



Anti-trafficking checkpoint at Nepal-India border © NISER

Adolescent girls' experiences of cross-border and international migration in the adult entertainment sector in Nepal

Authors: Anita Ghimire and Fiona Samuels¹

Introduction

Human trafficking is a global issue and continues to be a challenge in Nepal. According to the National Human Rights Commission of Nepal (NHRC) report (2019), nearly 1.5 million Nepalis are at risk of being trafficked. Around 35,000 people were trafficked in 2018/19 to work in different sectors, including the adult entertainment sector (AES) (ibid). While work in the AES does not necessarily always involve commercial sex work (CSW), a large part of it is related to CSW, either directly or as a space to link the client and the sex worker. Recent reports found that people also pay intermediaries to be smuggled to other countries and to work in sectors of their choice (SaMi, 2018). The proliferation of AES activities in Nepal, the country's linkages to the global AES market and the growing use of technology seem to have increased the international migration of Nepali women and girls who voluntarily travel to work in the AES.

According to the NHRC (2019), around 10,000 women annually are prevented from crossing the border because they are suspected of paying to be smuggled to India for an onward journey abroad. On the demand side, the recruitment of Nepali women and girls by foreign manpower agents to work in the AES abroad has increased sharply since 2008 (Risal et al., 2018; SaMi, 2018). According to the Safe Migration Project study (2018), these agents visit Nepal and select girls from AES venues such as dance bars and massage parlours and offer them work in the AES venues of countries in the Middle East.

On the supply side, international migration to work in the AES has become a growing aspiration for girls who are working in the AES in Nepal: for example, according to a study conducted by the Safer Migration Project (2018), 60% of girls who worked in the AES in Nepal had an intention to work in the AES in other countries in the next year. For 43% of those girls, it was

¹ Suggested citation: Ghimire, A. and Samuels, F. (2020) 'Adolescent girls' experiences of cross-border and international migration in the adult entertainment sector in Nepal.' Policy Brief. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence.

not the first time they had migrated to the AES abroad and despite having had bad experiences during their previous international migration (ibid) they wanted to migrate again.

Adolescence, defined by the World Health Organization as 'the period of life spanning the ages between 10-19 years' is a time when growth is accelerated, major bodily changes take place and differences between boys and girls are accentuated (WHO, 2014). It is also a period of rapid cognitive growth, which has the potential for huge aspiration, energy and creativity but also significant vulnerability. Today, around 1.2 billion adolescents in the world make up 16% of the world's population and more than half of all adolescents (340 million) live in Asia (UNICEF, 2019). Adolescents currently make up about 22% of the 28.5 million people in Nepal (UNFPA, 2017). The 2011 population and housing census, which is the most recent census in Nepal, recorded 3,207,821 male and 3,199,583 female adolescents (NPCS and CBS, 2012).

Interest in adolescence is growing; however, there remain both programmatic and knowledge gaps. We know that adolescents are not a homogenous group; their transitions to adulthood, the opportunities open to them and their life trajectories are markedly different based on gender, age group, income level, infrastructure and policy support, and the prevailing gendered social norms and values (Harper et al., 2018; Bakrania et al., 2018; Viner et al., 2015). We also know that girls in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are among those least able to build their capabilities (Harper et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2011) and often face significant vulnerabilities in life in general.

The brief is derived from the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE)-Adolescent Girls in the Adult Entertainment Sector (AGES) programme. Box 1 gives a brief summary of the GAGE programme.

AGES is part of the GAGE study in Nepal. The objective of the GAGE-AGES study was to understand how gendered norms influence girls' and boys' entry into the AES, what the gendered experiences of girls in the AES are, the cross-border and international linkages of the Nepali AES and the role of technology in the mediation of AES.

The study followed a qualitative methodology. It was conducted in five areas: Kathmandu, the hub for the AES;

Sindhupalchowk, a popular district of origin for girls and boys working in the AES; Delhi, India, as a destination for girls working in the AES; and two districts where the AES is on the increase, Jhapa and Sunsari. Additionally, two border points were observed in Nepal and India (on each side of the border), which according to key informants are active cross-border migration routes for girls to travel to India and abroad. Girls and boys working in different venues (dance bars, discos, massage parlours, home-based and street-based sex workers, freelance sex workers, and those working in guest houses) were included in the study. Altogether, 26 focus group discussions, 40 in-depth interviews, 45 key informant interviews, nine life history interviews and three case studies with girls rescued from the international AES and girls who left the AES to work in non-AES sectors were conducted. The study also analysed 10 intervention programmes and conducted an online study of social media for a year. For further details on the methodology please see the forthcoming report.

