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Unpacking Human Trafficking from Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism Paradigms in Nepal: A Critical Review

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Abstract

This theoretical review paper examines the trafficking of women and children in Nepal caused by oppression and socio-economic marginalization and unpacks human trafficking from neoliberal and neoconservative paradigms. It does not discuss human smuggling but instead provides a critical examination of the forces contributing to human trafficking in Nepal according to the neoliberal and neoconservative paradigms. It begins with a brief overview of human trafficking in Nepal and then explores the international frameworks related to human trafficking. It then briefly examines the “4 P” strategy – prevention, protection, prosecution and partnerships – related to anti-human trafficking efforts and identifies gaps in practice/policies. It concludes with a critical discussion of the implications for social work. The paper also stresses that anti-trafficking intervention programs and approaches must be accountable and responsive to the aspirations, strengths, wisdom and experiences of the specific community and be sensitive to the external and internal forces contributing to the trafficking they seek counter. It claims that there is a need for participatory action research that invites trafficking survivors to engage in critical dialogue and conversation and help develop integrative strategies to address human trafficking in Nepal. To write this paper, the author critically reviewed secondary data, including qualitative and quantitative studies and NGO publications, but does not claim to provide a comprehensive or systematic analysis of evidence.

Keywords: anti-human trafficking discourses, gender inequalities, injustice, solidarity

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It is hard to gain accurate or replicable data on trafficked children and girls because trafficking is illegal and done covertly (Buet, Bashford, & Basnyat, 2012; Frederick, Basnyat, & Aguetant, 2010). In 2001, it was estimated that 5,000 to 7,000 thousand Nepalese women and girls had been trafficked to Indian brothels that year (Crawford & Kaufman, 2010, citing an International Labor Organization report). Ten years later, the Human Trafficking Assessment Tool Report of the American Bar Association, 2011, reported that approximately 5,000 to 15,000 Nepalese girls and women were trafficked annually to India for sexual exploitation. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018), “Nepal reports more child victims than adults” (p. 64). The most recent report of Nepal’s National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) indicates that 78 percent of identified victims of trafficking in 2017/18 were female, and 25 percent were children (Abilio et al., 2019, p. 5). Another study reported that the number of trafficking in person (TIP) cases was declining in district courts, but that the numbers in the high (appeals) and supreme courts were increasing (Banjade et al., 2018). In the district courts, the average annual cases registered for five years was 281, with conviction rates 42 percent and pending conviction rates 51 percent (Banjade et al., 2018).

These statistics suggest that Nepal’s involvement in the anti-human trafficking movement is increasing. This means it is not clear what they mean in the anti-trafficking discourses. Do they genuinely suggest that the movement is addressing the issue of human trafficking? Most cases of trafficking in Nepal are never reported to the police to avoid stigmatization. Besides, the judicial process is prolonged and expensive. The nature and scope of human trafficking have drastically changed in the last few years. The trend has shifted from human trafficking to India for sexual exploitation to labour trafficking, mainly in East

Asia and the Middle East. Therefore, it is essential to conduct community-based studies and participatory action research to validate the national figures and explore why there is so little incentive to report cases of human trafficking. Participatory action research is an empowering and emancipatory approach that provides marginalized socio-economically groups with opportunities to come together, share their silenced voices, identify their issues, develop strategies, and act upon them in addressing the problems identified (Dhungel, 2017).

International Frameworks and Agreements

The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (2000) defines human trafficking as follows:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or a position of vulnerability or of giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation or 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. (p. 2)

The UN established Trafficking in Persons 2000 (TIP) as a collaborative tool for national and international communities to address the issue of trafficking in collaboration with (Kaye & Winterdyk, 2012; Kempadoo et al., 2005).

Countries that sign and ratify it are required to commit to preventing trafficking and protecting its many victims (US Department of State, 2020). The United States has developed anti-trafficking measurements focusing on the 4Ps, prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership will be discussed below. Nepal has complied with the TIP by engaging in the 4Ps since becoming a signatory country.

