**Post Trafficking In Nepal Sexuality and Citizenship in Livelihood Strategies (ESRC Project Res-062-23-1490)**

**WORKING PAPER**

**‘Crossing back over the open border: geographies of post trafficking citizenship in Nepal’[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Abstract**

This paper argues that open borders may circumscribe and shape women’s lives in powerfully embodied ways. Bringing to light the everyday ways in which returnee trafficked women deal with the stigma and marginalisation they experience upon return to Nepal illuminates this. We argue that more academic attention needs to be given to the situation of trafficked women when they return from trafficking situations and seek to (re)establish a sense of belonging and respect. Drawing on an Economic and Social Research Council project on citizenship and livelihoods post-trafficking in Nepal, we focus on the processes and mechanisms of citizenship, examining the interplay of state and non-state actors (national and transnational) in constructing political subjectivity in Nepal. We argue that state codifying of collective identities in relation to citizenship occurs in ways that marginalise the lived experiences, and related political rights based claims, of returnee trafficked women and the organisations that represent them. In particular we examine geographies of stigma explaining how hierarchies of stigma are influenced by the destinations women are returning from and the places they subsequently go to. We explore the different ways in which the open border which allows free travel between Nepal and India is marked by women shaping their strategies for dealing with stigmatisation and making lives.

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper draws on an on-going Economic and Social Research Council project entitled ‘Post Trafficking in Nepal: Sexuality and Citizenship in Livelihood Strategies’[[2]](#footnote-2). This two and half year, qualitative study aims to explore the situation of returnee trafficked women in Nepal and is a collaboration between Newcastle University, the Non-Government Organisation ‘Shakti Samuha’, the only anti-trafficking organisation in Nepal to be founded and staffed by returnee women, and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Mission in Nepal. A key aspect of this research is to gain knowledge that is grounded in the actual experiences of Nepalese trafficked returnee women themselves. In the broader project we are interested in how returnee livelihoods intersect with sexuality and citizenship and aim to tease out how the issues raised by trafficking intersect with development agendas.

Nepal is one of the source countries for sexually trafficked women in South Asia. While many Nepali women have been traditionally trafficked to India for sexual purposes, new destinations facilitated by the traditionally open border between the two countries are emerging. India has recently become a transit route for trafficking on to the Middle East in particular and South East Asia in general. Much work on trafficking examines the process and flows of trafficking (for Nepal, Bal Kumar 2001, Beshford 2006, Brown 2000, Chen and Marcovici 2003, Hennick and Simkhada 2004, Human Rights Watch 1995, MWCSW 2001, Poudel 2011, Richardson et al. 2009; more widely, AWHRC 2003, GAATW 2004, Kangaspunta 2006, Kempadoo, Kim and Chang 2007, Pattanaik and Sanghera eds. 2005, United Nations 2003, US State Department 2010). Yet very little research has focused on the situation of returnee women themselves (Richardson et al. 2009). There has been much research on gender and migration across the social sciences, but surprisingly little on trafficking specifically in some disciplines like Geography. A review of ten leading international geography journals[[3]](#footnote-3) since 2007 revealed only one book review (Yea 2008) and three articles that mention trafficking in the title, abstracts or key words (Hubbard et al 2008; Richardson et al 2009; Van Liempt 2011). There is however an interesting and related set of work emerging in political geography around critical border studies. This work addresses the geographical imaginaries of excluded groups such as asylum seekers and exiles, examining the technocratic governance of border spaces (see for example Johnson et al 2011, McConnell 2011, Mountz 2010). In this paper we attempt to engage with these agendas by examining how geographical imaginaries of the border shape the strategies used by returnee women to deal with the stigma associated with a trafficked identity. We explore how the geopolitically strategic location of Nepal shapes aid programs and national debates about changing definitions of citizenship in ways that have consequences for how trafficked women are seen.

