Poverty, prostitution and women

Meena Poudel

There is a growing risk for Nepali girls of being sold to traffickers of women. Let us protect them.

In economic terms women – representing half of the population – control only 20% of the world’s property and goods. In Nepal, as elsewhere in developing countries, declining rural economies and environmental depletion have been undermining the position of rural women. Their activities are focused around the household, home-based industry and agriculture. While resources are being whittled away by the multinational companies, women’s petty tradings are taken over by big business and the prices of basic commodities soar, wages decline, and – above all – their self-respect and self-esteem are crushed. Because of this, increasing numbers of women are being forced to become actively involved in the sex industry – mostly for survival or to get food for themselves and their family.

In Nepal, the trafficking in young girls is taking place faster than the public can imagine. While we have no firm, reliable data, it is estimated that about 200,000 Nepali girls and women are working as prostitutes in the brothels of India. Hundreds of Nepali men and women are working as traffickers and brothel operators; whole villages obtain a substantial income from selling off their own daughters, sisters and wives.

“I want to go back to the brothels to earn more money. I can get up to 5000 rupees per night!” says X when asked about why she wanted to go back. The desire for making money is strongly inculcated among many previously poverty-stricken women. Even within the country, women sex workers are found in Kathmandu and all of Nepal’s main towns.

Spread of infection

Because of unemployment, poverty and the influences of “modernization”, many young people are migrating from the countryside to the towns looking for jobs, often helped by the village agents. Most of them are destined to become cheap labour, working in carpet and garment factories and hotels. All too many girls are either brutally raped or trafficked abroad from these workplaces. From the far western and northern regions of Nepal, men travel to India during the slack farming season (winter) and work as porters or watchmen. While they are away from the family, they may visit cheap brothels and become infected with sexually transmitted diseases, then return home and infect their wives. There is no proper condom distribution system and the men usually don’t have the mentality to use them. Even though wives may get infections from their husbands, it is the women who will be rejected...
Countries where women are seen as a commodity that can be bought pay a heavy price in the spread of HIV.

from the family if they are identified as HIV-positive; men are never blamed for their mistakes.

“My family didn’t want anything to do with me while I was helpless in police custody (for two years). It was not until nine years later, when I was making a good living and making money, that they were happy to accept me!” said Y, when she was asked about the importance of money influencing her family relationship.

The principal cause of the greater risk of HIV infection in Nepal is poverty. Where relative poverty levels are high and women lack alternative work opportunities, many are induced to turn to prostitution. Male/female differentials in income result from a combination of traditional and biological factors, the limited demand for work, and economic institutions that induce labour market stratification.

Paying a heavy price

Women’s bodies, beauty and sex have become highly demanded commodities in this part of the world. Sex tourism, match-making, bride-supplying, pornography and so on are all the result of this thinking. Since buyers of these commodities can spend a lot of money, girls and women are very easily lured. Thailand, Philippines and Nepal are the countries where such businesses are prospering but these countries are also paying a heavy price: the spread and growth of HIV infection and AIDS.

The conditions are ripe in Nepal for a very serious AIDS epidemic, and for AIDS to become a women’s disease. The epidemic is hitting all groups of people, not just certain subgroups. It has been said that by the year 2000 there will be more infected women than men in the world, but in Nepal this is already the case. The main reasons for this situation among women can be ascribed to widespread poverty, low status, lack of decision-making rights, lack of access to and time for education and information, rural–urban imbalances, inability to assert their rights, and so on.

Government policies, services and awareness-raising activities are concentrating mainly on rural elites. Empowerment of women has been limited to the conference rooms of five-star hotels. The women of the countryside are being victimized because there are no other alternatives.

Here are some suggestions about actions that could be taken to address the problems:

- offer alternative survival opportunities to poor and disadvantaged women so that they are not forced into prostitution, with such consequences as HIV infection and AIDS;
- promote awareness among both women and men about HIV/AIDS, the risks of trafficking and preventive measures;
- organize poor and disadvantaged women from the lowest social levels around the whole issue of sexual discrimination, and encourage them to overcome the problem collectively;
- ensure the empowerment of women: socially, mentally and economically.

Dr Meena Poudel chairs the non-profitmaking Nepalese organization WATCH: Women Acting Together for Change, which offers support to poor and socially oppressed women, including those with HIV/AIDS. Its address is: GPO Box 5723, Kathmandu, Nepal.

An adult female literacy class. Education is an essential tool for the empowerment of women.