

From Nowhere to Somewhere

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Introduction

Araria, Kishanganj and Purnia (also Purnea) are three districts of north Bihar, infamous for the trafficking of young girls and women. Even though not ordinarily evident, sex trade in Bihar is highly organized and cuts across urban and rural areas. While Gulabbag and Kasba in Purnia municipal area and Khagra and Kattalbari in Kishanganj town are urban bases for flesh trade, Bishanpur, Premnagar, Bibiganj and Samesar are located in haats (rural markets) and isolated places in villages. Similarly, Uttari Rampur is located in the town of Forbesganj whereas Khabaspur is in rural Araria.

Twenty kilometers away from Kishanganj town is another brothel, Panjipara, in the neighbouring North Dinajpur district of West Bengal, which has more sex workers than all brothels in Kishanganj, Purnia and Araria put together.

However, none of these are isolated or standalone in their activities or trafficking. Pimps from one brothel maintain relationship(s) and exchange information with other brothels belonging to these neighbouring districts.

These brothels trade in sex workers on the basis of rise and fall in demand at each location.

With support from the United State Department of State J/TIP office, Nomi Network ('Nomi') started a project for the women in trafficking or at the risk of trafficking in 2012. The women are based in Forbesganj in Araria district of Bihar, arguably the poorest state in India. In the initial two months, Nomi conducted a survey in and around the red light area of Forbesganj to assess the basic skills of the women and girls and their interest in alternate livelihoods.

Based on interviews of 44 sex-workers, this study outlines the socio-economic condition and behavioural responses of sex workers and captures the impact of the work done by Nomi Network in the lives of those involved in flesh trade in Araria district.

Profile of Victims and their Families

For effective intervention it is important to appraise the socio-economic condition of the victim's family before she entered commercial sexual exploitation.

Most of the vulnerable women suffered from low self-esteem. Poor levels of literacy and awareness were added risk factors. It was found that most of the victims had not received any kind of formal education. A number of girls who entered sex trade belonged to large families. Only a fourth of the respondents had a monthly family income of more than two thousand rupees. Many sex-workers interviewed were unable to give details of family income as they were minor or illiterate or both.

Poverty, illiteracy and lack of any vocational skill increased their susceptibility to enter the flesh trade. Economic deprivation and associated conditions were found to be the most significant underlying factors that led to increased vulnerability of these girls and women.

However, entering flesh trade seldom resulted in economic empowerment of the victim. While splitting of income received from commercial sexual exploitation is an integral part of flesh trade¹, only a few of the sex-workers interviewed received incomes from the brothel owner. Younger girls did not receive any money, as they had to pay back to the brothel the cost of their purchase. This binding was neither given to them in writing nor clearly mentioned orally. All going well, they will get monetary compensation after being in the trade for a few years.

Amongst the other prevailing circumstances in the family that the victims could recall were:

- Gender discrimination within the family
- Dysfunctional home environment
- Families facing uncertain times
- Children in substitute care
- Breaking-up of the family
- Marital discord
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Drug abuse
- Abandonment by husbands
- Husband acquiring a second or a third wife, etc.

Profile of the Pimps and their modus operandi

Pimps who recruit sex-workers are usually young men and middle-aged women. They are significantly older than the young girls or women that they target. These sex-work contractors travel often between home regions (towns or villages) and brothel areas (receiving regions) and

¹ Mukherjee and Das, 1996, "This sharing of income makes the nexus between procurers, pimps, brothel keepers, local goondas and police so strong that they together promote prostitution."

have significant linkages with the villages and towns where the victims originate from. Terms like '*dalal*' (agent) are commonly used to refer to pimps. Agents speak several dialects and languages.

These *dalals* are often neighbours, family-friends, relatives of a friend, migrant women or women friends returning from cities. Many pimps are either former prostitutes or are trying to escape forced prostitution by recruiting a substitute.

In some instances the agent could be a lover, boyfriend, husband or even the father. They either use friends and acquaintances to recruit sex-workers or rely on word of mouth.

It is observed that many of these agents indulge in dodgy activities like gambling and substance abuse, sometimes as part of their living. They can be drug peddlers, band leaders in dance-bars, head masons at construction sites or labour contractors.