Donors, NGOs and government organisations influence the livelihoods open to returnee trafficked women through their role in what is often termed ‘the rescue industry’ (Agustin 2007). This industry has a policy focus on ‘the three Rs’: Rescue, Repatriation and Rehabilitation[[4]](#footnote-4). ‘Rehabilitation’ is a loaded and contested term for anti-trafficking advocates as it implies that women themselves are to some extent responsible for their experiences and need to be ‘rehabilitated’ in order to re-enter Nepali society. Not all women return to Nepal as result of a ‘rescue mission’ by NGOs or the Indian policy of carrying out raids on brothels. Therefore some women remain outside the direct influence of the NGO rescue missions. Nevertheless, for many the experience of gaining a livelihood after returning is influenced by access to NGO and/or government shelters and hostels where they receive support services including counselling and skills training. In this paper we also explore how for some women going through a rescue process is not a positive experience as it can lead to the forced exposure of a trafficked past.

Crucial to the policy framing of trafficking and livelihoods is the link between a rescue agenda and donor aid in Nepal. Here the role of the annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report published from the United States’ State Department plays a central role (US State Department 2010). How this report grades a specific country’s implementation of policies and mechanisms that focus on the three Rs directly influences the allocation of bilateral aid[[5]](#footnote-5). This policy context is important because in this way, as Shah (2006) argues, international discourses of trafficking and local interpretations of stigma and honour are able to influence the success or defeat of rights-based organising in particular places.

In what follows we explore the geographies of post-trafficking stigma. We examine the hierarchies associated with returning from different destinations including analysing the distinctions women make between internal and international trafficking. We argue that increased migration from Nepal is blurring the categories of trafficked and migrant women in complex ways. In the light of this we focus on how women invoke the border to locate themselves strategically within discourses of appropriate and inappropriate femininities. We examine how bodies come to be seen as ‘in and out of place’. We begin however by setting the methodological context and explaining how current citizenship regimes frame and limit women’s experiences and livelihoods options post trafficking.

**APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

Forty six interviews with returnee trafficked women were conducted and coded. Core themes emerged around issues such as the effects of stigma, marriage and the processes through which a woman’s trafficked identity becomes hidden or disclosed.[[6]](#footnote-6) Our sample selected women who self-identify as returnee women and NGOs and social movements which identify with anti-trafficking and/or gender rights agendas. Methodologically part of the aim was to understand how they came to that position and how they critically considered the livelihood options of returnee trafficked women to be more than those of ‘victims’. These interviews were taped and transcribed in Nepali and then translated into English in Nepal. Where we draw on this material in this paper we do so using the idiom of the original translation as we wish to recognise that Nepali English is one of the many forms of global English spoken in the world. Given the extreme sensitivity of the research, in the first instance participants were approached through our local partner organisation, Shakti Shamuha, and other anti-trafficking NGOs. Using these as an important source of data for participant observation and some interviews, we then used snowballing techniques to try to reach women without current, direct NGO contact. The sample drew in women with different representation by local home region, age of being trafficked/returned, ethnicity, caste and religion, length/number of trafficked journeys, returnee routes and timeframes of return, access to citizenship and type of contact with intermediaries. All these factors we hypothesise can influence their access to livelihood options upon return. These interviews were split between Kathmandu and three rural sites. The three rural sites selected have been identified by the government as having high occurrences of trafficking[[7]](#footnote-7). Corresponding to government priorities on high risk areas and the government human development report 2004 (UNDP 2004), one site from the far west (Kailali) and two from the Central Development Region (Sindhupalchock and Makawanpur) have been selected (see figure 1).

Figure 1 Map of Nepal Administrative districts



Each rural site plays a significant role in trafficking either as an exit/transit point to India or an entry/transit point to Nepal. At the Shakti Samuha Annual conference of trafficked survivors in 2009, presentations from members coming from the rural districts reported that traffickers are moving women from the South East to traffic them through the far west region into India[[8]](#footnote-8). They argue that the success of NGO awareness training in the east central area and around that border region is forcing a shift in trafficking flows. Samarasinghe (2008) suggests that monitoring of the most frequently used crossing points is forcing traffickers to use more difficult routes despite transport challenges.

