



Figure it out: Reporting on trafficking in women

By Rajashri Dasgupta and [Laxmi Murthy](#)

Media coverage of trafficking of women and children, migration and sex work is confused and inaccurate. Media wrongly uses the terms 'sex work' and 'trafficking' synonymously, perpetuating stereotypes and stigmatisation and contributing to the violation of women's right to free movement and livelihood options, say these authors

If media reports were to be believed, there would be no young girls left in Nepal. Oft-quoted figures such as 5,000-7,000 Nepali girls being trafficked across the border to India every year and 150,000-200,000 Nepali women and girls being trapped in brothels in various Indian cities, were first disseminated in 1986 and have remained unaltered over the next two decades. The report that first quoted these statistics was written by Dr I S Gilada of the Indian Health Association, Mumbai, and presented in a workshop in 1986. Subsequently, a version of this report was published as an article in the ***Times of India*** on January 2, 1989. The source of this figure remains a mystery to date. Unfortunately, such a lack of clarity is more the norm than the exception when it comes to reporting on trafficking in women and girls.

Not surprisingly, figures about the same phenomenon differ vastly. For example, the news report 'Majority of girls trafficked are minors', ***Indian Express***, Guwahati, March 9, 2007 cites the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as estimating that 150,000 people are trafficked within South Asia. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that between 600,000-800,000 people are trafficked across borders. The news report quotes estimates by the same organisations, that between 5,000-10,000 Nepali women are trafficked every year to India for purposes of 'commercial sexual exploitation', with an estimated 40,000-200,000 women and girls from Nepal working in brothels in various cities across India.

However, another report, from a different news agency, IANS, that appeared in ***The Tribune*** on October 24, 2007, quoted the UNODC chief Gary Lewis as saying that 5,000-15,000 women and children are trafficked to India from Nepal. Where does the truth lie? Or do 5,000 women this way or that not matter at all?

People on the move

Today, more than ever before in history, people are moving across the world in search of better opportunities of life and livelihood. Made easier by faster and cheaper means of transport and communication, migration for employment and its linkages with development as a phenomenon occurs in most societies the world over.

As global capital moves, so must global labour. In South Asia, the movement of persons is usually from the poorer regions, rural areas and less developed regions and countries, to the more developed, in search of greater employment opportunity. With growing urbanisation, availability of services as well as the opportunity to earn cash income, rural migrants are drawn into the big towns and metros. Many argue that people move from labour surplus-low wage areas to labour shortage-high wage areas. In some cases, it is also due to political instability and religious persecution.

In 2005, the five major South Asia labour-sending countries (India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan) sent over 1.5 million migrant workers abroad legally. India sent 549,000 migrants; Bangladesh 253,000; Nepal 184,000. The number of migrants deployed rose in each country by 2007; for instance, according to ***Migration News 2008***, the number of Indians deployed was 800,000, the number of Bangladeshis 833,000.

Remittance by migrant workers is said to be a major pillar that supports the economies of some countries. In 2007, the five major South Asia labour-sending countries received \$40 billion in remittances, led by \$27 billion in India, \$6.4 billion in Bangladesh and \$1.6 billion in Nepal. Most South Asians earn about \$200 to \$400 a month in the Gulf oil-exporting States.

Globalisation and the phenomenal economic growth in some parts of India have resulted in complex patterns of migration across borders in the region. According to a 2006 report of the International Labour Organisation, women are increasingly migrating and now account for half the international migrants. With the right safeguards in place that protect women without infringing on freedom of movement, migration can be profitable and strengthening, and women should not be discouraged from exercising this right. However, domestic laws, as well as regional laws and policies in South Asia, have not kept pace with these population movements. Security concerns, as well as political upheavals and internal conflict in most of the countries in the region, have also prevented the development of a comprehensive migration policy.