The Vicious Life-cycle of a Sex Worker

Retired prostitutes who become pimps or sex work contractors (SWCs) are locally referred to as *Maushis*. Most of these *Maushis* entered the profession at a young age, because of either trafficking or family descentance (born in a brothel or born to a sex worker).

By the time they are thirty, a majority of sex workers start losing clients and therefore start searching for alternate livelihood. However, because they entered the sex trade at an early age and led a life away from the mainstream society, a majority of these sex workers are not ready for alternate livelihood. To cope with this vulnerability, they often resort to sex work contracting as a source of livelihood. They employ agents and leverage their network to procure young girls (trafficking), who will then work as prostitutes under their supervision. These SWCs live off the income of these sex workers.

The cycle of women oppressing women for the pleasure of men is also painfully evident in the issue of prostitution. As the city prostitutes age, their aim is to become 'madams' (or *Maushis*) who will live off the sale proceeds of their victimized young girls. Often prostitutes who bear female children will introduce them early to the world of the brothel.

Broadly, there are two systems of commissioning prevalent in these brothel areas. In the first, the *Maushis* or SWCs pay for the recruitment of the sex workers and takes care of their primary needs including food, clothes and shelter. At the time of retirement, the *Maushi* or SWC may choose to give her an endowment to start another chain under her. In the other system, the *Maushi* or SWC provides space for the sex worker to stay, solicit and entertain clients. She also protects the sex workers from any undue harassment by clients or raids by the police and also provide for their

treatment for illness. The sex worker herself negotiates with the clients, collects the fees and gives a commission (share) to the *Maushi* or SWC.

As is the common practice across brothels of Bihar, there are no fixed rules and the nature of contract depends upon the interpersonal relationship between the sex worker and the contractor (*Maushi*). Contracts are invariably drawn up verbally after negotiations.

Sex work contractors mostly being women with little literacy require a male pimp (or guard) who can negotiate for them, network with the police officials and deal with other similar issues. The *Maushi* and her pimp assistant sometimes indulge in intimacy and develop emotional attachment. In a few cases they have even married and established a family. Thus they try to make a virtue out of their socio-economic constraints, in the process fulfilling their personal, social, security and emotional needs.

However, the real dilemma strikes once they have a child of their own. On the one hand they have the ambition to give their children a better socially-integrated life that they themselves aspired for but could not achieve and on the other hand they try to keep their children away from sex trade while still sustaining their livelihood through the only profession they have ever known.

The society tends to ostracize both the *Maushi* and her pimp husband forever, for adopting an unacceptable social behaviour, making mainstreaming very difficult for them. This further confines them to the comfort zone they have within their own family circle formed within the brothel. It has been observed in Kishanganj brothel areas that while they allow their girl children to return to sex trade, they keep daughters-in-law away from the trade and protect her. They believe that in this manner she will help them carry their family forward shielded from the ills of sex trade. If she has a male child, he grows up to become the protector and adopts the role of the guard at the brothel. In these complex arrangements, a guard (male pimp) can therefore be a husband, a son or a brother of a sex worker or the *Maushi*. Those interviewed could not recall since when this practice has been around.

It is primarily the *Maushis* who are at the centre of such relationships, They are known to marry their siblings with similar families from neighbouring brothels. As a result a new social structure has developed between all the nearby brothels that together foster a closed-community bond. This informal association also works as a collective asset at the time of social or economic crisis. This phenomenon can also be reflected upon with the help of Maslow's need hierarchy, whereby the new social structure helps fulfil physiological, safety and social needs of its members.

Their Future Aspirations

The study also attempted to assess how the survivors viewed their future.

Shayrabano is one of the victims of trafficking and now lives in Samesar red-light area of Kishanganj district in Bihar. She was asked, if she would quit prostitution provided she gets another job option? Shayrabano's counter-question was, 'What will be my salary? My monthly expense is approximately Rs. 5000. I like the monetary benefit and the luxurious lifestyle it offers. I want to remain a prostitute. It is the easiest way of making money'.