The three selected rural sites all rank low on poverty indexes, with the development regions in the far west scoring lower than those in the Central Development Region. For example, Kailali has a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.461 against 0.531 for the Central Development Region or 0.509 for the national average. Its Social Empowerment Index (SEI), Human Poverty Index (HPI) and Gender Development Index (GDI) are also all low when compared to those at a national level (UNDP 2009).

Each rural site is inhabited by diverse caste/ethnic groups, who speak different languages/dialects, practise different religions and experience forms of violence perpetuated by the diversified socio-cultural practices that contribute to trafficking (MWCSW[[9]](#footnote-9) 2001). While 13.81% of the population in Kailali are dalits[[10]](#footnote-10), the region is predominantly Tharu (44.76%), a marginalised ethnic group who are beginning to organise as an ethnic rights movement (Krauskopff 2008; Gunerante 2002) and, as part of the wider *Adivasi Janajan*[[11]](#footnote-11)*,* are attempting to access development funds targeting social exclusion and to lobby for indigenous autonomy (Anaya 2009).

Other qualitative methods adopted in the project involve the analysis of discourses and emerging policies on trafficking and citizenship in Nepal. This includes a review of the National Plan of Action, the most recent national TIP report and the UN Global Plan of Action against Trafficking[[12]](#footnote-12). We are also tracking the evolution of debates in committees of the key Constituent Assembly (see below), such as the Fundamental Rights Committee. During the next phase of fieldwork (October-November 2011) 15 semi-structured, stakeholder interviews with activists, key personnel in NGOs and in government will be conducted. There will also be a further 10 interviews with targeted returnee activists focusing specifically on issues of NGO professionalisation.

**CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS: PLACING TRAFFICKING IN THE CHANGING POLITICAL CONTEXT IN NEPAL**

After a decade of civil war, 1996-2006, Nepal is undergoing political transformation by restructuring the nation and re-drafting the constitution through a Constituent Assembly process. Nepal’s first multi-party democratic constitution was ratified in 1990. In April 2006 an Interim Assembly was enforced following the People’s Movement III, the revival of the dissolved parliament and the brokering of peace talks with the Maoist rebels (GoN[[13]](#footnote-13) 2007). Two years later an elected Constituent Assembly (CA) was convened in April 2008 which declared the country to be a Federal Democratic Republic after ending the Monarchical parliamentary system. This assembly marked a turning point for gender representation in Nepali politics. More than thirty per cent of the elected CA members are women and in addition the deputy speaker position is occupied by a woman from the grassroots.

With the Constituent Assembly comes a re-definition of citizenship rights where it is anticipated that an established gender bias in accessing citizenship will be permanently overturned. Nepal has no systematic registration of births. A man of 16 may go to his District offices to acquire citizenship very easily. Until now notions of female citizenship have been based on ideas of kinship (Joshi 2001:158). Since 1963 citizenship women’s claims need to be sponsored by a male relative (a husband or father)[[14]](#footnote-14). As many girls are trafficked before the age of sixteen they do not have citizenship when they return to Nepal. Not having a citizenship card severely limits returnee women’s livelihood options. They (and any children they may have) have difficulty accessing government services, health, education, skills-training and waged employment, as Maya explains.

“If you don’t have a citizenship card it can be very problematic…I wouldn’t be able to open my bank account. Similarly I couldn’t get my marriage certificate and my children’s birth certificates. And I could not be able to look for job also. ...You don’t get work if you don’t have citizenship card. Moreover, you need to have it in order to get a room (apartment) to live”.

The new democratic scene in Nepal has met with great support from the donor community. Extreme poverty, a large rural population and the need for post-conflict resolution, together with Nepal’s geopolitical importance between two of the fastest growing economies in the world, China and India, has set the scene for a large donor presence in the country. This includes a range of programs operated by different United Nations agencies such as UNIFEM, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the ILO among others which have large anti-trafficking projects. More recently the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has started to take an interest in trafficking projects as part of its wider migration remit.