In this brief, we analyse the following:

- Linkages between the AES in Nepal and India.
- Girls' aspirations to work in the international AES.
- Factors that drive these aspirations.
- The process of recruitment, financing migration into the international AES from the AES in Nepal and the migration process.

We also discuss the cross-border and the international migration of adolescents from Nepal to work in the AES. While in the broader AGES study we explored the perceptions and attitudes of both adolescent girls and boys, in this brief we focus on adolescent girls, since the international and cross-border dynamics primarily concern them.

Findings

The findings section is divided into two parts. In the first section we explore the cross-border linkages with India of adolescents involved in the Nepali AES. In the second section, we discuss the findings on the international linkages of the Nepali AES.

Box 1: The GAGE programme

GAGE is a nine-year (2015–2024) mixed methods longitudinal research programme, exploring gendered experiences of adolescents. It follows lives of 20,000 adolescents in six focal countries in three regions of the world: Ethiopia and Rwanda in Africa; Bangladesh and Nepal in Asia; and Jordan and Lebanon in the Middle East. GAGE aims to fill the vast evidence gap on 'what works' to enable poor adolescent girls to emerge from poverty and fast-track social change for themselves, their families and communities, and their countries. GAGE's research addresses two broad questions:

- What do adolescents' lives look like as they evolve over the second decade of life and how are their experiences gendered?
- What impact have change strategies (e.g. through programme interventions) had on adolescents' development?

Figure 1: Map of the common India–Nepal transit points and study sites on the border



Source: adapted from mapchart.net

Cross-border migration between the AES in India and Nepal

As shown in Figure 1, Nepal is bordered by India on three sides. The two countries have an open border provision which allows nationals of both countries to cross over into each other's territories without requiring a passport or visa. Figure 2 shows the main transit points and border study sites. Every day, thousands of people cross the border from these points for trade and transit, to visit family or for economic, medical, religious and touristic reasons.

The literature on the Nepal–India cross-border AES is extensive but dominated by discussions on trafficking. The literature covers diverse aspects of trafficking, ranging from the history of trafficking to the way of life of Nepali girls in Indian brothels (see, for example, Laurie et al., 2015; Dhakal Adhikari and Turton, 2019; Kumar, 2019). In this brief, we only focus on the AES linkages in the eastern districts that lie along the Nepal–India border that have been happening recently. Our study focus is predominantly on the Nepali side of the border. Due to a lack of access, we were not able to conduct interviews on the Indian side or to interview Indian girls who had come to Nepal to work in the AES in Nepali towns. Hence, what we present here is based on interviews with key informants who have worked with Indian girls in Nepal and Nepali girls who are engaged in the AES in the border towns in Nepal, as shown in Figure 1.

According to key informants, the Indian regions bordering Nepal – Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal – are regular routes for girls voluntarily entering into the AES in India. They take the Kathmandu–Bhadrapur airport route in Nepal and enter India either through the West Bengal border in the east of Nepal or the Bihar–Bengal border from the south-east. While girls crossed the border on foot or in three-wheeled vehicles a few years ago, according to key informants, private vehicles are increasingly used to carry girls working in this sector into India. Arrangements are often made for their onward journeys to urban centres in India such as Siliguri, Mujaffarfur, Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata by bus or train. While in earlier times, girls from neighbouring hilly districts such as Makawanpur and Gorkha were more likely to enter India through the eastern border of Bihar and Bengal, key informants who work on the border find that girls from all districts of Nepal are now using the routes.