When asked whether they would like to continue in the same 'trade', 60% of the victims reflected Shayrabano's sentiment and answered in the affirmative, while the remaining 40% did not respond. Their reasons for choosing to continue as a prostitute included

- social stigma;
- no education;
- no other place to stay;
- no other marketable skill;
- family members dependent on their income; and
- no status in society.

Profile of Clients of Commercial Sex Workers

To get an idea about the kind of men who visit brothels, victims were asked about the occupation of their clients. Their responses show that the clientele consists of men from different walks of life. The largest number of clients in the region belonged to the labour class. Truckers followed by businessmen and students were the other professions that clients in these brothels pursued. Police officials, doctors, politicians and criminals also figured amongst the clients who frequented these sex workers.

Overcoming Initial Challenges and Running the Programme

Past Disappointments and Low Morale

One of the greatest challenges that Nomi Network had to overcome was the women's disappointment with previous programs that could not lead up to sustainable job opportunities. As a result, these women had no motivation to participate in other programs like Nomi Network's Train the Trainer Program. Nomi addressed this issue by

- 1) setting up machines in order to showcase the next phase of our program to the women and committing to working with them for a longer duration than what they had previously experienced,

- 2) spending time on a personal level and building deeper friendships with them to gain a better understanding of who the women outside of the classroom were, and
- 3) exhibiting that it is a community activity (not just a job) where the women can grow together (solidarity and unity) towards success.

Training Programme and Outcome

All women and girls recruited for the programme received 11 months of training that covered sewing (of fabric bags) skills, entrepreneurship and leadership. The programme consists of three months of basic skill-building, four months of intermediate level learning and four months of advanced training. During this period, they are equipped with knowledge and skills in order to work in any manufacturing or production setup. Due to the lack of employment opportunities outside, Nomi Network is presently employing them to make pouches for its own retail outlets.

Since August 2012, Nomi Network has trained 46 women and young girls living in and around the red-light area in sewing fabric bags. Average income of each woman (March 2013 onwards) has been Rs 2400/- per month, which includes base pay, onetime bonus and learning bonus.

Monthly emoluments of women and young girls sewing fabric bags for Nomi Network

- Base pay: Rs. 1010
- Monthly on-time bonus: Rs. 190
(awarded to women who come on time, participate in all activities and leave office after completing all work that is assigned for the day)
- Learning bonus: Rs. 100
(awarded to women who come before time, participate in learning sessions and learn English alphabets, words, sentences, etc.)
- Productivity pay: Rs. 5 for each pouch (medium sized)

After the successful completion of training for the first group, demand emanated from both the brothel areas and vulnerable communities to start new training programs for them. Nomi Network responded by initiating more training programmes.

Table 1: Training programmes initiated by Nomi Network, since August 2012

Groups	Members	Stage of training	Remarks
Pilot Project Group	18		
	In production (fabric bag/ pouch making)	50% trainees from Rampur red-light area; 50% from the slum area of Forbesganj; 90% trainees equipped with advance knowledge of conducting Quality Control.	
Khabaspur Training Group (red-light area community)	6	Completed basic training and started intermediate technical training with sewing machine	All the women and girls in this training are from Khabaspur (15 kilometres away from Forbesganj) red light community
Painting Group for Adolescent Girls	11	Completed basic training and started intermediate training in painting	All the adolescent girls are from the community living around the Rampur red light area and are highly vulnerable
Rampur Training Group	11	Started basic training in sewing	A mix of red light community women and SC community living on government land at Kali Mela Road, Forbesganj

Picture 1-2: Nomi Network Production Centre, Forbesganj, Araria District, Bihar



The Recruitment and Training Process followed by Nomi Network

- Mobilization and initiation
 - Co-opt women trainees, their family members and pimps
 - Selection of women and young girls for the programme
 - The training programme begins with life skill training
 - Setup the rules and regulations of the training program
- Build a conducive eco-system for trainees
 - Organize visits to the home of the trainees
 - Provide legal support to the women and girls
 - Express solidarity with the women and girls to say no to domestic violence and sexual exploitation
 - Create groups with a mix of women from red light areas and other vulnerable communities
- Training content
 - Create synergy in the group with different innovative games
 - Begin with basic training for hand stitching of fabric bags and other products
 - Ensure that every woman and girl follows the rules of the training program
 - Encourage women during the training program
- Guidance, encouragement and empowerment
 - Keep visiting their living quarters
 - Help women in need and encourage other women to come forward to help their co-workers in need
 - Peg the monetary expectation at a realistic and sustainable level
 - Finalize stipend for the trainees
 - Help trainees with the opening of their own bank accounts
- Manage earnings and become financially prudent
 - Encourage them to deposit 50% of stipend money in their individual bank account
 - Show them reason in saving so that in need they can withdraw from the bank instead of taking a loan from the local money lenders at very high rates of interest
 - Give them an understanding of economic self-reliance