The original mandate to draft the new constitution by May 2010 was extended and is now due to be ratified in November 2011, although there is still division over the definitions of citizenship that are emerging. Our research suggests that the situation of returnee trafficked women is not being sufficiently addressed by the currently proposed definitions. In order for this situation to change, citizenship for women and men would need to be granted based on birth, with no parental endorsement being required. Also citizenship for children born abroad, to mothers who were sexually exploited abroad and who are now living in Nepal with their mothers, would need to be granted based on state endorsement. However at this point in the CA process these do not seem to be the dominant lines of thinking that are emerging[[15]](#footnote-15).

While the quotation from Maya above illustrates how citizenship plays a crucial role in accessing livelihoods, in the next section we analyse the ways in which stigma affects the wider social rejection of women, negatively influencing the livelihoods opportunities available to returnee women.

**GEOGRAPHIES OF STIGMA**

The geographies of stigma associated with trafficking make the experience of return very difficult for women. For example, when we asked ‘how might the society treat her in the village afterwards?’ Maya explained

“It affects in a negative way….The society says to her, ‘This woman was sold and now she is back from such situation. Now she is going to spoil the people here in [the village]”.

While the focus is on the general contaminating role of returnee women, the destination from which women return means that stigma is often a differentiated experience. Rupa for example, not only draws a distinction between internal and international trafficking in relation to different levels of stigma but also highlights that this is influenced by different destinations, countries and cities.

“The society perceives differently to women trafficked to Delhi, Calcutta and women trafficked abroad such as [to] Lebanon, Kuwait. It is seen as they have nice work in Kuwait or Lebanon”.

-What about women trafficked in

Nepal?

“People will definitely backbite against her if not directly…though the stigma is not same as to those returning from Bombay”.

However some women believe that internal trafficking provides more opportunities to hide a trafficking past, as the following exchange with Tara indicates.

Question: “If you were sold within Nepal, would there be difference in terms of social rejection and stigma towards you?”

“If I was sold within Nepal I could hide my family about it and I could hide the nature of work I had done. I could be in touch with them and see them sometimes, it would be different”.

Internal and international trafficking, however, are not necessarily distinct experiences. Figure 2 illustrates that both are linked through a complex geography of flows and movement. These circuits are highly gendered at all levels, thereby affecting how particular people going to specific destinations are seen. Once the border has been crossed, however, a hierarchy of stigma comes into play. India is the most stigmatised destination as it is seen to be synonymous with sexual trafficking (although it is not).

Figure 2: Internal and International trafficking transit routes through Kathmandu

Rural Nepal

(west)

Rural Nepal

(central)

Rural Nepal

(east)

Rural Nepal

(mid/far west)

Whether or not women were trafficked to India into the ‘sex industry’, the circus or other forms of bonded labour, these women are usually stigmatised as prostitutes and/or HIV carriers when they return to Nepal (Poudel 2011). As one woman, Birahi, who is HIV positive, explained, while people did not usually say things directly in front of her, she felt threatened and scared much of the time. Despite this she tried to be brave and in one case she did answer someone back as she describes below.

There was a context one person (man) told me that ‘you came from *uta’* (symbolic meaning of Mumbai)…..and ‘you were working there as…..’ and I was angry and reacted strongly by saying that ‘why you bother about me, what you want from me? Did you see me going there and did you see me what I was doing there? This is nothing to do with you it was my personal matter’. After that he stopped saying those things to me.”

Birahi managed to conceal her trafficked identity in her home village for more than a decade. In another case, Sushila who is also HIV positive and who returned to her village from India, experienced so much harassment that she was unable to carry on with the new life and livelihood she was trying to establish.

“It was hard living in the village. The people gossiped. I opened one small tea shop. One of my friends who is a member of Shakti Samuha had given me 1000 Rs. It was at Sindhupalchok. Ten minutes from my home. It was again very difficult. I used to make tea, local wine there and the men used to show me disrespect - trying to grasp me, touch my hands, talking in a stupid way, throwing stones on me. It was very embarrassing.”

After eight months she was forced to close her shop. Therefore it seems that returning to rural situation is always very difficult for women because, as Bindu explains,

“You can’t hide it from your neighbours and people surrounding you providing that you are living in your own village. You can hide it just not opening up your mouth to anyone if living in places other than your village”.

