COMMENTARY

Human Trafficking in Nepal: Post-Earthquake Risk and Response

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ABSTRACT

As Nepal mourns the 1-year commemoration of the April 2015 earthquake and its aftershocks that killed more than 8500 people and left thousands injured and displaced, other more hidden repercussions of the resultant chaotic environment need attention: the increased risk of human trafficking. Considering that natural disasters provide a milieu for this illicit trade, there is a need for a robust response from stakeholders such as donors, civil society organizations, and government organizations against human trafficking following disasters such as the Nepal earthquake. Responsibility to prevent and fight trafficking should be explicitly included in the mandate of relief and rehabilitation mechanisms set up at the national level to coordinate the disaster relief response, serving to support populations in both rural and urban areas. (*Disaster Med Public Health Preparedness*. 2017;11:153-154)

Key Words: earthquake, human trafficking, public health, Nepal

As Nepal mourns the 1-year commemoration of the 2 major earthquakes—a 7.8-magnitude earthquake on the 25th of April 2015 followed by a second powerful 7.3-magnitude quake 2 weeks later—that killed more than 8500 people and left thousands injured and displaced, other more hidden repercussions of the resultant chaotic environment need attention: the increased risk of human trafficking in the wake of complex disasters. Nepal is a main source country for human trafficking in South Asia.[1]

Although largely framed as a legal and a social issue, human trafficking is also a major public health problem globally because victims of trafficking experience health-related problems and are at higher risk of injury, illness, or death.[2,3] While the scale of human trafficking is a global phenomenon, populations in a post-disaster scenario are at higher risk.[4] The open borders between Nepal and neighboring India have provided opportune conditions for the illegal movement of women and girls to India and further afield.[5] The paucity of border controls and concurring corruption further compound the situation with chaos and weak law enforcement.[6] While political instability has plagued Nepal since the end of the civil war,[7] the disrupted law enforcement and the current post-disaster period leaves Nepalese children and women at higher risk of being trafficked. The risk increases for children separated from their families, as they may be believed to be missing or dead. Conditions for women serve to further increase risk of exploitation, including too low levels of literacy, fewer educational opportunities, and fewer opportunities for job training or employment. Nepali women also experience frequent discrimination due to rigid gender roles and stereotypes and sociocultural norms, lessening women's autonomy.

Women are particularly vulnerable when disaster strikes because chaos exacerbates existing gender inequalities. Women from marginalized castes such as the Dalit (untouchables), those with disabilities, widows, the elderly, and those living in rural areas may be further at risk of discrimination, violence, and sexual abuse following a natural disaster.

Nepal has a long and troubled history of human trafficking. Many girls and children are trafficked every year within the country, to India and the Middle East for commercial sexual exploitation or forced marriage. The United Nations estimates that between 12,000 and 15,000 girls are trafficked to India and Gulf countries for commercial sex and forced labor.[8] While organizations supporting women's and children's rights have expressed concerns over the increased risk of trafficking of women and children from displaced families, response to this situation has been very minimal. The US "Trafficking in Persons Report" has identified Nepal as one of the countries that has yet to fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.[9]

The Government of Nepal has made efforts to prevent trafficking over the past several years through a comprehensive approach that includes policy reform, law enforcement, and programs that meet the special needs of women and children and people at risk. Nepal already has important laws in place that

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address trafficking of girls and forced child labor, including the Human Trafficking Control Act of Nepal of 1986, the Labor Act of 1992, the National Human Rights Commission Act of 1993, and the Trafficking in Persons and Transportation Control Act of 2007.[10,11] Within a patriarchal society, women are at a higher risk of experiencing violence within an intimate relationship. The Nepalese government is working to strengthen the strategic health response to gender-based violence with the hospital-based One-Stop Crisis Management Centers (OCMC) for women, offering necessary services within one visit.[12] These OCMCs could form a strong foundation to support women experiencing violence accessing health care and also an opportunity for women to engage in initiatives, such as improving literacy levels.

However, despite these government initiatives in place to combat trafficking, effective law enforcement mechanisms are lacking in the country. Moreover, public awareness of human trafficking is still very low, and prevention activities through the sensitization of the general population are yet to be fully carried out.[13]

Considering that natural disasters provide a milieu for this illicit trade, there is a need for a robust response from stakeholders such as donors, civil society organizations, and government organizations against human trafficking following disasters. The increase in human trafficking activities stemming from complex emergencies such as in Afghanistan, Haiti, and Sudan over the last decade has made this a priority.[14] Stakeholders should be engaged in the prevention of this illegal trade, appealing for a clear, sustainable, international humanitarian response to human trafficking. This requires appropriate strategies, as well as concrete tools and mechanisms for early warning and emergency response. Immediate response should focus on identifying and rescuing victims.

The most important need is to create awareness among the public about trafficking. Awareness programs should be geared toward changing harmful social and cultural practices that contribute to gender discrimination and violence against women. Traffickers must be promptly prosecuted and appropriately punished with those who are trafficked being provided with access to adequate support and protection. Responsibility to prevent and fight trafficking should be explicitly included in the mandate of relief and rehabilitation mechanisms set up at the national level to coordinate the disaster relief response, serving to support populations in both rural and urban areas.

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