls were arrested. He proclaimed with conviction that the girls had not been arrested, they has been "rescued." He then referred our questions to a journalist who was working with the organization who described the persistence of the trafficking of young prostitutes from the Sindhupalchok region, in particular, as an enormous moral problem that the whole country faced. According to him every home in Sindhupalchok that was roofed in metal instead of wood or thatch was evidence that at least one daughter from the household had worked as a prostitute in India. Anuradha Koirala, in an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*, even went as far as to say that she had been to Sindhupalchok, and found that none of the villages had young women in them as they had all been taken as prostitutes (Holmstrom, 1999).[8]

There is another dimension to Koirala's charge. Tamang women, particularly those from the Helambu region in Sindhupalchok, have a widespread reputation for being, as one long-time Tamang ethnographer puts it, "notoriously free from the Hindu notions of feminine propriety (Campbell, 1993: 14)." In contrast to the conservative feminine ethos of the majority of Hindu women, Tamang women have a reputation for sexual candour, something that is frequently seen as a factor in their participation in prostitution in India:

> The ethnic groups residing in the higher altitude and remote areas (Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung, and Magar) are compelled to send their girls to different cities in India for better employment opportunities. Because there are limited resources in these villages and no employment opportunities, illiteracy, social unconsciousness, and social acceptance of multi-partner sexual behaviour have all contributed to the migration of girls into prostitution, though unknowingly and reluctantly. (Rajbhandari, 1998: 88)

The discourse on female trafficking in Nepal is based on two contradictory claims. On the one hand, women are "unknowingly or reluctantly" being coerced, misled, drugged, or physically and sexually abused into prostitution. On the other hand, women from non-Hindu minority groups and especially those from Helambu are held to be sexually promiscuous and their ethnic groups to be socially and culturally inferior by many of the better educated, predominantly Hindu social activists involved in child prostitution rescue. One claim implied the other in the trafficking discourse; women are both the victims and the authors of their moral degradation.

The "rescue" of the 15 young women from Helambu thus becomes even more firmly linked with rescue from forced prostitution, and prostitution by Nepalese women in India is a much-narrated but poorly understood phenomenon. In a recent article on the subject John Fredrick (1998), a former UNICEF field director based in Kathmandu, argues that statistical estimates of the number of prostitutes in India is subject to frequent inflation by overzealous journalists and NGO activists. Fredrick points out that the number of prostitutes is almost impossible to know with any certainty given the informal nature of Bombay prostitution and, moreover, many in the NGO field are distorting the nature of traffic in women to Bombay. He uses the example of a popular Nepali language film, released in 1993.

In that film a young Tamang girl, Gita, has her marriage arranged with a distant but wealthy groom by her well-meaning parents. After the ceremony, the happy couple leaves for their new home, but Gita finds herself instead drugged and placed on a bus to Bombay. Once in Bombay, Gita is forced into brutal prostitution by a sinister Nepalese madam. After escaping to a Bombay NGO and returning to Kathmandu, Gita returns to her home to find that her family and friends have disowned her. She returns to an NGO in Kathmandu where she is later diagnosed as HIV-positive and dies, tragically alone. The point that Fredrick makes in relation to the film is that the notion that prostitutes are somehow coerced or forced into prostitution by strangers absolves people of what he calls "soft trafficking," that is, family and social networking that places young prostitutes in Bombay. Fredrick argues that this is by far the more common way that young women find work in Bombay brothels, but that the Gita story permits the illusion that no one is there by choice or inclination, and perpetuates a discourse of female victimization. The Gita story also is poignant because the site of her violation and contamination is India, that is, outside her home state. Her death and its redemption can thus be seen as a matter of national honour, and a metaphor for the way many Nepalese view the power of Indian culture and the Indian state.

The would-be migrants from Helambu are caught up in this same discourse. Not only is the attempt to circumvent Nepalese restrictions on domestic labour in the Gulf States equated with the illegal traffic of young girls to Bombay, but the girls in question and their families are constructed simultaneously as passive victims of cynical manipulation and as victims of their own culturally constituted sexual proclivity.