For this reason many women choose to relocate in Kathmandu where a more anonymous life can be sought. Despite these significant general findings, it is also important to understand that not all rural places are the same. A further layer to the complex geography of stigma is revealed when we look in more detail at where Sushila’s tea shop experience occurred.

Sushila is from Sindhulpalchok which is located in the High Middle Hill area of Nepal. Its inhabitants are predominately people from the Tamang ethnic group. It is a highly stigmatised district/region because the Tamang communities here were among the earliest to be exposed to trafficking. Over time a stereotype emerged implying that families sold their female members, daughters, sisters, wives into trafficking on a semi-organised basis, using the profits and any remittances for family welfare (see also Joshi 2001). Such stigmatised constructions of ethnicity probably have longer historical roots. In the 19th Century the feudal Rana ruling family recruited Tamang girls from this region to serve as entertainers for themselves in Kathmandu (Poudel 2011; Samarasinghe 2008). Until recently, even if a woman is a migrant worker not working in the ‘sex industry’, it is likely that she will have been read as sexually trafficked or seen as a prostitute if she returned to Sindhulpalchok from India or further afield. We would argue that this example points further to the associative power of geographies of stigma, where origins as much as destination can affect how a returnee woman is seen. In the following section we focus on the ways in which women’s identities as migrant and trafficked women are becoming blurred. We explore how this blurring in some cases shapes the associative power of geographies of stigma as women seeks to locate themselves in particular ways in relation to their experiences of crossing the border or not.

**BLURRING MIGRANT AND TRAFFICKED WOMEN IDENTITIES**

There has been a huge increase in migrant workers from all over Nepal in recent years (Seddon 2005; UN Office 2010; United States 2010). Formal migration from Nepal has increased nearly tenfold over the last decade according to official statistics. As Table 1 indicates, the numbers of migrants leaving Nepal with official government permission have increased from approximately thirty five thousand (1999-2000), to nearly three hundred thousand in 2009-10. It is estimated that each day around 900 youths leave for overseas employment from Nepal with an estimated 3 million migrants working and residing overseas[[16]](#footnote-16). As table 2 suggests most of these migrants go to the Middle East

Table1: Labour Migration Trends in Nepal (total Numbers of labour migrants by year) 1992-2010

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1999/**  **20** | **2000/**  **01** | **2001/**  **02** | **2002/**  **03** | **2003/04** | **2004/**  **05** | **2005/**  **06** | **2006/**  **07** | **2007/**  **08** | **2008/**  **09** | **2009/**  **10** |
| 35,543 | 55,025 | 104,739 | 105,055 | 91,540 | 183,929 | 165,252 | 204,533 | 249,051 | 219,965 | 298,094 |

*Source:* Department of Foreign Employment, 2010.

Table 2: Country of Destination for Nepalese Migrants gone abroad with permission from Department of Foreign Employment (other than India) from 1993/94 till 2008/09

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| S.No. | Country | Male | Female | Total |
| 1. | Malaysia | 455, 436 | 249 | 455, 685 |
| 2. | Qatar | 425, 237 | 571 | 425, 808 |
| 3. | Saudi Arabia | 277, 755 | 170 | 277, 925 |
| 4. | U.A.E. | 180, 069 | 1,258 | 181, 327 |
| 5. | Bahrain | 17, 849 | 481 | 18, 330 |
| 6. | Kuwait | 14, 938 | 1,264 | 16, 202 |
| 7. | Oman | 7, 928 | 265 | 8, 193 |
| 8. | Israel | 3, 658 | 2, 440 | 6, 098 |
| 9. | Lebanon | 249 | 5, 693 | 5, 942 |
| 10. | Hong Kong | 4, 237 | 40 | 4, 277 |
| 11. | Others | 31, 199 | 1, 238 | 32, 437 |
|  | **Total** | **1, 418, 555** | **13, 669** | **1, 432, 224** |

*Source:* Department of Foreign Employment.

