

Women activists catching sex traffickers red handed at Nepal-India border

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Local women patrol the Nepal-Indian border to apprehend people taking girls out of the country



A dusty junction in Birgunj, Nepal. Photograph: Gavin Kelleher

Just before dawn in the bustling city of Birgunj, an elegant middle-aged woman clocks on to start her border patrol shift.

Maya Gurung has policed these streets for the past nine years. But she is not a law enforcement officer. She is one of a team of people who scour the Nepali-Indian borderlands for signs of one of the most insidious – and growing – crimes in this part of the world: the trafficking for sex of young women.

Traffickers target young women from [Nepal](#)'s remote communities, promising them employment opportunities abroad, only to sell them into forced labour and prostitution once they reach India's megacities.

These women can spend years locked up in brothels, being made to have sex with over 20 men a day to make money for their "owners". With no access to healthcare, many fall victim to disease and never make it home. Estimates put the number trafficked at as high as 10,000 a year.

The "human interceptors", as they are known, work in partnership with [Love Justice International](#), an NGO that coordinates teams at 20 of Nepal's border crossings. Gurung is tasked with monitoring the constant stream of traffic across the border, and physically intercepting women she suspects are being tricked out of Nepal by human traffickers.

Love Justice International has said it averages about 90 successful interceptions a month in [Nepal](#). The interceptors look for several signs that passers-by might be being trafficked, mostly by assessing their body language. Sometimes women were clearly panicking, but most often they were simply nervous, and look unrelated to the person travelling with them.

"The first thing we say is: 'Where are you from, where are you going?'," says Gurung. "We ask if their family know that they are travelling to [India](#) and when they say they do, we call them to check."



Interceptors Asmita Thapa and Maya Gurung, standing at the crossing point into India, Nepal. Photograph: Gavin Kelleher

At this point holes in the stories sometimes appear. The family may say she was travelling to meet relatives, while her accomplice would mention a job or a shopping trip. Often the women themselves would lie, refusing to give up hope of a better life on the other side.

The traffickers have established close relationships with victims, and often came from their own communities. Sometimes they would pretend to be in love with them and trick them into India with promises of marriage. Increasingly, the traffickers were young women themselves.

The interceptors do not have any legal authority to stop people crossing the border, and instead have relied on the local police force to apprehend traffickers once they have identified that an attempt at trafficking was being made.



“The hardest part is when we take the girls we intercept to the police station and try to file charges against their trafficker, but these cases are not taken seriously,” says Gurung. “The police sometimes ignore the cases and even accuse the victims, saying, ‘This girl is no good and that she wants to be sold’.”

Maya recounts one interception where the team identified a young woman being taken across the border by a man who had promised her a job that they later verified did not exist. When the interceptors took the pair to the police station to file a case against the trafficker, he became violent and threatened Maya and her family.

“Intercepting human traffickers can be a dangerous job”, she says.



Interceptors question a young man and woman, travelling across the border in a horse and cart, Nepal. Photograph: Gavin Kelleher

Sometimes, the victim can prove reluctant to be rescued. This is where Asmita Thapa steps in. As the

youngest member of the team she seeks to build a rapport with the women who were usually of similar age. Young women have found it easier to share their experiences with her and often provided valuable information about how the trafficker approached them and the routes taken from their village toward the border.

“It can make me sad sometimes,” Thapa says. “The bad environment can be difficult to be around, and fighting and struggling with the girls that do not realise that we are trying to help them can be frustrating. They do not cooperate at first because many of them lack education and they trust the trafficker to be telling them the truth.”

When women have been rescued, they were housed in a shelter until their family could collect them. Binsa Mishra, who has been an interceptor at the Birgunj station for the past seven years, explains that reuniting them can be complicated. “The parents of the girls can sometimes get angry when they come to collect their daughters, especially when they left without telling them,” she says. “Sometimes they try to beat them but we help them to understand each other where we can.”

Gavin Kelleher

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