Grey areas

The lack of easy avenues to migrate has resulted in a plethora of illegal activities and

organised crime in the business of getting people/labour across borders. Trafficking for the purpose of debt bondage, child labour, organ trade, begging, sex work and mail-order brides are only some of the more glaring manifestations. Smuggling of persons across the border, through dangerous means, albeit with their consent, is another outcome of the lack of safe migration opportunities. Further problems arise because of the common perception that all movements of women (especially across borders) are forced, and mainly for the purpose of prostitution. This also leads to the conflation of 'prostitution/sex work' with 'trafficking', with these terms wrongly being used synonymously.

Stigmatisation and the perpetuation of stereotypes by the media add to the violation of human rights of each of these categories of persons: migrant workers, trafficked workers and smuggled workers. Within these categories, women are more vulnerable; gender discrimination and violence makes women soft targets of trafficking, while traffickers thrive on vulnerabilities. However, due to these vulnerabilities and risks, all women who migrate are lumped (in popular perception, the media, laws and policies) with children in need of protection. Such a protectionist approach often ends up violating women's right to free movement, to livelihood options, and choosing a country of residence.

Globally, anti-trafficking initiatives have stemmed from a crime-control perspective, rather than a human-rights perspective. Thus, the focus tends to be on stamping out a vice through stringent laws and effective enforcement, in order to rid a society of a social evil. Such an approach dwells little on the lived realities of women, their complex situation, and their human rights which might get violated in the process of vice control. The media has tended to mirror and reinforce this view, rather than focus on safe migration for individuals and their families.

Media coverage on issues of trafficking of women and children, migration and sex work over the years has been far from ideal. In the first place, issues of migration and trafficking do not receive adequate coverage in mainstream media. For example, a study by the Office of the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Women and Children, ONRT-NHRC Nepal (2007), found that there were only 184 news/views in nine leading dailies, both English and Nepali, over a period of one year (2006). Besides the scanty coverage, the quality of coverage is also a major concern. Moreover, misinformation, alongside commonly held myths, overridden by the prevailing morality, contributes to media coverage of these issues being shoddy and lacking in a factual base. Further, when journalists are unable to recognise and keep aside their own prejudices and biases, they are unable to tell it like it is.

An analysis of clips of selected English, Hindi, Nepali and Bengali newspapers and

electronic media clips over the period 2007-08, reveals certain common threads, despite the differences in language, region, and specificity of issues. A significant finding of the media analysis was that reporters have a confused understanding of the terms trafficking, migration, sex work, child abuse, child labour and exploitation. Often, one is mistaken for the other, and at others, the official or police version 'also guilty of wrong definitions' is quoted without analysis or critique. The attempt to sensationalise the issue and draw more attention is also perhaps one contributory factor to 'spicy' but confused headlines and reports.

Facts, lies and statistics

One of the pre-requisites for dealing with a problem is the availability of accurate data from reliable sources. However, media coverage on trafficking of women and children clearly reveals scanty and unverified data; different newspapers quoting the same source but different data and very little original investigation.

For example, a report in *The Deccan Chronicle* (India), January 23, 2007 by a staff correspondent, 'UN Official: 20,000 girls are trafficked in India', quotes the UN official, Gary Lewis, as saying that at least 20,000 girls are being trafficked in India, and that 90% of them do not cross national borders.

Interestingly, another UN official, P M Nair, is quoted as saying that 45% of the girls in brothels across the country are from Andhra Pradesh, but the source of Nair's figure is not mentioned. This figure differs vastly from the report in *The Statesman* one year later that claims that 93% of girls in brothels are from West Bengal.

Besides falling in the usual stereotype of equating trafficking with prostitution, a report in *The Statesman*, Kolkata, January 2, 2008 by Rajib Chatterjee, 'State (West Bengal) tops woman trafficking list', quotes the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), and goes on to say that 93% girls sold for prostitution in brothels in India in 2006 were from West Bengal. While the total number is not mentioned, it is stated that 114 out of a total of 123 cases of "selling girls for prostitution" reported from various police stations in the country, were from West Bengal. Interestingly, the NCRB figures were disputed by the inspector-general of police. No NGOs or affected people were quoted in the story.

