

Capturing a culture of trafficking

Written by [Elaine Allaby](#) | 20 July 2011

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The [capture and arrest of Anthony Harrison](#), the man recently handed a 20 year sentence for trafficking offences, has been hailed as a triumph of UK policing, and led one Home Office spokesman to boast that “Last year we removed 5,235 foreign criminals from the UK.” But with [trafficking on the increase as a global trade](#), is the capture and removal of a single individual from one nation really a meaningful step? Or should we be focussing on those cultures which allow it to thrive as an industry?

Last summer I spent time with anti-trafficking organisations in Nepal, a nation with one of the world’s highest trafficking rates. While there I met John Molineux and Bhola Acharya who help run [Tiny Hands](#), an organisation which works in trafficking interception. They operate at 12 of the 26 official border stations between Nepal and India and estimate that they intercept roughly 4 cases every day. The open border between the two countries means its regulation is best described as extremely lax, which makes identifying trafficking is a highly complex and convoluted process involving a series of speculative steps. If the situation looks suspicious (common tropes involve a young girl travelling with her older ‘uncle’ or ‘brother’), the members of the party are separated and questioned to see if their stories match up. Are the police helpful? “Ye-ah” says John after thinking for a moment. “Nowadays,” chimes in Bhola. “But if we weren’t there the police wouldn’t stop them or ask any questions.”

Cases like Harrison’s often make the papers primarily because of their sensationalist appeal – witchcraft, violence, false imprisonment – but give a skewed picture of the day-to-day dynamics of the situation. The majority of Nepali girls trafficked over the border are not kidnapped but are lured from home with promises of untold wealth to be earned in a foreign country, making them more than willing conspirators in their own abduction; John and Bhola estimate that 80% of the girls they intercept are travelling alone and less than 1% know what trafficking is. John speculates that part of the problem is the invisibility of the violence and coercion involved in trafficking, as the prostitutes working in India often seem perfectly docile, even content. “The thing that no-one sees is that for the first few weeks she doesn’t want to do it. That she resists, that she’s locked in a room and beaten and threatened and her family are threatened and she’s forced repeatedly to have sex with men against her will until she stops resisting.”

The checks will work in some cases but not all – those determined to make the crossing will try until they succeed, and the barbarities inflicted on those who eventually do so have been **well-documented**. Less reported is the fate of the survivors in the months and years after they escaped their captors. I learnt about this through meeting Shyam Pokharel and Indira Gurung, the founding director and current president of **SASANE** (Samrakshak Samuha Nepal: literally, 'Protection Group Nepal'), an organisation run for, and entirely staffed by, trafficking survivors.

A former Supreme Court lawyer and special court superintendent of 18 years, Shyam came up with the idea to found SASANE in 2007, after his research for a large trafficking-survivor international NGO led him to question the validity and impact of their work. The many hundreds of survivors he interviewed made the complaint that although they were materially provided for, the management of the organisations failed to serve them in a wider sense. "Non-victims do not understand the victims' pain," they told him. "They can't empathise." This got him thinking: why couldn't trafficking-survivors themselves run an organisation to help other victims? He had no doubt of their ability having already trained the 7 literate survivors he found during the course of his research to assist him as paid assistants. "Victims understand the issues of victims," Shyam explains, "Victims are poor and the organisations are rich. How can victims run an organisation when they are poor and unskilled?"

The idea was side lined until September 2007, when a group of survivors who came wanting to speak to his organisation's director were turned away. He resigned immediately in protest, called a meeting with the girls he'd met through the research about the possibility of starting their own organisation and was met with an enthusiastic response. In early 2008, SASANE was born, funded by Shyam's savings and pay-off. "I left from my job and my family are showing dissatisfaction with me," he chuckles, in what I imagine to be a mild understatement of the facts.

The founding principle is self-empowerment. Their exploiters may have treated them as 'dolls', explains Indira, SASANE's president, but the victim mentality perpetuated by many survivor organisations is little better – especially as an increasingly high percentage of survivors are literate and have a basic education. They started by offering a group of 70 girls paralegal training through Shyam, and many of them now work in police stations across the Kathmandu Valley filing reports for civilians, many of whom are abused women, at a tenth of the price formerly charged by police officials and working *pro bono* in some cases. The training has since been administered twice a year, and more recently SASANE has

developed partnerships with banks, local media outlets and schools to provide internships and scholarships for the women they work with.

It is a success story, but the problems rooted in Nepali society which enable trafficking to take place remain. A large part of this is a deep-seated cultural misogyny, which is so entrenched it stretches even to those working in women's rights fields. When interviewing candidates to work for Tiny Hands, John will give them what he calls a 'moral reasoning' question:

Sumi is a Nepali girl working a dance bar, and is often pressured to perform sexual acts with customers. When she starts complaining not only the dance bar owners but also the police and government officials warn her to keep quiet. When she doesn't, the restaurant owners send her over the border to India, where she is forced to work as a prostitute in bonded slavery for 10 years, during which time she contracts HIV and dies.

What % of the blame for Sumi's death is attributable to:

Sumi herself; the restaurant owners; the police and govt officials; the Indian brothel owner?

The *majority* of male candidates will say that Sumi is 100% responsible for her own death. "I've had some really good candidates who just bombed at that question," says John. As Bhola dramatically understates, "Nepal is a male-dominated society".

SASANE has begun to take steps to address the problem – **in 2008 they won a landmark case** against police workers who had effectively broken the law by arresting and attempting to fine a group of 'dance-bar' workers while letting their pimps walk free. But Nepal has a long way to go. While another anti-trafficking NGO has recently **won international recognition for their work**, domestic sex slavery catering for western tourists within Kathmandu is reaching unprecedented levels. Shyam casually makes it known that he has filed contempt of court cases (currently pending) against 17 officials whom he feels have been complicit in perpetuating violence against women. Among them are the chiefs of police in 3 of its largest districts, the head of the Public Administration office, the Home Minister and the Women, Children and Social Welfare minister.

He seems worryingly nonchalant about making enemies on either side of the law. Has he ever been threatened? "Oh, yes, yes, yes", he answers cheerfully, admitting that he's had a

knife held to his throat on at least one occasion. But my follow-up suggestion that this might make him reconsider his work is met with a stern look: “It is my duty because I am a lawyer. If every educated person is afraid of those who are angry, who will be responsible to take action? They are doing wrong. Why am I afraid of them?”

Evidently Nepal has its heroes, as well as its Anthony Harrisons, but ultimately this is not simply a Marvel comic story in which the forces of good and evil battle it out against the backdrop of a society of passive and helpless bystanders; it is becoming increasingly apparent that society is the biggest player. A frustrated John is all too aware of this, noting that those traffic victims who do escape their captors and find their way home “can’t say anything or they’d be rejected. She’ll come back from the brothel and not say a word to anyone, won’t warn her friend, because she fears being scorned by society.” From the traffickers to law-enforcers and politicians to family members to former victims themselves, everyone seems to be playing a role in keeping the industry thriving. When I ask about the biggest obstacle to their work, John sums it up without missing a beat: “All of society basically complies with her being trafficked”.t

Put the villain behind bars and throw away the key? If only it were that simple.