Sex Trafficking in South Asia

Telling Maya's story

Mary Crawford

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Routledge Research on Gender in Asia

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2010
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

First issued in paperback 2011

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Typeset in Times by
RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Crawford, Mary (Mary E.)
Sex trafficking in South Asia : telling Maya's story /
Mary Crawford—1st ed.
p. cm.—(Routledge research on gender in Asia series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Human trafficking—South Asia. 2. Prostitution—South Asia.
3. Women—Social conditions—South Asia. I. Title.
HQ281.C73 2010
363.4′40954—dc22 2009025679

ISBN13: 978-0-415-77843-5 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-415-50007-4 (pbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-203-86281-0 (ebk)

Sex Trafficking in South Asia

This book is a critical feminist analysis of sex trafficking. Arguing that trafficking in girls and women is a product of the social construction of gender and other dimensions of power and status within a particular culture and at a particular historical moment, this book offers the necessary locally grounded analysis.

Focusing on the case of Nepal, from where thousands of Nepali girls and women are trafficked each year primarily to India, Mary Crawford assesses how the social construction of trafficking—the concept and its representation in discourse—are influenced by the dynamics of gender, caste, and the development establishment. The defining figure is an innocent, naïve young girl being lured or duped into leaving the safety of her village. The trafficking victim is portrayed as "backward"; however, she is "backward" in specific ways that resonate with Nepal's struggle to resist and yet encompass Western influence. This view may lead to paradoxical effects in which efforts to protect girls and women instead restrict their human rights. Rather than seeing women as universalized victims, Crawford assesses how the social construction of trafficking in a particular society affects girls and women who live in that society.

In this book, the author's voice as a woman, a feminist, and a social scientist immersed in a "foreign" way of life illuminates aspects of this process. It makes the connection between Nepali subjectivities and a problem of international significance, the trafficking of girls and women. The book provides a model for other locally grounded accounts of sex trafficking to counter the universalizing rhetoric of the mass media and some anti-trafficking activists, filling a niche in South Asian Studies and Women's Studies.

Mary Crawford is Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at the University of Connecticut. She is the author of more than 50 research articles and ten books including *Talking Difference, Innovative Methods for Feminist Psychological Research*, and *Transformations: Women, Gender, and Psychology*.

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For Ranju

Preface

Years ago, I came across an obscure volume by a former Peace Corps worker in Nepal, who wrote of the difficulties of his work there and of his (never realized) ambition to climb a modest peak in the Solu Khumbu. If I remember correctly, the book was titled *The Two-Year Mountain*. That title came to my mind again as I worked on this book, which sometimes felt like a two-year mountain of its own. It has been a daunting task to make sense of what I experienced doing fieldwork on sex trafficking in Nepal, and to represent it in all its complexity. In writing this book, my first goal was to document the realities of sex trafficking in this part of South Asia. But I wanted to do more than just report the "facts" about sex trafficking. The subtitle I chose for this volume, *Telling Maya's story*, is intended to indicate that I also focus on the discourse of sex trafficking, addressing questions such as: How are victims of sex trafficking represented? Who is authorized to tell their stories? Whose interests do such representations serve? Thus, this book is a critical analysis of a disturbing form of sexual exploitation.

At the outset of this project, when I was not always able to articulate its shape even to myself, I was fortunate to receive considerable institutional support. The Council for the International Exchange of Scholars awarded me a Fulbright Senior Scholar Grant (2004–5) that made possible the fieldwork in Nepal. This was supplemented by a grant from the University of Connecticut Human Rights Institute. The University of Connecticut also provided a sabbatical leave for the academic year 2004–5. I am grateful for such tangible support during the crucial early stages of this project. In its later stages, a University of Connecticut Humanities Institute Fellowship (2007–8) provided me with precious time to begin the writing of this book.

Many individuals contributed to this book. First and foremost I would like to express my thanks to those who helped me while I lived and worked in Nepal during 2004 and 2005. Mrs Durga Ghimire and the women and men of ABC/Nepal welcomed me with affection, included me in the work of ABC/Nepal, and patiently answered all my questions. It has been an honor to work alongside these remarkable feminist activists. I also want to express my gratitude to Ms. Deepti Khati, who participated in the Nepal fieldwork as a full-time research assistant. Deepti was not only a competent and dedicated

research assistant; she also taught me much about the changing lives of Nepali women in an era of rapid modernization. Other research assistants contributed their skills to various parts of the project; my thanks to Alka Gurung, M.A., Anjana Chalise Regmi, M.A., and Pinky Jha, M.D. Former UConn graduate student Michelle Kaufman joined me for part of the fieldwork, contributing greatly to the ABC/Nepal interviews and other aspects of the research. Michelle has gone on to develop independent research projects in women's health in Nepal, and we continue to collaborate on trafficking-related research. I thank Dinesh and Renuka Thapa for sharing their home with me, my old friend Kiran Magar for his companionship, Mike Gill for his stewardship of the Fulbright program in Nepal, and all the program staff for their dedication and professional services. Thanks too to Mike Gill, Kathryn March, and Bidya Ranjeet for helping to verify my Nepali-to-English translations.