The news report states that there was a 146% rise in the number of girls being sold to brothels in 2006 (from 19 in 2004 to 50 in 2005). Yet, the reporter does not analyse this sudden spike, nor wonder whether it was a rise in incidence, or could be because of better reporting due to the setting up of the Anti-Human Trafficking Cell in the CID (year of setting up not stated). Further, by mentioning 'girls' it is not clear if the reporter

actually means minors, or whether 'girls' also includes adult women. Such ambiguity does not enable accurate assessment of the problem.

To quote another example, the *Indian Express*, Guwahati, of March 9, 2007, in an article by Samudra Gupta Kashyap ('Majority of girls trafficked are minors') quotes Rajib Haldar, executive director of New Delhi-based Prayas Institute of Juvenile Justice saying that 20,000 young women were being trafficked across the country at any given time. The report does not make clear what time period he is referring to. According to Haldar, an alarming 2.3 million individuals, mostly women, had been trafficked in India in the past 10 years. He goes on to dispute the NCRB figures that say 25 cases were reported from Assam. He claims the figures for the rest of the Northeast (nil cases), cannot be believed. The news report however offers no explanations of these statistics.

Discrepancy in agency reports is particularly significant because the same report is picked up by publications across India. Similarly, a Press Trust of India (PTI) report that appeared in *The Sentinel*, Guwahati, on October 15, 2007 quotes Malini Bhattacharya, member of the National Commission for Women, India, calling human trafficking a "kind of international terrorism". Yet, the same news item says that it is estimated that 90% of India's sex trafficking is internal. Trafficking from neighbouring countries accounts for only 10% of the coerced migration into India, with approximately 2.17% from Bangladesh and 2.6% from Nepal. These figures (the source of which is not revealed) debunk the popular impression that the majority of trafficked women in India are from outside the country.

'International trafficking' undoubtedly makes for a more juicy story. A report in the New Delhi edition of *Dainik Bhaskar* (Hindi) of August 31, 2007, '*Ladkiyon ki taskari par police ko notice*' (Notice to police on trafficking of girls), is an agency report about the trafficking of girls from Delhi to the Gulf, via Ajmer. The entire report is based on the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) notice to the police forces of Delhi and Ajmer, in response to a news item about such trafficking. The story is however unsubstantiated by any figures, broadly saying that "many girls" are trafficked in such a manner.

Another item with the sensational headline '*Ladkiyon ko bheja ja raha hai Bangladesh*' (Girls are being sent to Bangladesh) in *Dainik Hindustan* (Hindi), New Delhi, September 26, 2007, is about one case of kidnapping, which, on very scanty evidence, is being called trafficking. The news report is based on a high court case filed by the missing woman's parents against her husband, who in turn accused his wife's parents of "selling" her to relatives in Bangladesh. The report does little to inform the reader about trafficking.

According to an article published on July 3, 2008 in **Nepal**, a weekly magazine published out of Kathmandu, each day 600 young Nepalis leave the country to work. "The government has given 774 manpower agencies permission to send those people abroad. The 2007-08 statistics show that there were 263,033 young people emigrating to find jobs". Simple arithmetic shows, however, that the average daily departure would be 720 persons, not 600.

A report in **Qaumi Patrika** (Hindi), New Delhi, January 16, 2007, quotes NGO sources as saying there are 1 crore women and children trafficked, and the revenue generated is 100,000 crore. This agency report goes on to quote the figure of 10 lakh dollars as the revenue generated from trade in children and women in Delhi alone. Apparently, there are 100,000 sex workers in Mumbai alone, of whom half are Nepali. It says according to the Centre for Development and Population Activities, about 200 girls and women join sex work on a daily basis.