There are marked gendered dimensions to this migration. While men migrate to various destinations in the Middle East and Malaysia for construction work, in official statistics women are concentrated in a few countries such as Lebanon and Israel where they are recruited for domestic work and to look after children or older people. Nevertheless these figures are not the full story. The research team’s participant observation in high level meetings and policy briefings indicates that the Ministry of Labour and Transport Management are disseminating gender estimates that conflict. For example, figures shared by the ministry suggest that 11% of the Nepalese migrants working in the labour market abroad (which does not include India) are women and of these women 90% are estimated to be undocumented. However other figures shared by the ministry for the Arab States alone put the estimate of Nepalese women working as migrants at 66,000. This is more than double the 11% estimate of female participation in the overall foreign labour market. The gender dimensions of migration therefore need more critical analysis. The blurring of the distinction between migrant and trafficked women identities may in part be influenced by the fact that the open border between India and Nepal is a gendered migration route. While men migrating for work through formal recruitment agencies typically leave from Kathmandu and fly over the border, women are more commonly both trafficked and formally migrate by overland means, the latter often flying on from Delhi rather than Kathmandu to destinations further afield.

Previously we have argued that neoliberal labour arrangements between Nepal and specific countries in the Middle East and parts of South East Asia where there are labour deficits have made it easier for some women to pass as generic migrant workers upon return (Richardson et al 2009). Our current research, however, is suggesting a change in this scenario. As more women migrate in search of work, increased awareness of what is required for formal migration with official permission makes passing as a migrant worker upon return less easy. For example, in response to our question about women being able to hide their trafficked status by pretending that they left for foreign employment, Tara explains: “it needs evidence like citizenship card, passport with company’s stamp which I didn’t have, I went with nothing, so lying was….[not possible]”. In addition our findings suggest that ever more complex patterns of trafficking are emerging. With greater numbers of people leaving the country migration is acting as a route into trafficking for many. When these women return after a long period of no contact with family and with no money they face rejection and suspicion from their communities. As a result, post return, more women are beginning to be perceived as potentially ‘trafficked’, irrespective of how they originally left the country.

Although many female migrant workers in the Middle East face situations of sexual exploitation similar to those of trafficked women, they are likely to be read differently if they have been in a position to send money home. However, because of fears of rejection and stigmatisation these women are often forced into silence about the negative experiences they encounter whilst abroad, as both Tara and Nita explain.

“It is called foreign employment at the time of their departure but in fact they experience trafficking out there. …They are similar to trafficked women since they encounter the similar exploitation”. (Tara)

“Her outlook [in sukila mukila (neat and clean) dress] also affects positively. People follow her assuming her to have earned good amount in abroad. They may ask her to take them with her to abroad and find jobs for them. In this context, a migrant woman would never disclose about bad part even if she had bad experience. She would never take anyone to place where she worked because she never wants other to know about her past work”. (Nita)

Formal support services are often only available to these women if they identify as trafficked pos- return. By seeking these services a trafficked identity is further reinforced.

**Marking the border: hierarchies of trafficking**

While women’s origins and the destinations to which they are trafficked appear to structure geographies of stigma, other geographical reference points also act to mark difference between women. Here the role of the Nepal-India border is significant. Some women use the border to say “I’m not ‘as trafficked’ because I ‘escaped/was rescued’ before I crossed”. Uma, a dalit woman with more than twelve year’s association with an anti-trafficking NGO, explained

*“*They hide it in different ways. They might say I didn’t go for the purpose of this work [sexual exploitation]….or some might say I was taken into a trafficking situation but I didn’t reach the place; I was almost to reach there but I returned…I was not trafficked”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This invocation of the border constructs a differentiated version of the binary of “acceptable and unacceptable” femininities. This distinction can be important to women who experience a further layer of stigma by association because of their involvement with the anti-trafficking movement. For example, Maya was worried about how her association with Shakti Samuha would be seen by her husband when we asked if he knew she had been trafficked.