Neoliberalism/Neoconservatism

Neoliberalism and neoconservatism are tied to capitalism and individualism; thus, their primary focus is to support a robust economy that benefits a few individuals. Western society and much of the global community are deeply entrenched in an economy based almost entirely on monetary incentives and policies, free trade, globalization, the retrenchment of social policies, and the privatization and deregulation of the economic sector (McKenzie & Wharf, 2016). Society is committed to individual freedoms and, believing that each individual is responsible for his or her wellbeing (McKenzie & Wharf, 2016), focuses on the private rather than the public sector (Strier, 2019). Furthermore, governmental funding formulas are based on corporate models of efficiency and cost-effectiveness, and there is a push for the social sector to embrace this model (Macías, 2015).

Although the word 'neoliberalism' was first coined in the 1930s as a term of leverage to argue against fascist and other oppressive authoritarian systemic culture, the term became more prevalent in dominant discourses from the 1970s to 1990s (Harvey, 2007; Raschke, 2019). The spread of neoliberal policy, discourse, and ideology has influenced political thoughts and created a global hegemonic culture (Prendergast et al., 2017). This change has led to the weakening of democracy, the growth of inequality, insecurity and austerity, the extension of free markets globally, and an overall emphasis on individualism (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016; Prendergast et al., 2017).

Under neoliberal ideology, the wealthy have grown wealthier and the poor poorer. The middle class has tended to suffer from economic impoverishment. These results have included deteriorating wages, the privilege and security of labour unions, erosion of the delivery of government and government-funded services, and the removal and restriction of social and welfare benefits (Prendergast et al., 2017). Neoliberalism promotes competition. It rewards those

who are already wealthy and punishing those who are not. As neoliberalism continues to push individualism, privatization, inequality, and the withdrawal of social services, many of the most vulnerable are left without safety nets. Those who work to uphold fundamental human rights are left fighting against a tyrannical system that eliminates any attempt at dismantling it (Prendergast et al., 2017).

Neoliberalism is usually accompanied by neoconservatism, which aids neoliberalism by enforcing policies that force people into the labour market and, once there, in low-paid and insecure jobs (Prendergast et al., 2017). The term “neoliberalism” was used to spread American values to other developing nations and suppress anti-American views by the systematic use of state power. It also promoted national interests and democracy globally by building solid coalitions with international allies and opposing foreign enemies (Prendergast et al., 2017). Universally, neoliberalism involves and seeks to enforce acceptance of elitism, a pro-capitalist hegemonic ideology, hierarchy, and acceptance of one’s place in that hierarchy. Neo-conservatism is a complex political ideology and, while it is sometimes conflated with neoliberalism, it is an entity of its own with distinct views on foreign policy, free trade markets, social welfare, and so forth (Prendergast et al., 2017).

Unpacking Human Trafficking from Neoliberal and Neoconservative Ideas

With the increase in free-market policies across the globe that accompanied the spread of neoliberalism in the late 20th century, there has been much economic growth; at the same time, however, global competition has also increased (Peksen et al., 2017), making it hard for some countries to succeed. In addition, with the focus primarily on economic growth, there has been little regard for human rights or addressing the needs of those most negatively impacted by these policies (Peksen et al., 2017). Furthermore, while the effects of globalism do boost economic development, they also exacerbate the violation of labour rights

and trafficking of various forms, including forced child labour (Aduhene-Kwarteng, 2018; Peksen et al., 2017). As neoliberal globalization aims to produce cheap goods, provide poor services, and reduce labour costs, it violates human beings' social and political rights (Aduhene-Kwarteng, 2018; Peksen et al., 2017).

Some see human trafficking as modern-day slavery. Smith and Kangaspunta (2012) recognized that “slavery has a long history throughout the world. Its occurrence is recorded as early as 539 BC and was not completely illegalized until the late 1900s” (p. 20). Slavery is seen as an ancient form of human rights violation, and the antislavery movement emerged to promote human rights (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2017). In fact, “the early United Nations was formed due to human rights against slavery” (Smith & Kangaspunta, 2012, p. 21). The trafficking of women and children is a complex interconnected issue resulting from an oppressive culture and society (Locke, 2010).

