The place of trafficked women's biographies in anti-trafficking activism in Nepal

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We focuses on returnee trafficked women’s biographies - Why?

• Lack of research to date that focuses on returnees

• Family stigma makes citizenship difficult

-in turn livelihoods are difficult
Discourses and activism

- Shah (2006) argues that international discourses of trafficking and local dialects of stigma and honour influence the success of rights based organising in particular contexts.

- In part we aim to show how trafficked women’s activist biographies are made in this context. This includes examining how emerging nationally and transnationally produced policy discourses around citizenship, trafficking and development frame future prospects for returnee women in Nepal.
Why Nepali women?

- Returnee trafficked women who, while representing one of the most stigmatised, vulnerable groups in Nepal are also beginning to organise around rights to sustainable livelihoods. **Partner organisation ‘Shakti Samuha’**

- Their demands challenge discourses of victimisation and assert citizenship claims focused on a right to livelihoods which need to be analysed in relation to current democratic processes.
Context: Women’s citizenship in Nepal

- In Nepal citizenship is awarded on blood rights, fathers pass citizenship to their sons and daughters. Under the Constitution (1990), only a person over 16 years of age whose father is a citizen of Nepal at the birth of the child shall be a citizen of Nepal. The mother is not considered on a par with her husband in terms of being able to confer citizenship to her child. According to the Citizenship Act of 1963, after the age of 16 both men and women shall apply for a certificate of citizenship to ensure that their citizenship rights are protected. This is a relatively simple process for a young man, however for a young woman an application must be supported either by her father or her husband.
Reforming citizenship the current democratic moment in Nepal

1990 first multi-party democratic constitution

- April 2006 Interim Constitutional Assembly
- April 2008 Elected Constitutional Assembly – 40% women, Deputy speaker a woman from ‘ethnic’ background
- Mandate to write the new constitution by end of May 2010 – just prolonged until May 2011
ESRC project objectives

- To generate new gendered understandings and research approaches to the relationship between citizenship, sexuality and pro-poor development.

- To examine the role of sexuality and citizenship in livelihood strategies, focusing particularly on the experiences of diverse groups of returnee trafficked women in Nepal.

- To understand how citizenship and livelihoods are constructed by so called marginalised groups (returnee sexually trafficked women) as new democratic moments emerge.

- To examine the professionalisation of activist anti-trafficking networks and the impact of this on grassroots activists/local NGOs' ability to get sexual citizenship on transnational advocacy, donor and national pro-democracy agendas.
Methods

• Analysis of discourses and policies of trafficking and models of citizenship operating
• Semi structured interviews with activists and key personnel in NGOs and key informants in government
• In depth Interviews with returnee women (20-25 in urban –mainly Kathmandu- and 20-25 from rural districts)
Sample: returnee women

• with different returnee routes and timeframes of return
• representation by local home region
• age of being trafficked/returned
• ethnicity, caste and religion
• length/number of trafficked journeys
• access to citizenship,
• type of contact with intermediaries
Preliminary findings: institutional strategies

- Increased competition and success in obtaining funding in some cases is forcing processes of professionalising within local anti-trafficking NGOs.

- **Shakti Samuha**
  - Non members come to occupy staff positions
  - Weak alliance with groups supporting generic “migrants’ rights” (view of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women -GAATW)
  - Weaker links than previously with other stigmatised groups in Nepal such as lesbian groups and women with HIV aids
Strategic Representation: Shakti’s activist biographies

Shakti Samuha establishing an identity as the only anti-trafficking NGO run by “returnee women”

- Promotion of 1996 ‘rescue’ founding narrative

- Looking for training in research methods
Making a personal biography

• Dealing with stigma and gaining legitimacy - Invoking the border to mark ‘difference’ and claim authority/expertise

• Creating a career biography - from trafficked women to activist to professional (Staff Worker)
Building skills?

“Like, first when I came here I was in reception, looking after store, work of reception and later on I was sent to field as a field worker and till now I am in field.

Looking the context of work, what I think is how long this job is going to last, this will go till funding provided by donor.. there is 1-1 years of contract, and that contract that happened, this year will happen next year what or not, it’s uncertain? And this job.. till when, if not tomorrow, maybe some day no job, there is no way to go, what to do where to go? Women may get forced to street, I have no capability to fight in other places, have no qualification.”
Job satisfaction but not a sustainable livelihood?

“For doing job...I am satisfied with this job. This is social work, awareness program...doing awareness programs saving others from being trafficked is satisfaction”.

Meena’s question: but how about earning food and other living such as cloth, house, medication etc?

“It is difficult for filling stomach. It is expensive in place like Kathmandu, after having baby there is so much of expenses involved with baby, have to pay for room rent, that is creating so much of difficulty. Sometimes feel like what to do, living with such a small money is so difficult. Something needs to be done like business, feel like that what to do”.
A conclusion? Development and sexuality intersections

• As anti-trafficking NGOs become established and vie for political space the mobilisation of the identity ‘trafficked woman’ both gains and loses currency in different ways and for different groups of people.
Activist biographies: our challenges

• Keep focused on our topic – when, how and if to close down narratives of huge pain and suffering in the interview process

• Activist academic biographies in the research process - limitations of the insider/outsider status in development circuit we are studying

• Current political situation in Nepal – we may get limited and/or skewed biographical interviews
Where to find out more

ESRC project ‘Post Trafficking Livelihoods in Nepal: Women, Sexuality and Citizenship’
www.posttraffickingnepal.co.uk


PhD Meena Poudel Dealing with Hidden Issues: Social Rejection Experienced by Trafficked Women in Nepal (Newcastle 09)