Both the Nepali police and Nepali NGOs stop and systematically question girls who are about to cross the border about their travel. They take detailed information about the girls and their parents and families. Both the police and the NGOs in Nepal coordinate closely with their partners (security forces and NGOs) in India. CSW is the main form of work in the AES in India and in the last two to three years, girls who voluntarily travel for this work often say to the border



In-depth interview with a study participant in Kathmandu © Fiona Samuels

police that they are going for training for 'network business',¹ to visit family or to go shopping. Border control officers will call the girls' parents and prohibit girls from crossing the border if they are unsure about the girl's answers. According to key informants, they usually prevent 25–30 girls from crossing the border each month.

Key informants found that while girls who are taken by middlemen travel by rickshaw (a three-wheeled vehicle), the trend is changing and girls now directly solicit business with Indian clients. In these new cases, girls will fly from Kathmandu to Bhadrapur, where they are picked up by the client or employer's private vehicle and ferried across the border. While border checks are still carried out on these girls, key informants were of the opinion that this method of transporting girls is largely done to discourage interrogation from border officials. During our observation we found that these private vehicles are usually expensive SUVs with tinted windows and there is often only a driver accompanying the girl. We did not find evidence that these vehicles are less frequently checked, however. The vehicles were routinely stopped, and both the girls and the drivers were questioned and were required to provide

the necessary information before they were allowed to proceed.

Regarding the way cross-border migration is arranged in east Nepal, our study found that people in Nepal and Nepalis living in West Bengal have joint investments in businesses across the border. These investments are usually in potential AES establishments such as hotels, travel and tour services, and transportation. Linkages between clients and girls are mediated by hotel owners or managers. In some cases, Indian clients who come to Nepal offer to take girls to India.

However, in Jhapa and Sunsari, girls tend not to accept these offers because they believe that they will be put into brothels or street-based sex work in India and might face severe forms of violence.

Migration to India from Kathmandu is a common phenomenon. Girls and women who are already part of the Nepali AES largely migrate to India voluntarily as 'mistresses', where they serve a single Indian client who pays for their upkeep in India. The girls work there seasonally and the client typically rents out a flat for the girl during her stay in Kathmandu. It is expected that the

¹ Network business is a type of business where products from a particular company are sold not from shops but among networks of people who join the business. It is illegal in Nepal.

girl will only have a sexual relationship with the client and will not do CSW in Kathmandu. The preference in the Indian AES is for young, slim and fair-skinned Nepali girls and, depending on the beauty and age of the girl, they can earn as much as USD400 (50,000 Nepali rupees) per month.

I know a friend who migrated to India. She used to call me to join her but I used to tell her to go by herself as I was scared. At one time she used to bring back around 30,000 Indian rupees (USD430). Focus group discussion with girls working as street-based sex workers, Kathmandu.

This study also finds evidence of girls from India coming to work in Nepal. According to key informants, they usually come via three channels: as former sex workers who come to Nepal to work in hotels and restaurants (for example, as dishwashers) not necessarily as sex workers, but who may be willing to provide these services if they are requested by clients; as new girls who cross the border to Nepal to seek CSW and work in hotels; and those who arrive using the investor linkages across the borders discussed above. The girls come from the neighbouring town of Naxal in India and live in the border town of Kakadbhitta in Nepal or the nearby town of Birtamode.

Migration between the Nepali and international AES

In this section we discuss findings on the aspirations girls from the Nepali AES have to migrate to the international AES. We also discuss findings related to the recruitment and funding process.

Aspirations to go abroad

A desire to work abroad in countries such as the United Arab Emirates (in Dubai), Hong Kong, South Africa, Kenya, India, Malaysia and Thailand was common among girls working in the AES, particularly in dance bars and doharis in Kathmandu.

Stories of girls and women who were previously working in the AES in Nepal and who are now working in dance bars in Dubai, Japan, Australia and Malaysia and leading a good life are circulated regularly on social media or discussed among peer groups, which creates aspirations for international migration in the AES. Girls are further attracted by videos and pictures of Nepali models, singers and dancers who post pictures of their international performances on Facebook and give interviews on social media. The pictures do not show the challenges of this lifestyle, but focus on the positive side of life abroad.

Those who want to continue working in the AES believe that working in the AES abroad yields a better income with

I don't know anyone, but my senior colleagues say that they had friends who migrated abroad and are making a good income.

(In-depth interview with a girl working in dance bars, Kathmandu)

less difficulty. It is estimated that they earn around USD990 per month and can stay for three months.