The following section will discuss how neoliberal and neoconservative ideas contribute to the trafficking of women and children. The particular factors involved are (1) unequal distribution of power; (2) patriarchal norms and men’s privilege; (3) socio-economic divisions; (4) armed conflict; and (5) the centralization of industries in Kathmandu.

Unequal Distribution of Power

The trafficking of girls and children dates traces its roots to the reign of the tyrannical Rana dynasty from 1846 to 1951 (Lama & Bory, 2002; McNeill, 2008) when indigenous girls from the Himalayas and Middle Hill regions were brought to Kathmandu hoping to serve as housemaids to the Nepali queen. Instead, they were presented to the kings of India as gifts. Their role was to entertain the Ranas and their guests with dance and song (Asman, 2009; Richardson, Poudel & Laurie, 2009). This practice became a tradition that continued even after the Rana regime collapsed in 1950 (Lama & Bory, 2002). Some Ranas fled to Indian cities such as Kolkata and Mumbai, taking along their

housemaids in some cases, selling them to brothels in India. Once sold, they had no choice but to continue working there to survive (Asman, 2009). They then started to recruit other women and children from their places of origin in Nepal (National Human Rights Commission of Nepal, 2008), promising them that employment opportunities in India would improve the quality of their lives (Asman, 2009; Subedi, 2009).

The 1950 Treaty signed by Nepal and India established an open border and contributed to a rise in girl trafficking (Human Rights Watch as cited in Richardson, Poudel & Laurie, 2009). The number of trafficked women and children to India continued to increase during the Panchayat regime from 1960 to 1989. Indeed, “a criminal network was developed from villages to brothels, from elite to the local police and to the national political elite” (Human Rights Watch/Asia as cited in Subedi, 2009, p. 12). The fact that no trafficking law was adopted until 1984 and the regime’s misuse of power increased the number of girls trafficked (Chaulagai, 2009; Subedi, 2009).

The 1980s and 1990s saw widespread rural-urban migration as carpet factories opened in cities and workers were in demand. Once away from home, many girls and children were transported further across the border and were urged to work in the Indian sex industry. After the Government of Nepal prohibited bonded labour in domestic work, agriculture and brick kilns in 2002, former bonded labourer servants got involved in commercial sexual activities since they had no home or other resources to support their families (Frederick, Basnyat, & Aguetant, 2010). Bonded labourers were of two categories: poor farmers and migrants forced into servitude when they could not pay back loans from landlords or moneylenders. The children of such borrowers were born into bondage. Chaulagai (2009) argued that this traditional practice has continued to make children vulnerable to sex trafficking despite the new democratic system of governance.

Patriarchal Norms and Men's Privilege

Kaye and Winterdyk (2012) claimed that gender inequalities are perpetuated by patriarchal values, while Hackman (2000) pointed out that the power imbalances of a patriarchal society undermine women's power and personal freedom. Patriarchal values negate gender equality, leaving women powerless and making them vulnerable to the scheming of human traffickers (Kaye & Winterdyk, 2012). Nepali culture and society are inherently rooted in patriarchal values and male-dominated paradigms that intensify gender inequality and gender-based violence, leaving girls and women more vulnerable to sex trafficking (Buet et al., 2012; Dhungel, 2017; McNeill, 2008; Sharma, 2014). Given these facts, it is essential to critically analyze patriarchal values and norms in Nepal and their impacts on the lives of girls and women.

Gender inequality is manifested in multiple forms in Nepal: women work more at home, have lower literacy rates, and numerous laws are discriminatory (Banskota & Manchanda, 2001). A number of studies report that multiple gender-based discriminatory practices are embedded in the Nepalese culture and society and that these increase the vulnerability of women to trafficking. These include but are not limited to gender roles, family decisions, socio-cultural values, and economic activities, as well as the nature of the labour force, education system, and public participation (Chaulagai, 2009; Hennink & Simkhada, 2008; Locke, 2010; Parker, 2011; Sharma, 2014; Subedi, 2009). For example, women are largely confined to domestic duties, and their role defines their status as daughters, wives, and mothers, not individuals. Men are still considered to be family "breadwinners" (Sharma, 2014). In addition, women are discouraged from challenging their position in society and are taught to be submissive (McNeill, 2008).

