

FOCUS: **BOMBAY**

DECEMBER 2022



Rescuing victims of trafficking

The photos featured in this *Focus* are part of the Mumbai Smiles' travelling exposition, "Las caras de la trata (The Faces of Trafficking)", and were taken by the Indian photographer, Abeer Khan.

In this exhibition, courageous women wanted to show their faces and share their stories to denounce the shame of human trafficking and sexual exploitation.



The context of human trafficking

One of the priority programs of Mumbai Smiles is the fight against human trafficking. Along with arms and drugs, this is one of the three illegal industries that generate the most profits: during the past decade, all three moved 650 billion dollars annually (about 595 billion Euros), which is equivalent to 1.5% of world GDP.

Human trafficking can have different purposes: work, slavery, forced marriages, organ harvesting. However, the most frequent destination, especially for trafficked women and girls, is sexual exploitation. Every year more than half a million people are trafficked for this purpose, that is, one every sixty seconds.

Trafficking can be understood as a modern form of slavery. The Asian-Pacific region had the highest number of victims across all forms of modern slavery, accounting for 73% of victims of forced sexual exploitation, 68% of those forced to work by state authorities, 64% of those in forced labour exploitation, and 42% of all those in forced marriages.

Within the region, North Korea, Afghanistan, and Pakistan were the countries with the highest prevalence

of modern slavery. India, China, and Pakistan were the countries with the highest prevalence of modern slavery. India, China, and Pakistan had the highest absolute number of people living in modern slavery and accounted for 60% of the victims in the region.

In the case of India, trafficking cases have increased dramatically since the last decade. According to data from 2016, West Bengal had over a third of the world's total number of sexually exploited victims, Rajasthan has the second-highest number of trafficked children, and Maharashtra had the second-highest number of trafficked females. In India, 90% of all victims of human trafficking are from India, and 89% are transferred from other states internally. Of the 10% who are not from India, most are from Nepal. About 20,000 Nepalese girls are trafficked to India annually.

Official studies estimate that there are about three million prostitutes in India, of which an estimated 40% are children.

Mumbai has more prostitutes than all other Indian cities, and some studies reveal one out of seven is slave. There are 16 hotspots in Mumbai in which women and girls are offered for sex in public places. According to conservative estimates released by NGOs, trafficking for sexual purposes

in Mumbai exploits approximately 400,000 individuals, including 180,000 children. Police estimate that there are about 35,000 Nepalese nationals in Mumbai's red-light areas, although social activists insist the actual number is closer to 100,000, the majority of whom are minors. The Kamathipura neighbourhood of Mumbai is considered Asia's largest red-light area, with about 5,000 sex workers.

The recruitment processes

Most of the victims have a prior history of abuse and difficulties before they fall into the hands of the trafficking networks. They are often physically abused at home, suffer child marriage, are abandoned by husbands or families, have run away from home, are orphans, or have little social support. The recruitment process of trafficking can also include abuse of authority from parents or guardians, as well as other authority figures.

Increasingly, technology and the internet are used for recruitment, something which has increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Today, a greater number of young girls are recruited by "lover boys," young men between 20 and 24 years old and hired by traffickers to seduce and attract them her to

urban centres with fake promises of employment, marriage, or even a visit to a tourist attraction. Once in the city, the girl will be trapped and sold in a brothel. Lover boys may receive up to 50,000 Rupees (approx. 600 Euros) per deceived victim.

Traffickers may also entice girls with drugs. Some traffickers exploit Indian and Nepali women and girls in India as "orchestra dancers," where girls work for dance groups hired to perform at public functions but are subsequently subjected to sex trafficking.

The hard conditions of exploitation

Women and children suffer many forms of abuse inflicted by traffickers, clients, etc. Some of the maltreatment is used by traffickers as a form of control, to make them submissive.

One way to control the victims is through money. Traffickers will provide them only small amounts to cover the basic needs for food, clothing, or makeup, but will make sure they will not be able to save any, so they remain dependant on the traffickers..