Several UConn graduate and undergraduate students co-authored journal articles and conference papers that gave primary accounts of various parts of the project; they include Amy Huntington, Greg Kerwin, I-Ching Lee, and Galina Portnoy. The undergraduate students who worked as research assistants in my UConn social psychology lab from 2005 through May of 2009—Jamie Bassell, Samantha Brown, Kathryn Calkins, Lindsay Dashefsky, Jenna Formerster, Samantha Gorley, Meghan Niedzwicki, Jessica Norton, Tara Pelc-Faszcza, Kimberly Plue, Elizabeth Ronan, Stephanie Rua, Marissa Sylvester—contributed many hours of background work. I thank all of them. Special thanks are due to UConn graduate student Annie B. Fox, M.A., who coordinated my lab group and helped with final editing of the manuscript.

The map of South Asia comprising Figure 1.1 is a public domain image from Wikipedia Commons. The annotations indicating South Asian trafficking patterns are my own. The photographs reproduced in this book also are my own, with the exception of the bottom left panel in Figure 3.1, provided by Durga Ghimire, and the poster reproduced in Figure 5.1, courtesy of Mari Shimizu. I thank them for sharing these images with my readers.

The Author and Publishers would like to thank the following for kind permission to reprint material in this book.

Ms Durga Ghmire for kind permission to reprint her photograph in our Figure 3.1.

Mrs Durga Ghmire and ABC/Nepal for permission to reprint the poster in Figure 5.1 originally published by ABC/Nepal, with the support of the Danish Embassy.

Finally, I want to thank my partner Roger Chaffin. Although Roger appears only in the background within the pages of this book, his ongoing support is central to my life and work. Once again, Roger, *Dhanyabaad*.

Mary Crawford
Ashford, Connecticut
June 5, 2009

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1 Sex Trafficking

The Global and the Local

What is it like to be sold into prostitution? Girls and women who've survived it tell of horrific abuse and degradation:

Marika's story

Marika was desperate for a way to earn money to help support her mother and two younger sisters, and there were no jobs in her Ukrainian hometown. The recruiter swore on the names of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary that the offer of a waitress job in Tel Aviv was legitimate. The only reason she would fly by a circuitous route through Cairo was to save money on airfares. But after being met in Cairo by a Russian man and forced to travel overland to Israel by jeep and on foot through the Sinai desert, Marika was imprisoned in a deserted house, sold to the man in charge, and told that she would be his property until she paid off a $20,000 debt. Armed guards and frequent threats prevented her escape, and her sexual exploitation began immediately:

> That night, I felt for the first time what it was to be a whore. I had to service eight men. I felt so terrible and ashamed. . . . Over the next four months, I don't know how many hundreds of Israeli men I was forced to have sex with . . . I had to work or I would be punished.
>
> (Malarek, 2005: xv)

Sasha's story

> When Sasha was younger she always wanted to see her name up in lights, to be a world famous dancer . . . And she has entertained thousands—but not in the way she expected. For Sasha became a sex slave, tricked from her native Ukraine and forced to live a degrading existence . . . At 24 . . . she has witnessed men forcing themselves on women, women being beaten and girls as young as 14 shooting heroin into their eyes to numb the horror of their lives.
>
> (McGill, 2003:76)

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An anonymous woman's story

> I am 23 years old. I was working in a factory in Moldova and it closed down . . . A friend told me about an agency; they were offering jobs in Italy . . . We traveled across the border into Serbia. As we entered the apartment they locked the door. I went to run out of the door, but one of the buyers caught me, he hit me hard across the face, the blood moved into my mouth fast. Then he pushed me onto the bed, he ripped my clothes as if they were paper and as I fought it became worse, he bit me hard on my breast. He told me to shut up, that he would kill me if I screamed again.
>
> He forced me night after night. They had guns . . . We were forced to have sex with up to five men every night, the owner also used any of the girls whenever he wanted to. We were not allowed to go out and we were locked into one small room all day long.
>
> (International Office of Migration, 1999, cited in Watts & Zimmerman, 2002: 1235)

Sina's story

Kidnapped at 13 from her home country of Vietnam, Sina was drugged, taken to Cambodia, and raped by a white customer who had purchased her virginity. After that, she was held captive and her sexual services sold to wealthy clients. When Sina was too ill and demoralized to pretend to be enjoying the daily forced sexual encounters, she was beaten and brutally tortured. Sina was doused with water and prodded with electric shocks. She was confined in a coffin with biting ants for days at a time. After years of such abuse, she was rescued in a police raid and has gone on to be an anti-trafficking activist (Kristof, 2008).