Moreover, women's access to knowledge, skills, resources, opportunities, and power remains low (Hennink & Simkhada, 2008; McNeill, 2008). According

to the 2011 census, only 23 percent of adult women are literate compared to 64 percent of men (National Census Report, 2012), and while the latest figures in the Nepal Human Development Report (2020) are improved, the “female literacy rate ...[of] 60.5 percent compared to the male literacy rate of 76.2 percent” (p.37), they still reflect “disparities in education.” In fact, the “male literacy rate is higher than the female rate in all seven provinces” (p. 37).

Pratiksha (2018) found that human traffickers mainly target “low-caste,” uneducated, and socio-economically marginalized groups and women. Locke (2010) reported that 70.7 percent of trafficked survivors were either illiterate or barely literate. Chaulagai (2009) suggested that the amount of household work expected of daughters, including helping their mothers with daily household chores and looking after their younger siblings, prevents them from capitalizing on educational opportunities in schools. The traditional belief that sending girls to school means “wasted limited income of the family” still dominates (Sharma, 2014, p. 13), as does the belief that “women and girls are . . . second-class citizens” (Sharma, 2014, p. 41).

Steeped in patriarchal ideology, son preference is widespread in Nepal. Pratiksha (2018) argued that “women and girls are regarded inferior in every stage of life. ... [and] [t]he practice of rejoicing at the birth of a son and lamenting at the birth of a daughter is quite common in most ... communities” (p. 18). Many believe that sons alone provide economical insurance for parents and that since daughters will care for their husbands’ families after they marry, there is no reason to invest much in their futures. In addition, Nepali laws have historically discriminated against women in property and inheritance rights. For example, the parental property automatically goes to the male offspring after a parent’s death. Aengst (2001) explained the result of such constrictions: “the lack of economic alternatives for girls and ingrained cultural beliefs regarding gender roles makes young girls particularly vulnerable to trafficking” (p. 5). Chaulagai (2009)

claimed gender inequality is “institutionalized” in the patriarchal society and exacerbates women’s vulnerability to trafficking. There is a strong consensus in the literature that the trafficking of women is inextricably linked to their low socio-economic status in Nepal (Cameron & Newman, 2008; Chaulagai, 2009; Hennink & Shimkhada, 2004; Parker, 2011; Sharma, 2014).

Socio-Economic Divisions

The unequal distribution of resources and the imbalance of power in Nepal resulted in the emergence of caste and class systems, reinforcing long-term social injustice and violating human rights. Only a few groups, those close to the royal family or working for the Government of Nepal, were entitled to own specific categories of land, a discriminatory policy creating a significant gap between the haves and have not. The situation of the marginalized Badi community in Southwest Nepal demonstrates the relationship between low socio-economic status and high rates of trafficking for sexual exploitation (McNeill, 2008, Subedi, 2009). To elaborate, Badi parents commonly pimp their daughters, who have no choice but to acquiesce (McNeill, 2008). The Badi community is seen as a prostitute caste who was supposed to entertain elite groups and religious leaders (Richardson et al., 2009). Similarly, as a last resort, until 2001, when bonded labour was banned, members of the Tharu community worked in conditions of bondage for landowners or sold their children as slaves (*kamaiya*) to repay their debts. Badi girls and women continue to be involved in the sex trade despite its more subtle forms and manifestations and are therefore highly vulnerable to trafficking, and in fact, “the localized traditional prostitution practice can be transformed into criminalized cross-border trafficking” (Richardson et al., 2009, p. 261).

Armed Conflict

Migration from Nepal to different cities in India is an age-old phenomenon, but it got a new stimulus due to the ten-year armed conflict between

Maoist forces and the government. The period from 1996 to 2006 saw the large-scale displacement of hundreds of thousands of Nepalese women and children (Cameron & Newman, 2008; Singh, Sharma, Poudel & Jimba, 2007; Sharma, 2014). Some women migrants who had left their homes searching for security and a better quality of life were sold either to Indian brothels or to other countries, including Dubai and Qatar, to work in hotels and factories (McNeill, 2008; Subedi, 2009).