In addition, there is less fear of being exposed to family members and a widespread belief among girls that jobs in the international AES are safer and easier than in Nepal. Girls have heard that overall the workplace environment is good – and girls get good leisure time, unlike in Nepal. There is also a common belief that guests are not allowed to touch or make contact with the girls, that the stage where they perform is separated so that clients do not have access to it and that, unlike in Nepal where clients are drunk and misbehave, clients abroad are well behaved. They believe that workplaces have CCTV cameras and so girls are protected, as indicated by this interviewee:

There is a boundary created between the guests and the artists. The artists will perform in a raised platform away from the guests. No guests are allowed to walk up the stairs and go and dance/sing along with the artists and in any way misbehave with them. Focus group discussion with girls working in dance bars, Kathmandu.

Girls currently working in *doharis* and dance bars believe that exposure to the international AES will make them famous singers and dancers, and they strive towards this largely by investing in singing and dancing lessons and looking for migration opportunities. According to respondents, they obtain this information from their peers, who in turn have heard about this from others who returned from the AES abroad. Despite extensive use of digital technology, we did not find girls using technology to find factual information or triangulate information shared by other key informants about the AES abroad.

For example, we asked girls if they had ever tried to get first-hand information about work abroad. Common responses, as seen below, were that girls did not know anyone to obtain first-hand information from and what they knew came from friends, people who worked in the same venue or those who had heard stories from friends:

I don't know anyone, but my senior colleagues say that they had friends who migrated abroad and are making a good income. They say that initially it is difficult to get established, but later it becomes easier to adjust.

Interviewer: How much do they earn?

Respondent: Dancers earn less than 30,000 Nepali rupees (USD300) monthly in Nepal but there they can earn 1 lakh Nepali rupees (USD1,000) in a month. (In-depth interview with a girl working in dance bars, Kathmandu.)

Successful returnees are also role models and provide girls with examples of what they themselves could do. Successful returnees often convey an aura of affluence and the impression that they have made an 'established life' for themselves in Nepal – they have properties or land, a house, assets and fancy personal attire such as flashy jewellery and branded clothes.

However, after learning from friends and social media about the increasing violence in the AES, and the harassment and hardships that women working abroad in the AES and other sectors face, some girls and women who were aspiring to seek work opportunities abroad have been discouraged. However, these are largely older girls whose peers have endured violence or girls with children.

Earlier, I had thought about it and I made my passport as well but these days I don't have such desires. I have heard stories of returnee migrants who have come back from abroad after doing domestic work where they been tortured and they suffered physical violence. Knowing all this, I think to myself, why should I try going abroad?' (In-depth interview with a girl working in a massage parlour, Kathmandu.)

Recruitment and funding for work in the AES abroad

Respondents working in dance bars and doharis believe that the selection process is rigorous, middlemen are looking for young girls between the ages of 18 and 19 and only singers and dancers have the opportunity to go abroad for work. Respondents shared that Middle Eastern countries are popular destinations from the AES in Nepal. To be eligible, girls need to have perfect bodies (no cellulite, stretch marks or scars, lean and fair) and a beautiful face. These criteria supersede every other aspect of selection.

I have heard stories of returnee migrants who have come back from abroad after doing domestic work ... and they suffered physical violence. Knowing all this, I think to myself, why should I try going abroad?

(In-depth interview with a girl working in a massage parlour, Kathmandu)

There are screening centres discreetly situated in parts of Kathmandu where girls have to go through full-body screening. Here, middlemen from abroad test girls who are referred by the Nepali AES owners or Nepali middlemen. The minimum academic criteria to work in the AES abroad is high school education with basic proficiency in English. If they are to be taken as dancers, girls need to have minimum dancing skills. Once selected, girls are trained and prepared as dancers, singers or masseuses to meet the expectations of clients abroad.

