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Nepal quake survivors face threat from human traffickers supplying sex trade

Criminal networks using cover of rescue effort to target poor rural communities in country from which an estimated 15,000 girls are trafficked a year, warn NGOs



Armed Nepalese police help people in Sindhupalchok district board a helicopter to Kathmandu after last month's earthquake. Photograph: Navesh Chitrakar/Reuters

[Jason Burke](#) in Kathmandu

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Tens of thousands of young women from regions devastated by the earthquake in [Nepal](#) are being targeted by human traffickers supplying a network of brothels across south Asia, campaigners in Kathmandu and affected areas say.

The 7.8-magnitude quake, which killed more than 7,000 people, has devastated poor rural communities, with [hundreds of thousands losing their homes and](#) possessions. Girls and young women in these communities have long been targeted by traffickers, who abduct them and force them into sex work.

The UN and local NGOs [estimate 12,000 to 15,000 girls a year are trafficked from Nepal](#). Some are taken overseas, to South Korea and as far as South Africa. But the majority end up in Indian brothels where tens of thousands are working in appalling conditions.

“This is the time when the brokers go in the name of relief to kidnap or lure women. We are distributing assistance to make people aware that someone might come to lure them,” said Sunita Danuwar, director of [Shakti Samuha, an NGO in Kathmandu](#). “We are getting reports of [individuals] pretending to go for rescuing and looking at people.”

Senior western aid officials in the Nepalese capital are also concerned. “There is nothing like an emergency when there is chaos for opportunities to ... traffic more women. There is a great chance that everything that is bad happening in Nepal could scale up,” said one.

Sita, 20, told the Guardian how she had been taken from her village in Sindhupalchok, the hill area north of Kathmandu, to the Indian border town of Siliguri where she was sold to a brothel owner, repeatedly beaten, systematically raped by hundreds of men and infected with HIV. “I do not have nightmares about my time there. I have erased it from my memory,” she said.

Last month’s quake killed more than 3,000 people in Sindhupalchok, and left hundreds of thousands homeless.

“The earthquake will definitely increase the risk of abuse,” said Rashmita Shashtra, a local healthworker. “People here are now desperate and will take any chance. There are spotters in the villages who convince family members and local brokers who do the deal. We know who they are.”



People injured in last month’s earthquake rest inside a tent at a makeshift hospital in Chautara, Sindhupalchok district. Photograph: Manish Swarup/AP

Sita, who was rescued last year, was taken by an uncle “for a job” in [India](#). Her parents, who are subsistence farmers and illiterate, believed assurances she would have a good job and be able to send back her wages.

In the brothel in Siliguri, Sita was forced to have unprotected sex with up to 20 or 30 men a day, seven days a week for a year. When the premises was raided by police, she told officials she wanted to return home and was handed over to an NGO.

“I am worried now for the other girls who might be taken away. They will need the money and be tempted if someone talks to them about a job. Then the same thing will happen to them as happened to me,” Sita said.

Nepal, one of the poorest countries in Asia, is the focal point of well organised smuggling networks dealing in everything from tiger skins to precious woods, from narcotics to people.