It is not clear to what extent a fate like Kani Sherpa's would await the girls on arriving in Kuwait. Unlike other South Asian countries where there is long history of migration to the Gulf States, to date only a very few other Nepalese girls have arrived back in Nepal after working in the Gulf. A few girls from a neighbouring village were reported to have returned from Kuwait even before their visas expired, and their experience of working in the Gulf may not have been a happy one. Indeed one villager told me "... 2 or 4 of them returned home. They ran away from there. We heard that they didn't have a very good job. They had to lift heavy machines. And we heard that it is very hot there."

Other South Asian domestic workers have fulfilled their work visas and returned only to find that their earnings in the Gulf have precipitated conflicts with their husbands and their families, and altered the gender balance at home (Gamburd, 1995). Michele Gamburd, (1999) who has documented this for returned Sri Lankan maids, argues that the "horror stories" about rapes, beatings and abuse play on Orientalist perceptions of Arab males in Sri Lanka and abroad though they are not representative of the broader situation. Nasra Shah, commenting on studies of returned domestic workers, states that most report general satisfaction with their experience of employment, and that the numbers in Kuwait who have fled to embassy shelters for repatriation constitute 0.4% of the total number of domestic workers (1997:21).

Sending young girls to work in Kuwait was considerably risky. Once there, they would have been unable to communicate effectively and thus relatively powerless to negotiate their needs. The illegality of their employment, moreover, meant that attaining outside help if they got into trouble would have been difficult. Given this vulnerability, there was plenty of potential for abuse.[9] Either the girls and their families were unaware of this risk or it failed to be considered in their calculations of benefit. Others, however, read into this risk obsessions with entrapment, debt-bondage and forced prostitution that reflect emergent anxieties about who controls young women and the appropriateness of their labouring for wages.

Given the uncertainty of the risks, then, the description of this migration network as fraught with dangers to the bodies of young women, either at the abusive hands of Kuwaiti employers or the exploitative hands of Nepalese labour traffickers must be seen as a discursive construct. A construct, moreover, in which the decision-making capacity of families, based on the calculation of the potential benefits of migration, is eclipsed by that of more powerful state and other agencies, based on imaginations of potential risk.

Conclusion

Kani Sherpa's body returned to Kathmandu in early December 1998. Her family was at the airport to receive her remains, where her grieving mother was quoted as saying that "the poverty of this nation ate my daughter" (*Kathmandu Post*, 1998b). This perspective on the reason for Kani Sherpa's death is as poignant as it is simple; for many Nepalese who remain isolated in agricultural villages the lure of the wage economy outweighs the potential risk of migration. Those risks necessitate an informed process of decision-making and an international infrastructure that works to obviate the most blatant and intolerable kinds of abuse. Kani Sherpa's death was a consequence of a poverty of cultural as well as material capital, as any knowledge about what may have awaited her was insufficient to overcome the need to provide the means to raise herself and her family out of what they saw as their desperate condition. The families from Helambu who sent their daughters abroad in the fall of 1998 made their decisions under similar conditions, but the intervention of the state and the NGO Maiti Nepal rendered those decisions illegitimate, and the risks to the girls unacceptable.

The decision to send these girls out to work in the international domestic labour market was taken largely by their parents, but it does not follow that this was against their own will. In the flurry of claim making that went on after their "rescue," however, those decisions were ignored altogether as the scheme came to be conflated with forced prostitution that was perpetrated by a *dalal* who was reputed to be close to traditional political authority. The girls and their families are thus both presented as child like innocents who were victimized by more powerful and more knowledgeable agents who prey upon that innocence. By protecting childhood innocence, state and NGO agencies invoke a "naturalized" model that constructs childhood as a sanctified experience beyond the politics of class and culture (Mankekar, 1997; Stephens, 1995). As this paper points out such constructions are also deeply gendered. The teenage girls of Helambu and their families are constrained by social class, ethnicity and a corresponding perception of their own backwardness from participating in any naturalized childhood.