“No, he doesn’t. But now a driver who came to know about my affiliation/relation with Shakti Milan and also aware of Shakti Milan inquired my husband the reason why I go there. He further mentioned my husband that it was an organisation of survivors of human trafficking. Later on my husband asked me about the reason why I go to Shakti Milan. I cleverly answered him that Shakti Milan is an organisation of women having hard lives but not of trafficked.”

However some women like Uma emphasise the importance of being open about a trafficking past as part of a politics of solidarity. She says “if we stay hiding it the trafficking of women will continue for ever”. For other women, however, the cost of self-outing in this way comes at a high price. Like Maya and Uma, Sabita, also works closely with an anti-trafficking NGO. She decided to take the unusual step of revealing her trafficked status to her husband but this has been a slow and difficult process fraught with fears of being seen as a ‘bad’ (unacceptable) woman.

*Question:* What will happen if it [that she has been trafficked] is known to a husband?

*Answer*: maybe rejection, [names a woman] was married without sharing with her husband and later there was problem when it was known that she was trafficked…

*Question:* Taking your case, are you still hiding or shared with everyone in your family?

*Answer:* No, I haven’t shared all, just a little…if they [other people] might have known from relatives, they haven’t said to me. I have shared with father and mother… [and]… have shared few things with husband. They haven’t asked me about details, I haven’t shared in detail to him. … He has not taken me with negative perspective. I haven’t shared all, just a bit. Earlier while marrying he didn’t know, he said you don’t have to say all things of your past. (laugh) But what I think is, knowing suddenly…..what will happen then?… One day it will be known anyway, … but seeing the behaviour, habits till now, I don’t think anything negative will happen to me. ….but sharing…family might think she was like that (bad), and that might be known to all.

Managing stigma in this way is clearly very personal and requires much individual energy and courage. For most returnee women who have opted for marriage as a livelihood strategy to manage stigma (see Richardson et. al. 2009 for more details), being able to keep her trafficked identity a secret from her husband or her husband’s family is important to avoid personal risk. While Sabita says she does not fear reprisals from her husband, other data emerging from the project suggests that for many returnee women who have chosen marriage as a way to establish a livelihood the situation is less positive. Many women live with situations of extreme abuse from their husbands. Fears of discovery, potential violence and family rejection, we have learned, can lead to anxiety because of the constant worry that, as the interviewee above suggests, “one day it will be known anyway”. As Bindu explains this can often be a very embodied experience of social rejection.

“The attitude towards us gets ultimately changed when people recognise us as trafficked women. The attitude to look at us is bad… People look at us from up to down and down to up (head to foot and foot to head); people stare at us in an embarrassing and humiliating way”.

Some women like Maya say they stood out because of the way they dressed when they came back from India. When we asked **‘**how do the people who know about your past experience see you?’ Maya replied

“my own aunt (sister of my father) had once said bad things in a sarcastic way*. (Yasto pauju lagaune ta dhanda gharma pugthyo) –* woman wearing finger ring on their feet fingers are prostitutes”.

The use of particular types of saris and jewellery can therefore mark women’s bodies as ‘out of place’ when they return. However for Bindu it was her language that gave her away. Unusually she was accepted and supported by her family upon her return and her father was keen to help her secure her citizenship card. However when she visited the local government offices they mistook her for an Indian and refused to process her application.

“I knew only Hindi language, not Nepali. I wasn’t trusted as a daughter of them/my parents…. I had arrived in the same year. I didn’t know Nepali language. I was caught in every word (Hindi) that I used…., I was understood as an Indian. They might have thought, ‘kanhabata yo kali Indian lai samater lerayo’, “from where did they catch this black Indian woman and bring her?”

She was eventually able to obtain a citizenship card at a later time when she had improved her Nepali language skills and changed her accent.

For another returnee, Nita, it was not her use of Hindi that outed her but the language and rescue tactics used by the Indian NGO from where she sought help. They drove her to her home village in an Indian bus with Indian number plates, despite the fact that she asked to be dropped at a distance so she could make her own way home. As she explains

“When I encountered the problem there [India] I through the support of different NGOs was directly brought home by a bus. This is how all the people in public knew that I had encountered problem (trafficking). It had bad impact upon my parents. It definitely perturbed me a lot. … I had requested them a lot to drop in the middle. They [Indians] spoke Hindi, however I could also speak bit of Hindi… [but] I couldn’t convince them.”