Results and Reflections

Once the trafficked girls enter sex trade and get into a brothel, all routes to exit this life and livelihood are almost closed. This aspect was not very well documented in previous studies on sex workers and their livelihoods. This study conducted by Nomi Network identified several factors that create this one-way ticket for the victims.

- The most significant one being social ostracizing. The existing social norms and practices in India are such that they cannot go back and reunite with their families even if they want to.
- Avenues for rehabilitation are also limited. There is no well established mechanism for those in flesh trade to return to normal social life.
- There are very few regular shelter homes where prostitutes can go for a short stay to learn vocational skills.
- Even if the sex workers are able to learn a new means of livelihood, getting hired in a meaningful job that can provide them sustainable livelihood remains a challenge.

For all practical purposes, commercial sex workers lose even food security, once they leave their brothel. The guarantee of food, clothes and shelter that the Maushi or SWC provides to the sex workers within the brothel still acts as a significant pull factor. An emotional bond seems to exist between the Maushi and her sex workers, primarily because the Maushi appears to be more human than the clients they solicit or the family that abandoned them.

By providing better access to skills, knowledge and information, Nomi Network helped these women and girls to come out from the vicious cycle of trafficking, poverty and vulnerability. So far, 46 women and girls have participated in the training programme run by Nomi.

The training helped the women and girls to learn the basic skill of stitching. Fulfilling the promise of providing these women alternate jobs at their doorsteps, all of them are presently employed at the production centre run by Nomi. The women also get to work in an environment where they have respect for each other.

Nomi was able to quickly establish a good rapport as well as build a trust level with these women. When the community and family members did pressurize them to leave the work at the production centre, they refused. Instead of leaving work they wanted to leave their abusive and drunkard husbands or the pimps who were forcing them to re-enter sex trade.

Nomi network has also been successful in creating an emotional bond between these women. In some of the cases of domestic violence and sexual exploitation all the 46 women and girls stood united and protected the victim from further exploitation.

Equipped with skills and knowledge these women and girls can organize themselves into a community and access government run social security schemes and services like insurance, healthcare, and crèche for their children.

These women gained in terms of greater self-confidence, alternate skill, earnings outside flesh trade and improved savings. At the centre, Nomi is also imparting reading and writing skills. Even their community members and neighbours, who criticized them earlier, started noticing their improvement.

Nomi Network is still working in Forbesganj and trying to reintegrate the commercial sex workers with the larger community in general by involving them in the production, during their home visits, participating in their festivals, etc. Through this ongoing programme Nomi is hoping to create a model project at Forbesganj, so that the learning can be replicated in other red-light districts of India or elsewhere.

Nomi Network and their Work

Nomi, pronounced as 'know me', was formed in 2009 by two young women from New York City. Since then Nomi has been working to provide alternate livelihoods to the women and girls in trafficking or at risk of trafficking. Nomi Network is a winner of the One to Watch Ethical Fashion Forum 2012 Source Award and Great Nonprofits Top-Rated List for 2012. It is a non-profit organization that strengthens social enterprises by providing job opportunities for survivors and women at risk of human trafficking.

Presently Nomi is working in Cambodia and India. The survivors whom Nomi is able to rehabilitate create eco-friendly handbags and accessories as an alternate livelihood. Nomi Network aims to economically empower these women by

- 1) providing targeted technical, entrepreneurship and leadership skill training,
- 2) designing and developing quality, market-ready products and
- 3) linking products made by survivors and women at risk of human trafficking to the global marketplace to help build sustainable global supply chains.

The entire profit from product sales is invested back into training and education opportunities for the women that Nomi Network serves.