In the introduction to this paper, I sympathized with Christine Chin's call for a "discourse on the kind of values and morals that are to inform social relations and interactions in the construction of a new world order." The obsessions over "national honour" and young female labour should be seen as a part of that discourse, but a part that should warrant critical scrutiny. The "trafficking" of the young into wage labour is one aspect of emerging global interactions that should demand our attention but, ironically, it is the legal restriction on female migration of all ages inspired by those same obsessions that pushed this activity underground in the first place. The murky and mysterious workings of informal networks may increase the potential for abuse, but these legal restrictions certainly decrease the ability of states to protect migrants from abuse. Phulmaya, my guide during my visits to Helambu in 1998, for example, left for Kuwait the next year despite the accounts of Kani Sherpa's death and the "rescue" of the 15 domestic workers from Helambu a year earlier. Her illegal migration to Kuwait illustrates a growing trend in the Asian region that States are hard pressed to control. As Ronald Skeldon has recently concluded:

> The elimination of trafficking, no matter how desirable, is unlikely to be realistically achieved through legislation and declarations of intent. Rather, the improvement in the socio-economic status of the population, particularly through the education of girls, is likely to lead to reductions in its worst forms . . . It is important to target the injustices created by criminal groups on the one hand while at the same time regularising or "managing" those forms of trafficking that benefit local populations and even those trafficked on the other (2000: 23)

The decisions of 15 families from Helambu to send their daughters to Kuwait must be understood as part of a household economic strategy. Currently, this illegal means is one of the few by which they can benefit from the world economy. The underground nature of this trafficking network left these girls vulnerable and without protection. I have argued that in the absence of sufficient information about it, a contradictory discourse about female trafficking reproduced moral obsessions that were directed, overtly or not, to restrict young women from international labour markets. The greater moral and physical risk to migrants may come from attempts to stop them from leaving the country at all.

Notes

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2 At about the same time as these events were unfolding, the Nepalese Government speculated about a program to allow teenage boys to travel to and work in the Gulf States. Critics charged that they would do only unskilled work and neglect their education and other job training. The plan was subsequently dropped, only after many government MPs had their offices swamped by potential applicants.

3 I have intentionally not given the name of this village, as the events I describe in this paper currently figure in legal proceedings against the "traffickers" of these girls. I have also not provided a pseudonym, in order to avoid the identification of any village with these events. I have used a few pseudonyms for people, but no one involved in the events I describe here has been directly named for the same reasons.

4 For a discussion of the ethnographic composition of the Helambu regions, see Clarke (1980). I understand the ethnic distinctions in the region to be extremely fluid, however, and concur with Clarke when he states, "one person's Lama is another person's Tamang."

5 In their village, there is one primary school that holds classes, intermittently, up to class six. In order to attend advanced classes, students would have to travel two hours down the ridge to the next village, and beyond their School Leaving Certificates, the only option for education is in one of the cities of the Kathmandu Valley region.

6 Because this news item gives the name of the man and is a clear photographic likeness of him, I am not referencing the exact date of this item to protect his identity.

7 The same theme recurs in accounts of Nepalese prostitution in India. Pradhan (1993), for example, states that "... the young women who are sold against their will are tortured mentally, physically and sexually: their bodies are burnt with cigarettes, they are denied food and water, and they are isolated and gang raped. These and other torture techniques are used to break their will and make them surrender" (see also Rajbhandari, 1998).

8 This is either a conscious or unconscious allusion to the "girl-less villages" of 19th-century missionary discourse (Brumberg, 1982), and, like the metal roof story, darkly characterizes every migrant carpet weaver or domestic worker as a potential prostitute.

9 The International Labour Organization states that the inability of children to return home after work constitutes a prohibited "hazardous" type of work (White, 1999: 138).

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