The armed conflict impacted people's lives in a variety of ways. On the one hand, people living in rural areas, particularly youths, ethnic minorities, and lower-caste groups, experienced death threats if they refused to join the rebels or provide them with food and shelter. On the other hand, state security suspected that they were insurgents or allies of the Maoists and consequently interrogated, tortured, and sometimes even killed people. Feeling trapped, rural people began to migrate to Kathmandu and cities in India in search of a better quality of life. However, they discovered that renting a home or a room in a new city was almost impossible due to their being from Maoist areas (Cameron & Newman, 2008; Singh, Sharma, Poudel & Jimba, 2007). The "[i]nternal displacement due to conflict and persecution, which currently affects almost forty million people, (UNHCR, 2014) creates significant risk factors for trafficking" (Gallagher, 2015, p.16). Multi-layered discrimination created a situation that increased women IDPs' vulnerability to trafficking.

Centralized Industries in Kathmandu

Because of neoliberalism and capitalism, opportunities and economic development were centralized and advanced in Kathmandu in a way that enabled dominant groups with power and privilege to take advantage of, endanger, and exploit marginalized socio-economic communities. The rapid growth of the carpet and other industries in Kathmandu during the early 1990s attracted marginalized socio-economic people to migrate to Kathmandu to better their lives (Subedi,

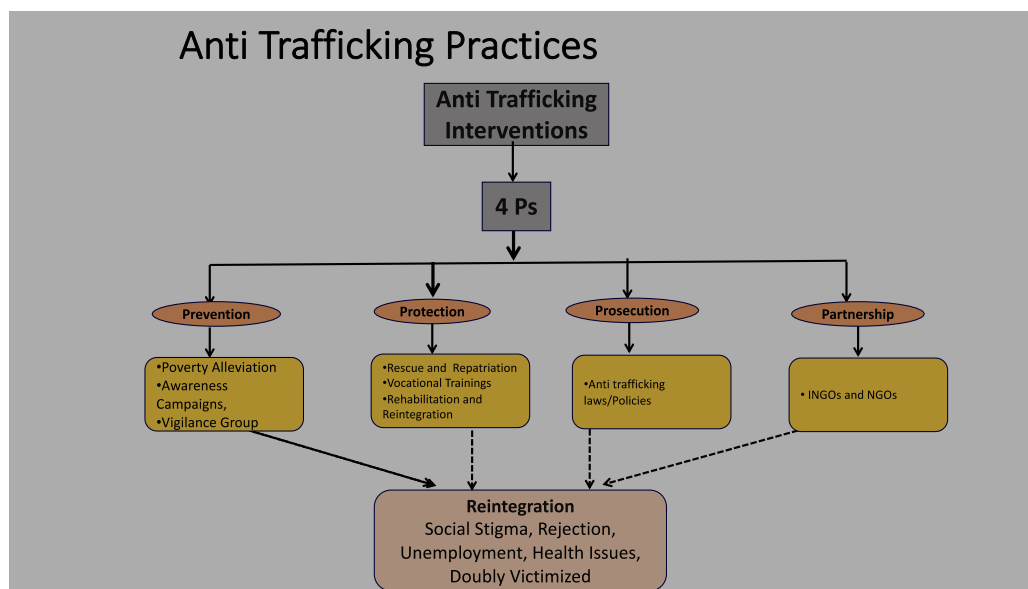
2009). Arguably, on the one hand, trafficking in persons was primarily influenced by the flourishing of the carpet business in Kathmandu, and on the other hand, when the carpet business declined due to the Maoist insurgency, those women and children who were primarily dependent on the industry for their survival became hopeless and suffered extreme poverty. As a last resort, the women and children left the country in search of new jobs. The decline of the carpet industry in the 1990s seems to have pushed more vulnerable women and children into sex and/or labour trafficking.

Anti-Human Trafficking Measures (4Ps)

Having adopted the United Nations' 4Ps anti-trafficking interventions, the Government of Nepal has developed a wide range of strategies to address the issue of human trafficking in Nepal. These are shown in Figure 1 below and discussed in the subsequent section.