Girls migrate for three to six months at a time. This is because the tourist visa used for such migration only allows a three- to six-month permit and because employers are keen to continually bring in new girls to maintain clients' interest. In the case of jobs in the AES, it is the employing company that initially bears all the expenses of taking girls abroad. However, according to respondents, girls are required to pay back around USD8,200 (10 lakh Nepali rupees) within the three to six months that they are there. Out of this, girls receive USD2,500 (3 lakh Nepali rupees) as an advance to pay for local expenses, for travel, to buy suitable clothes and to pay for beauty treatments. According to respondents, the local employers or middlemen are given a larger amount. A respondent who had returned from the AES abroad shared that girls do not have any alternative but to engage in risky behaviour to be able to earn the money in the three to six months of their stay. Girls are allowed to keep the remaining money if they are able to earn more than that. However, according to a respondent who returned from the AES in Dubai, it is very rare that girls earn more than what they have to pay, and hence they rarely make any money other than the USD2,500 they are given as an advance.

Conclusion

The open-border provision allowing nationals of Nepal and India to cross the border between their countries without a visa or a passport makes cross-border movement easy for all types of migrants, including those working in the AES. While Nepal has a long history of trafficking women and girls to brothels and circuses in India, this study finds that girls increasingly go to India voluntarily to work as commercial sex workers in hotels or as 'mistresses'. While inside Nepal, working in the AES does not necessarily involve CSW, but a large part of the AES work carried out by girls migrating from Nepal to India entails CSW. While previously, only girls living nearer to the border would go to India for the AES voluntarily, currently girls from all 77 districts use these border points to go to India or abroad to work in the AES.

Many girls working in the AES in Nepal aspire to migrate internationally to work in the AES abroad (e.g. in Dubai, Hong Kong, Malaysia and countries in Africa). Girls in such cases are largely influenced by stories from friends, returnees who present an aura of affluence and what they see on social media; they rarely check credible sources for information. For girls working in doharis and dance bars, they see it as an opportunity to earn as well as providing the opportunity for career advancement. There are widespread misconceptions that the AES abroad is safe, does not involve CSW and that there are systems used in the AES abroad to ensure that girls do not face sexual exploitation.

There is an established system of recruitment in place, where recruiters come from the destination countries to encourage Nepali girls to migrate. The initial costs related to travelling are borne by the employers and girls in these cases travel on a tourist visa for three months. Their net earnings generally include an advance payment of USD2,500. Besides high school education and basic dancing skills, girls who are slender and fair-skinned and have no marks on their bodies are predominantly those selected by recruiters.

Policy recommendations

In order to reduce the number of adolescent girls who migrate abroad to work in the AES, we propose the following measures:

- **Increase investment in patrolling the Nepal-India border** (such as increasing the number of police personnel, patrolling vehicles, set funding for regular engagement with the border police of India) to increase surveillance on cross-border migration.
- Since 'network business' is illegal in Nepal, **stop girls at the border who say they are migrating to India to take training courses in network business.**
- **Regularly invite Indian police who work at the border to teach girls about the dangers of the AES sector in India.** In addition, invite police to give talks in schools in districts and communities where the prevalence of female labour migration is high.
- **Make use of popular apps used by girls to disseminate information on safety** when working in

the sector (including abroad) and to support them if they decide to leave the sector.

- **The government should work with NGOs in Nepal to provide pre-migration orientation to girls who aspire to migrate abroad.** Current programmes do not have interventions to raise awareness about the risks of working in the AES in other countries and international AES destinations. The study finds that there is a need for programmes to show the risks and challenges associated with life in the AES abroad and to teach girls about alternative jobs and the importance of vocational education and safer migration trajectories.
- **Such programmes should also work with Nepali embassies in the potential target destinations to gather factual information** about the general way of life and demands of the job in the AES in the target destinations that can be used in the pre-migration orientation.
- **Carry out further studies to understand the prevalence of international migration to the AES, the condition of girls working in the AES abroad and the challenges in the destination countries.** Documentation and evidence are crucial to raise awareness of the plight of workers in this sector.
- **Include free vocational training and technical education in schools and have special mechanisms such as quota systems to ensure girls have easy access to such training.** Link training to local jobs in the province so that girls do not have to engage in CSW.
- **Increase outreach in the AES.** The study finds that programmes currently target only establishment-based AES for interventions, while girls increasingly work through informal networks. These girls therefore tend to be left out of any intervention programmes. NGOs and the government should develop programmes that reach girls who work in the AES through informal networks and who do not have links to establishments such as dance bars or doharis.

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