As is evident from the sample of data quoted in the reports above, accurate, reliable data is scarce. Data is cited without quoting the source, and even when sources are quoted the data varies and is contradictory. What is of more concern is that inaccurate data is regularly recycled in the media.

Very little data is available on the actual implementation of the law, and convictions arising out of anti-trafficking laws. A rare report is that on nepalnews.com dated November 2, 2007 ('5,000 sex workers in Valley: A study'). According to this report, "About 7% out of the total of 2,210 prisoners are serving jail terms in the Kathmandu valley in cases related to human trafficking. Most of the imprisoned male traffickers are from Sindhupalchok, Nuwakot, Dhading and Makawanpur districts." However, no source for this data is quoted.

Recycling unverified data

The analysis of newspaper clippings and electronic clips revealed that data tends to make the rounds of media outlets. Even if the data is not attributed to any reliable source, it is quoted repeatedly, thus almost assuming the status of 'fact'. Following is one such example:

The **Dainik Bhaskar** (Hindi), New Delhi, of January 14, 2007, in a report titled '**Deh vyapar ka karobar ek lakh karod ka**' (Flesh trade to the tune of one lakh crore) contains some interesting facts and figures:

- After drugs and arms trafficking, trafficking in children and women is the next biggest moneyspinner in the world.
- These women and children are used in the sex trade, and the business

amounts to 10 billion dollars annually.

- India shares 1/4th of this booty.
- In India, 1 crore women are trafficked, and 1 lakh crore rupees change hands.
- In Mumbai the women involved in sex trade goes up to 1 lakh.
- In India, there are 500,000 women from Nepal and Bangladesh.
- Every year, around 10,000 women from Nepal and 7,000 women from Bangladesh are trafficked to India on the promise of employment and better marriage prospects.
- Most of these are below 16 years of age.
- The girls from Nepal are sold for Rs 2000-60,000.
- According to Centre for Development and Population Activities, every day, 200 women are added to the sex trade in India.

A point to note is that the source for the data for points 1 through 9 is attributed to "various human rights agencies and NGOs" without naming them.

Significantly, these statistics were quoted in two news reports on major TV channels in India: The report 'Tackling Trafficking', aired on NDTV 24x7 on December 4, 2007, while reporting the newly launched Ujjwala scheme, quotes the ***Dainik Bhaskar*** data, but no primary source. Similarly, a report on Doordarshan on the same day (December 4, 2007) on the Ujjwala scheme, also quotes the same ***Dainik Bhaskar*** figures. Journalists must be alert to the process of recycling data without checking original sources, especially when the data thus quoted is contradictory.

Getting off the beaten track

The majority of the reports analysed can be called hand-out journalism ' either from official sources, press releases, or NGO publicity materials. There is almost no attempt to follow up stories, track the issue, dig out primary sources, or do investigative research. Rarely did any of the stories explore new angles, or break new ground in exposing the roots of the problem, leave aside suggesting innovative solutions to the problem of trafficking in women and girls. A few articles did attempt to highlight little-known facts, such as the extremely low conviction rate for the crime of human trafficking ('5,000 sex workers in Valley: A study'), the lack of training for police (Sreyashi Dastidar's 'Never too young to be sold' in ***The Telegraph***, Kolkata, October 15, 2007). But these continue to be rare, illustrating the need for more analytical and investigative reporting of these issues.

This critique of coverage in print, online and electronic media must be read in the context of the crucial role played by the media. The media can provide information and awareness about safe migration; investigate and expose violations of human rights of

women and children who are trafficked; build public opinion by providing the context of the real experiences of women; influence and impact public policy on migration and trafficking by highlighting all sides of the issue, and as significant, the media can also provide a platform for healthy debate and airing divergent views. However, if the media takes it upon itself to play either moral guardian or police mouthpiece, little is possible in terms of generating an informed debate.

(Rajashri Dasgupta is an independent journalist based in Kolkata.)

InfoChange News & Features, January 2009