Moreover, the victims will experience physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and verbal abuse. It may come from brothel keepers, clients,



Sexual Trafficking in Mumbai

1 in 7
prostitutes is a **slave**

400,000
women sexually
trafficked

180,000
children sexually
trafficked

35-100K
Nepalese nationals
trafficked

~5,000
sex workers in just
one neighbourhood

or even other sex workers – young female sex workers may earn more, causing conflicts between sex workers who earn different amounts of money. Also, community members may treat them badly, believing they are interfering with their lives by soliciting on the streets.



Some traffickers will even force them to conceive babies, which can later be sold or kept to further control the victims.

It is also a common practice for exploiters to give them drugs or alcohol to keep them addicted, and increase their dependence on the traffickers, as they are the only ones who can provide them with it. Alcohol and drugs may also be used to "initiate" them into sex work, turning into the only way they can cope with their situation.

Either way, the amount of violence and abuse they experience is appalling.

Our projects against trafficking

During the first years of our work against human trafficking, Mumbai Smiles put in place several projects whose main goal was to improve the

life conditions of the victims of human trafficking in the neighbourhoods of Kamathipura, Khetwadi and Ghatkopar. These initiatives included educational support to the victims' children. Also, we ran a community centre in Kamathipura, where they received mental health counselling and participated in art therapy sessions.

Prevention

During our work in those neighbourhoods, we realized many of the victims were trafficked from rural regions of India, as well as Bangladesh and Nepal. So we also implemented preventive projects in rural areas of Maharashtra district of Thane, in the outskirts of Mumbai, and in districts of West Bengal (India), Nepal and Bangladesh, to create awareness about the risks of human trafficking.

In **West Bengal**, we have focused

on the formation and functioning of youth groups, facilitating their leadership, building capacity of youth leaders to take action and also guide them to identify their problems as well as community problems. By means of these groups, we work with trafficking-related issues as well as other related concerns, such as child marriage, child labour, discrimination, assaults, etc.

The ongoing progress with these groups seeks to increase youth leadership and role-taking, including community and stakeholders to strengthen the safety net, ensure their support system and system linkage by the youth, based on the issues identified by the youth which would also ensure amplification of their voices as change makers. A total of 50 adolescents and traffic survivors take part in these groups and help the girls in their communities to increase their awareness about human trafficking.

In **Nepal**, we have completed a project to strengthen adolescent girls against human trafficking and sexual exploitation. The project provided services to

40 young women from rural areas of the district of Nuwakot, northwest of Katmandu, through residential training in skills and knowledge about human trafficking, allowing some of them to start a business or find a job related to tailoring. They also became change agents in their communities, warning other girls about the risks of trafficking.

In addition, 10 girls were selected among those beneficiaries who are working actively in their communities to a two-day residential training to improve their abilities as change makers. Each participant has had access to a concrete action plan of trafficking-prevention activities, support to victims of, and those vulnerable to, human trafficking and gender-based violence when they go back to their community. All these girls would eventually reach up to 800 girls in their communities with preventive



messages about the risks of human trafficking.

Concerning **Bangladesh**, our intervention focuses on the women and girls of the district of Satkhira who are at high risk of trafficking. Young men and boys are also part of the prevention process, as they are potential victims of trafficking for slave labour exploitation.

The activities are conducted through close coordination with relevant stakeholders, community, and youth peer leaders. The trafficking survivors and individuals at risk get different services like information, counselling, skill development training, employment that will impact on their lives and livelihood.

Through the intervention, the youth peer leaders are capacitated on knowledge base skill, and those at risk and survivors get counselling and skill-development training to expand their scope of employment. Thanks to this, they have the chance to find a safer and better livelihood and avoid the risk of human trafficking; a social hub will continue to establish



comprehensive efforts to prevent human trafficking. In total 2,315 persons (740 male and 1,575 female,) have benefited by the different actions of this project.

Rehabilitation: The “Udaan” house

Mumbai Smiles runs a shelter in the outskirts of Mumbai which hosts six survivors of human trafficking. We call this house “Udaan” (“flight”, in English). In the house, their needs are met for accommodation, food, health, education, leisure activities and legal aid. They receive training to acquire skills in the handcrafted elaboration of

textile products, as well as candles and cosmetic products. The objective of these activities is for them to become self-sufficient so they can return to a normal life. With his goal in mind, they also resume their education, and develop professional skills, as well as learn their rights and prepare to work and successfully reintegrate into society. They also receive empowerment and counselling sessions to help them improve their mental health. Most important, they find a safe place where they can live in peace and take the time they need to heal their wounds and recover a life with dignity and freedom.