Khalida's story

Khalida, from Bangladesh, went to India with a relative who promised her a good job. Instead, the relative sold Khalida to a brothel. She worked there for three years under horrible conditions. The brothel was guarded to prevent her escape: the owner tortured her regularly, and food and medical care were insufficient. On average, Khalida had sex with six or seven customers every day, 95% of whom did not use condoms. The money she earned was controlled by the brothel owner.

(Shah, Brar, & Rana, 2002)

Lek's story

Lek grew up in a slum outside a resort area in Thailand. When she was three years old, a neighbor child took her to meet a British tourist. Lek watched as the 8-year-old neighbor was paid to masturbate the man. Lek soon learned how to do this work, and by the age of 6 she was initiated into having regular

intercourse with the man, who paid money to Lek's family in return. Lek was taught by her parents that it was her duty to help provide for her family in this way. At 12, Lek became pregnant by another foreign customer and gave birth to a daughter. In order to pay for the expenses of the birth and to take care of her child, Lek returned to prostitution six weeks after the birth (Montgomery, 2001b).

Neela's story

Neela left her rural Nepali village at 14 for a job in a Kathmandu carpet factory. There, a man posing as a cousin told her about a much better job in a town just across the border in India. After getting permission from her family, Neela went with the "cousin," who delivered her to a Bombay brothel. Sold for $500, Neela was told she had to work to pay off her debt. She worked at the brothel for about a year, with all her earnings going to the owner, until she was rescued in a police raid. After testing positive for HIV, Neela was taken to a shelter for children (Human Rights Watch, 1995).

Within the past decade, the public's perception of sex trafficking has shifted dramatically. Once thought to be an obscure phenomenon that few believed even existed in the modern world (Farr, 2005), it is now recognized as a huge and successful industry and a widespread cause for international outrage. According to the *New York Times*, "It happens every single day . . . throughout the world, where selling naïve and desperate young women into sexual bondage has become one of the fastest-growing criminal enterprises in the robust global economy" (Specter, 1998).

The United Nations has recognized human trafficking, including trafficking for sexual exploitation, as a global problem (United Nations [UN], 2000), and has provided direction in the fight against it (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2006a).

Sex trafficking as a global problem

Common features of trafficking on a worldwide scale are specified in the United Nations Protocol on Trafficking (2000, p. 2), which defines it as follows:

> . . . the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation should include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs;

> The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used.
>
> The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered "trafficking in persons" even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article;
>
> "Child" shall mean any person under eighteen years of age.

The UN protocol acknowledges that people are trafficked for many purposes, including forced labor and organ donation. In the case of sex trafficking, the purpose is sexual exploitation.

For children, like Sina, Neela, and Lek, the UN protocol specifies that consent is not possible even when no direct coercion is used. For adults, like Marika, Sasha, and the other women whose stories I've highlighted, the core elements of this definition, which distinguish trafficking from migration, smuggling of persons, and voluntary labor under difficult conditions (including sex work) are movement of a person, with deception or coercion, into forced labor or servitude (Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women [GAATW], 2000). The cases I've described, which involve deception, coercion, sexual exploitation, and forced labor under slavery-like conditions, all clearly meet the UN definition of human trafficking.

Contested meanings

The UN definition of trafficking has not been uncontroversial. On the contrary, it was arrived at only after considerable debate, during which feminist lobby groups took opposing stances on the interpretation of the concept of consent. Their stances were related to the broader feminist debate over women's agency and right to engage in commercialized sexual transactions (Cwikel & Hoban, 2005; Doezema, 2002; GAATW, 2000; Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998; Kesler, 2002; Long, 2004; Overall, 1992; Peach, 2005; Raymond, 1998, 2003; Raymond, D'Cunha, Dzuhayatin, Hynes, Rodriguez, & Santos, 2002). Although the Protocol's final version, signed by more than 80 countries, represents a compromise between groups who wished to focus on protecting trafficking victims and those who wished to focus on protecting women's right to migrate and/or engage in commercial sex, debates about women's agency and the commodification of sexual activities still suffuse anti-trafficking research and advocacy work. At the core of these debates is the moral question of whether commercial sex work, the basis of virtually all sex trafficking, is a legitimate form of work when it is entered voluntarily and with consent, or inherently a form of degradation and violence against women. All parties agree that the use of force and deception is reprehensible and should be illegal, and that minors cannot consent to prostitution/sex work. Where they disagree most vehemently, and ideologically, is on the question of

whether commercialized sexual transactions should be decriminalized, legalized, or prohibited (Peach, 2005).

