

Civil society response to human trafficking in South Asia

by Faisal Yousaf

In South Asia civil society organisations have led the way in encouraging governments to address the problem of human trafficking. A coordinated regional response by both governments and civil society organisations is urgently required.

Trafficking in South Asia is complex and multifaceted, both a development and a criminal justice problem. The main destination of people from South Asia is the Middle East but many stay within India and Pakistan. There is extensive trafficking of women and girls from Bangladesh to India, Pakistan, Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. UNICEF estimates that up to half a million Bangladeshis have been trafficked in recent years and that up to 200,000 Nepali women and girls are working in India's sex industry.¹ A small number of women and girls are trafficked through Bangladesh from Burma to India. Young boys from South Asia are trafficked to the UAE, Oman and Qatar and forced to work as camel jockeys.

South Asian governments have been slow to acknowledge global concerns about human trafficking. The countries in the region have repeatedly been rebuked by the US State Department for failure to tackle human trafficking.

Every major anti-trafficking initiative in the region has been civil society-led. NGOs have carried the main burden in reaching out to trafficked persons, providing health and legal assistance, raising public awareness, steering the national legislative initiatives and providing training and technical assistance to law enforcement and border control authorities. However, civil society involvement is quite recent and they can only provide limited services.

Key challenges are:

- absence of a joint regional strategy by civil society organisations to combat trafficking
- duplication in civil society programmes and activities: more agencies focus on awareness raising than on provision of assistance or repatriation of trafficking victims
- only a few organisations provide repatriation assistance to the victims of trafficking: one study found only ten out of 250 trafficking-focused agencies are engaged with repatriation
- lack of a coherent regional donor/funding approach and existence of several parallel anti-trafficking programmes
- major donor-supported anti-trafficking programmes in the region often only target specific countries, ignoring others in which traffickers also operate.

Some South Asian civil society organisations have pioneered innovative and creative practices which are potentially replicable across the region and further afield. Particularly impressive are the programmes of CHILDLINE India,² the Bangladesh Counter Trafficking Thematic Group,³ the Nepal Human Rights Commission,⁴ Pakistan's Insar Burney Welfare Trust⁵ and Sri Lanka's Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR).

There is an urgent need to:

- develop new legal and institutional frameworks to promote regional cooperation, especially through the South Asian As-

sociation for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

- advocate for the establishment of an office of Rapporteur on Trafficking in Women and Children at SAARC and at the national level, like the one already existing in Nepal
- conduct more in-depth research into the demand that underpins sexual abuse and exploitation of children
- develop compatible national and regional databases of abused, exploited and trafficked children with information on age, gender and nationality
- encourage private sector involvement in regional initiatives: MTV Europe and Microsoft's cooperation with the Canadian Police Service to share online access to information on child predators is a good example of what could be done.
- promote cooperation between civil society organisations and national law enforcement agencies
- develop policies and institutional mechanisms especially to repatriate victims of trafficking in a dignified and safe manner
- encourage inter-regional exchange visits and trainings, particularly with eastern European states
- train civil servants to make government schemes more gender sensitive.

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1. www.unicef.org/media/media_23464.html

2. www.childlineindia.org.in

3. www.iom.int/DOCUMENTS/PUBLICATION/EN/Full_BangladeshTrafficking_Rpt.pdf

4. www.nhrcnepal.org/project1.php?ProjNo=2

5. www.ansarburney.org