We would argue that by working across the border in this way, NGOs contribute to the social rejection of the women they say they are trying to ‘rescue’.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The emerging findings from this on-going research project on post trafficking livelihoods and citizenship in Nepal have a number of implications for the ways in which we can begin to think about bridging the gap between international and internal migration theory. Our work indicates the need to develop new theorisations of the role of border imaginaries in shaping both the policy framing and individual experience of trafficking for a number of reasons. First a border does more than mark the difference between internal and international migration. Not only are these connected but also our interviews indicated that for Nepalis the term ‘abroad’ only refers to places beyond India. Crossing the border into India does not count as international movement. This finding has implications for how ‘crossings’ are understood and highlights the need to theorise them in relation to hierarchies and geographies of stigma. Second while the border is a physical thing it is also important to recognise that it stretches into a country much beyond the policed site of a border crossing. Borders are extended into national territory through bilateral labour agreement and the policies, discourses and actions of donor organisations and (I)NGOs. Postconflict situations often mean that borders are rigidly marked and fixed while at the same time being stretched through the technocratic governance of aid. Practices like the diplomatic status grated to UN agencies and as Heather Hindman vividly described for Kathmandu, the need to recruit ex patriots from military service backgrounds in order to fulfil the security clearance levels required to work in post conflict zones, stretch the borders of belonging and redefine national and expatriate space. Third and perhaps most importantly from the perspective of the aims of our project, the border is something that is experienced differently. It can be given agency and used to mark specific people in particular ways, rendering them in or out of place when they come home. The border therefore is not something that returnee women just pass or cross over but rather it continues to influence their livelihood opportunities well into the future. It becomes something that they too have to theorise as they seek to make their lives post trafficking.

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at: Conference: ‘Crossing Borders, Traversing Boundaries: Bridging the Gap Between International and Internal Migration Research Theory’ 13th-14th October 2011. Organised by the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Project Res-062-23-1490. This large ESRC project runs from November 2009 to April 2012. http://www.posttraffickingnepal.co.uk [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Annals of the Association of American Geographers; Antipode; Environment and Planning A; Environment and Planning D; Gender Place and Culture; Geoforum; Progress in Human Geography;

   Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography; Third World Quarterly; Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. But see Harrington 2005, Soderlund 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a longer review of the current TIP report for Nepal see the working notes section on the project website <http://www.posttraffickingnepal.co.uk/#/publications/4538205925>. Last accessed 13/9/11 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more detail of this process see ‘The process of data analysis: Interview with returnee women’ <http://www.posttraffickingnepal.co.uk/#/the-process-of-data-analysis/4554537747>. Last accessed 13/9/11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. These sites were drawn from the official list of 26 designated ‘highly at risk areas’. This list has since been reviewed and extended in a recent version of the National Action Plan Against Trafficking of Women for Sexual Purposes and now covers 75% of Nepal**.**  [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Personal communication, research team meeting with Shakti Samuha, February 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Still considered Terai untouchable and excluded from mainstream development. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The collective term used for indigenous people in Nepal who comprise 59 different groups and make up 37.19% of the population of Nepal (Anaya 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For more details see the working notes section on the project website. <http://www.posttraffickingnepal.co.uk/#/publications/4538205925>. Last accessed 13/9/11 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Government of Nepal. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. While the interim Assembly of 2006 declared that girls can claim citizenship through their mothers if their mothers already have their own citizenship, this needs to be endorsed in the Constitution when it is finished. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For more details see project web site <http://www.posttraffickingnepal.co.uk> ,section for how we work ‘Activists’ workshop February 2011’ and publications ‘working notes’ summarising the current CA citizenship proposals. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See project website, publications, working notes Review on labour migration: <http://www.posttraffickingnepal.co.uk> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This point was also made by members of the Shakti Samuha executive board in one of the research team briefing sessions in February 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)