These debates are reflected in terminological choices. Those who emphasize women's right to engage in commercial sexual transactions and favor legalizing or regulating commercial sex rather than criminalizing it use the term sex work to draw a parallel with other kinds of paid labor. Those who believe that all buying and selling of sexual services is exploitative and should be outlawed use the term prostitution. Still others try to find a middle ground, for example by distinguishing between forced prostitution and voluntary prostitution, or advocating limited decriminalization.

I will attempt to negotiate this terminological minefield by using the word *prostitution* to indicate commercial sex transactions, whether the woman is overtly coerced, constrained by difficult life circumstances, or apparently enacting her own agency and choice. I use the term *sex work* when the women under discussion themselves prefer that term, and when citing works that use it. Lapses from this practice, if any occur, do not indicate an ideological bias for one extreme position or the other. While remaining open to the idea that prostitution can be voluntary and possibly even free of exploitation, I acknowledge that it is often extremely difficult to know whether a woman is being (or has been) coerced, whether her life choices are so constrained by poverty and gender oppression that "choice" has little meaning, or whether her apparently autonomous choices are the result of prior victimization and trauma, delusion, denial, mental disorder, or other factors that render her unable to give full consent. Questions of women's agency with respect to sex work, prostitution, and sex trafficking percolate throughout this book, and are not easily resolved. I try to avoid taking a polarizing stance on this issue, because I believe that maintaining an open-minded approach is more fruitful in understanding the problem of sex trafficking and finding solutions to it.

How big is the problem?

The scope of sex trafficking is difficult to ascertain. Claims about its extent vary widely. For example, the U.S. government has estimated that approximately 800,000 people are trafficked across national borders annually, approximately 640,000 (80%) of whom are women and girls (U.S. Department of State, 2007). However, no data exist to substantiate this often-cited figure and the method by which it was derived is not known (Warren, 2007). In contrast, the UN estimates that 700,000 to 2 million girls and women are trafficked across national borders annually (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2004). Other estimates range from 4 million to 27 million (U.S. Department of State, 2007). The State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report assesses trafficking in approximately 150 countries (excluding the U.S.). Its ranking of nations into three "tiers" relies on countries' reports about reforms and intended reforms, which often are not based on quantitative data. (Nepal is consistently listed as a "Tier 2" source country.) Critics

have charged that the rankings are highly politicized and intertwined with U.S. foreign policy interests, so that a country's "promotion" to a higher tier has little to do with its anti-trafficking record and much to do with its strategic importance and lobbying efforts (Malarek, 2005). The rankings, critics maintain, merely create an "imaginary concreteness" for trafficking documentation (Warren, 2007).

Many estimates of the extent of sex trafficking are repetitions of earlier published statistics, which may have been unverified in the original source. Others are based on small-scale surveys done by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), extrapolations from small numbers of anecdotal case studies, or inferences from immigration data. Moreover, their underlying definition of trafficking varies (Hennink & Simkhada, 2004; Raymond et al., 2002). Because none of the available estimates are based on reliable and unambiguous source data, I will not attempt to comparatively evaluate competing claims about numbers of girls and women trafficked into prostitution or other forms of forced labor.

The lack of reliable data is understandable given that trafficking in persons is an illegal, clandestine activity that is difficult to see and document. Moreover, a great deal of sex trafficking is intertwined with other exploitative practices: the mail-order bride industry; sex work around military bases and peacekeeping operations; and legitimate migration for service sector and domestic employment (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Farr, 2005; Long, 2004). It is an exceedingly difficult area in which to do research, and existing research has many methodological limitations (Cwikel & Hoban, 2005; Gajic-Veljanoski & Stewart, 2007). Like other kinds of violence against girls and women, sex trafficking is almost certainly under-reported. It is sobering to realize that unknown numbers of girls and women must have died in 20th and 21st century sexual bondage, their lives and deaths unrecorded and their stories untold.