The shelter currently hosts five women, working to recover from their past life. One more woman was successfully rehabilitated and she's starting over with her daughter and her husband.

Sadly, not all the survivors are able to complete the process, so at different moments, up to four women chose to leave the house for personal reasons.

The Rescue unit

In addition to the projects focusing on prevention of trafficking and rehabilitation of survivors, we created a rescue department whose main purpose is to release victims from their exploiters.

With this objective in mind, a team of

four people was created. This group has the mission of coordinating efforts with officials, authorities, and other similar organizations to locate women and girls who are sexually exploited and free them from their exploiters.

Each rescue case is different from another, but these are the usual steps:

1. An alert is received of a girl or group of girls taken from their town and possibly being exploited somewhere else.
2. Together with authorities and similar organizations, information is collected about the location of the girls, and above all, to try to confirm if it is a case of human trafficking and she has been exploited.
3. Once the victim(s) is/are located, our team will act like fake customers and will approach the brothel to pretend to be interested in hiring the sexual services with the victims. This will provide the definitive confirmation.
4. Police anti-trafficking unit runs the rescue operation. We provide any support they request, but they always decide how to proceed.
5. The victims are given the support they need to be rehabilitated.
6. Legal process takes place to imprison the exploiters.



The rescue unit started working in April 2020, with the idea of dedicating Fiscal Year 2020-2021 to put the department in place and start bringing survivors back to light and hope. However, the initial steps had to be slowed down due to the Covid-19 outbreak and all its consequences, such as the nationwide lockdown in India, mobility restrictions, as well as the need for the organization to dedicate all efforts to relief its effects among the most underprivileged population.

Under these unexpected circumstances, the newly created department had to readapt its actions to the situation generated by the nationwide lockdown, and initially focus on contacting government officials and non-government organizations, to build rapport with them. It was crucial, first, to understand the mechanisms they follow when it comes to investigating and

rescuing possible trafficking cases, and secondly, to introduce our organization as one capable of efficiently collaborating in such efforts. These contacts during those months allowed us to achieve both objectives and

be ready to get into action once the general situation made it possible.

During this initial phase, the team also conducted awareness sessions for these organization's employees, like social workers, etc.

After those initial months, the team started to be involved in cases of possible victims from Mumbai as well as outside the city, and even were invited by anti-human trafficking units of police departments to be a part of rescue operations.

As we have gained the confidence of these stakeholders as well as beneficiaries, we have been approached several times to request our support to help locate missing girls or women, which in many cases have made it possible to find them. They have not always been trafficking

cases, in a few cases there have been voluntary disappearances, but anyway we have been able to find them and solve the case,

Since the beginning of this project, we have been part of a total number of 13 operations where 26 victims have been released.

The future of the project

In the years to come, Mumbai Smiles has decided to focus its actions on the fight against human trafficking, even including it specifically in its foundational mission: "Transform the reality of people vulnerable to trafficking, as well as their families, to promote the empowerment of communities, thus achieving sustainable changes."

With this purpose in mind, rescue team becomes one of the most relevant pillars of our action in Mumbai, and all over India, to fight against this terrible nightmare affecting thousands of women and girls every year. Our commitment is to help find them and

release them from the situation they are suffering.

Over time, the department's team has forged ties with the police's anti-trafficking units, as well as with related entities and organizations. It is a process of constant learning and construction of synergies that let us optimize and improve our performance and meet our objectives more effectively. In the long run, the goal is to be able to receive timely and accurate information about a girl who may have been abducted by trafficking networks, and to be able to locate and rescue her safe and sound as quickly as possible. Trafficking in women is one of the scourges of our century, and our unequivocal commitment is to end it once and for all.





The #breakwithtrafficking Campaign

Human trafficking is an unacceptable form of slavery.

To sustain our efforts to keep locating and rescuing victims from exploitation, and to increase awareness about this problem, we are running the #breakwithtrafficking campaign. You can support the campaign both by making a donation, and by helping spread the message among your friends and relatives.

We also invite you to sign our manifesto against human trafficking, to support the victims and the survivors, at mumbaismiles.org/breakwithtrafficking.

You can show your face for them.