Figure 1

Nepal's 4Ps Anti-trafficking Interventions



Although all 4 Ps overlap and are equally important, Nepal's government focuses on preventive activities. In partnership with local organizations working

on the anti-trafficking movement, the government has initiated various preventive programs in Nepal, mainly in at-risk communities and at the Nepal-India border. The “Village Surveillance Committees” and the “Border Monitoring Groups” as preventive measures that watch out for the security of women or leave their communities and who cross borders were formed (Banjade et al., 2018; Bohl, 2010; Chen & Marcovici, 2003; Sharma, 2014; Subedi, 2009).

The government has introduced and developed resources and materials related to trafficking to raise awareness about trafficking in the school system. It plans to incorporate the material into the social studies textbooks of grades eight and nine. It developed and piloted a course module on human trafficking for grade seven in 100 schools in 10 districts (Government of Nepal, 2013). However, most of the work being done appears to be driven by the numerous NGOs operating in the country. These include Biswas Nepal, Shakti Samuha, Maiti Nepal, Shanti Foundation, Change Nepal and Women Rehabilitation Center; all of them have developed anti-trafficking strategies. For example, Biswas Nepal has implemented prevention strategies such as providing non-formal and formal education to women, introducing income-generating activities, and raising awareness through lobbying and advocacy campaigns to prevent trafficking in the entertainment sector. Biswas Nepal staff also visit and monitor restaurants and interact with owners, the police, trade union members, and officials (Banjade et al., 2018).

As shown in Figure 1, the protection approach comprises rescue, repatriation, rehabilitation, reintegration, and referral to services (Banjade et al., 2018). Many NGOs have played a significant role in rescue and repatriation. In FY 2016/17, a total of “1065 trafficking victims were rescued by five NGOs: KI Nepal (466), Maiti Nepal (310), Biswas Nepal (276), Shakti Samuha (9), Chhori (3) and Kumudini (1)” (Banjade et al., 2018, p. 124). The rehabilitation agencies provide a wide range of services, including food, shelter, skills development

training, mental and physical health services and legal aid services (Banjade et al., 2018). There are two forms of reintegration; the first focuses simply on reunifying victims with their families, while the second centers on providing skill development training and seed funding for earning a livelihood according to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) (Banjade et al., 2018).

The Human Trafficking and Transportation Control Act 2007 was promulgated. It provides funding for the services such as rehabilitation and reintegration and compensation of survivors (not less than half of the fine levied as punishment on offenders). The government has tried to be more progressive in its prosecution of traffickers (McNeill, 2008). However, the Act 2007 sets the maximum punishment for those involved in trafficking as between 5 and 20 years of imprisonment on the nature of the crime (Acharya, 2008). According to the US Department of State, there are “slightly stricter penalties ranging from 10 to 20 years imprisonment and a fine” for involvement with sex trafficking (2019, p. 341). While punishments are severe, the procedures of the Nepali justice system are so lengthy that they have enabled some traffickers to leave the country or change their identities and therefore escape prosecution (Dhungel, 2017). Also, many trafficked women opt not to file a case against traffickers to avoid stigmatization (Adhikari, 2014; McNeill, 2008). Overall, In January 2018, the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens led a “review of the 2012-2022 anti-trafficking national action plans [which] revealed the government had implemented less than one-third of the plan’s prosecution and capacity-building objectives” (United States Department of State, 2019, p. 343).

Discussion and Moving Forward

Some anti-trafficking interventions, primarily preventive and protective measures, focus on meeting the immediate need of both women and children to prevent trafficking and support the reintegration of trafficking survivors. Dhungana (2010) suggested that anti-trafficking programs that focus on

encouraging women not to leave their villages may hinder them from achieving their needs and aspirations. Meenakshi Ganguly argued on social media in 2021 that a new proposal by the Department of Immigration will further infringe upon women's rights (<https://www.hrw.org/about/people/meenakshi-ganguly>).