Despite the elusiveness of quantitative documentation, it is generally agreed that patterns of trafficking are shaped by gender-related inequities in material resources (Farr, 2005). In general, countries that are less developed, less wealthy, and less politically stable serve as source countries, from which girls and women are trafficked. Underdeveloped countries such as Nepal as well as industrialized ones with high unemployment, such as the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, are where trafficking most often originates. More affluent countries serve as destination sites, where trafficked girls and women are enslaved in brothels or otherwise constrained to participate in prostitution. Some countries are hubs, with venues where women can be bought and sold by multinational traffickers. Hub countries typically have highly developed sex industries (Thailand, the Philippines) and/or powerful organized crime sectors (Albania, Turkey, Nigeria).

The sex trafficking problem is most acute in Asia. According to one estimate, Asian countries contribute some 250,000 cases a year, compared to 175,000 from Central and Eastern Europe and 100,000 from the former

Soviet Union (Watts & Zimmerman, 2002). Figure 1.1 depicts patterns of sex trafficking in South Asia, both within and between countries. As Figure 1.1 shows, source countries in this region include Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, with Nepal in particular standing out as a source of girls and women who are trafficked both within the country and across its borders, primarily to India. One widely circulated estimate, now more than a decade old, is that 5,000 to 7,000 Nepali girls and women are trafficked each year

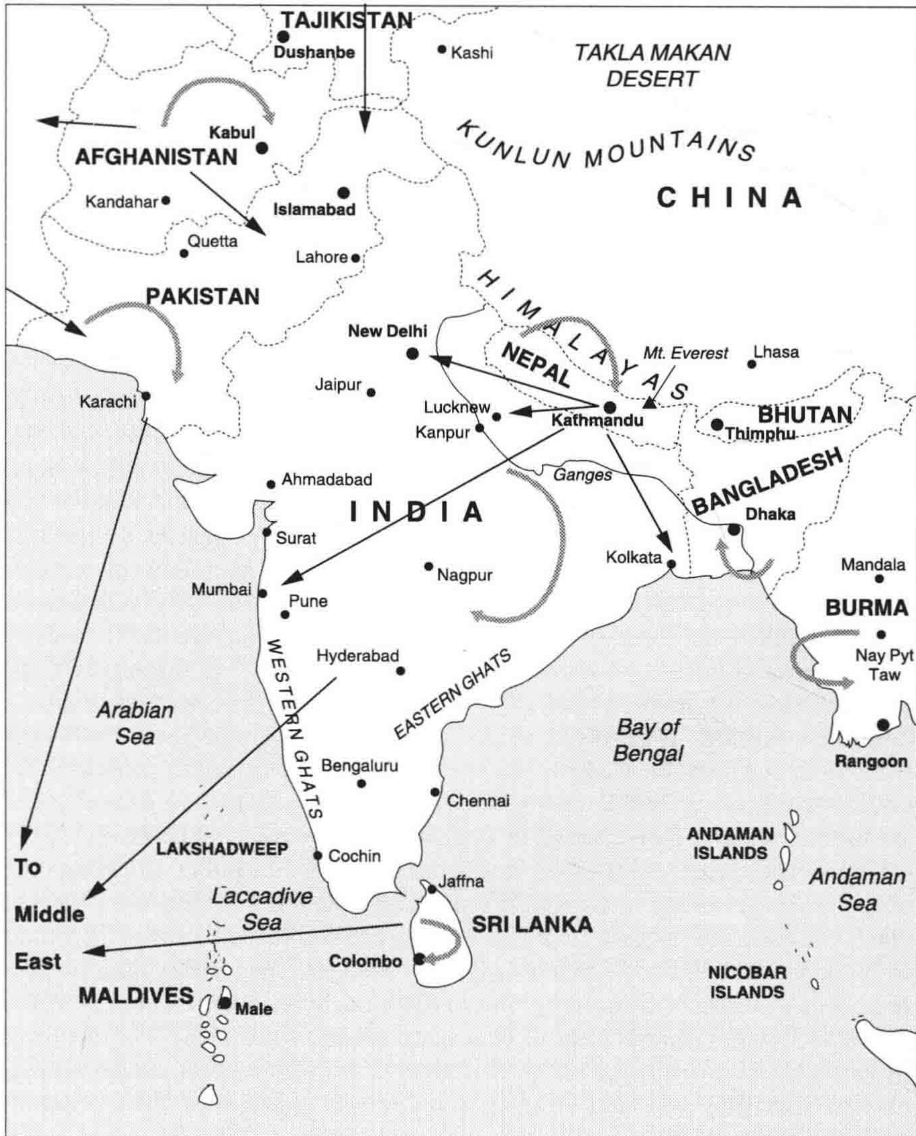

Figure 1.1 Patterns of sex trafficking in South Asia. Curved arrows indicate internal trafficking within individual countries. Straight arrows indicate trafficking across national borders.

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