According to this proposal, “any Nepali woman under the age of 40 will soon need the permission of her family and her local government ward office—among other requirements—before she can travel abroad alone” (2021, para. 2).

Counselling and vocational training, which fall under protective measures, seem to be pre-designed and generalized under a one-size-fits-all model and do not adequately address survivors' needs (Adhikari, 2011; Bohl, 2010; Chaulagai, 2009; Sharma, 2014). Interventions do not provide opportunities for professional training, including in health care and hotel management, and vocational training, such as sewing and knitting, leaving many survivors dissatisfied. Adhikari (2011) argued that “it is important for NGOs to strengthen their strategies to facilitate in economically empowering and independent living of the trafficked women returnees” (p. 83).

The government has failed to incorporate these measures into its work due to the poor enforcement of existing laws, the lack of comprehensive anti-trafficking strategies, and various manifestations of corruption (Chaulagai, 2009; McNeill, 2008; Sharma, 2014). The intimidation and harassment survivors experience during court proceedings, for example, discourage survivors from filing a case against perpetrators (Adhikari, 2011; Chaulagai, 2009; McNeill, 2008). The procedures for and approaches to the legal response to trafficking are also problematic. The victim is then cross-examined to determine whether or not she was trafficked (Dhungel, 2017), treating her as if she were a criminal and making them vulnerable to double victimization (Chaulagai, 2009; Dhungel, 2017). To avoid such humiliation, many victims refuse to file a case. According to the 2019 Trafficking in Persons Report, the “government [of Nepal] did not have

SOPs for victim identification and referral to services” (US Department of State, p. 342). “Official complicity in trafficking offences remained a serious problem, both direct complicity as well as negligence, and the government did not report significant efforts to address it, even after a 2017 parliamentary call to take action” (US Department of State, 2019, p. 341). When the US Department of State (2019) ranked 187 countries based on the extent of government action to combat trafficking, with Tier 3 as the lowest ranking (US Department of State, 2020), it ranked Nepal as a Tier 2 country because of its noncompliance with the minimum standards of TIP protocol.

There is little doubt that neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies benefit the wealthy and privileged to the detriment of everyone else. These ideologies are quietly accepted, however, because gender inequality in Nepal is perceived to be non-existent. Social practices like gender discrimination are seen as the result of individual shortcomings, and victims are blamed. For this reason, the continuation and rise of neoliberalism and neoconservatism threaten social justice advocacy (Boucher, 2017) and endanger the field of social work, which is a newly emerging field in Nepal. In turning their attention to anti-trafficking discourses, social workers need to advocate for legal and policy changes regarding human trafficking measures and develop interventions to bring about community change and social justice for oppressed and marginalized women and children. If they do not critically understand that the root issues of human trafficking lie in neoliberal and neoconservative ideas or are not aware of current anti-trafficking measures, including the 4 Ps, and their implications for curbing human trafficking from a human right lens, however, social workers may do more harm than good. Therefore, social workers must engage with women and girls, listen to their stories, and build anti-trafficking interventions in collaboration with communities to avoid harm. Service providers need to create community-led organizational responses to human trafficking using a pragmatic approach, including poverty

alleviation and focusing on community economic development, a protection approach focusing on trauma-informed care, and a prosecution approach focusing on advocacy for legal and policy change.

Women and child trafficking pose several challenges to the mental and psychological well-being of its survivors. To move forward, a wide range of professionals and communities, including researchers from interdisciplinary teams, activists, policymakers, practitioners, health professionals, civil society and communities, need to unite to carry out a community-based participatory study focusing on the mental health and psychological wellbeing of women and children in general and on the COVID-19-impacted society in particular. During times of hardship, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, this team of stakeholders must continue combating the inequities experienced because of the pandemic and the injustice and inequality that lie beneath the surface. Overall, social work practice and education should include action-based initiatives. For this reason, community-based participatory studies and action studies are needed. Since neoliberalism will continue to push against social welfare, social safety nets and the social work profession itself, it is critically important that social workers continue to be involved in community organizing and anti-trafficking discourses and their voices and experience to support the vulnerable and marginalized, the victims of the neoliberal regime.

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