

# Local Action to End Trafficking in Women in Nepal

An interview with Shanti Adhikari conducted by Stefanie Gude

Born in Nepal in 1961, Mrs. Shanti Adhikari has completed her B.A. in Economics and a graduate degree in Women's Studies at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan University. Currently, she acts as president of CWISH, Children and Women in Social Service and Human Rights, in addition to co-ordinating the Women's Section of the NGO Federation of Nepal. Mrs. Adhikari also represents her organization as an active member of AATWIN (the Alliance Against Trafficking in Women and Girls in Nepal).

Refuge asked Stefanie Gude, who recently returned to Canada from working in Kathmandu, Nepal, to interview Mrs. Adhikari, to provide important insight into the current state of trafficking in Nepal.

**Stefanie Gude for Refuge:** How would you describe the work of your organization?

**Shanti Adhikari:** CWISH strives to empower and improve the conditions of children and women who, due to forces of poverty, ignorance, and exploitation, are deprived of economic opportunities and social status—indeed, of their human rights. As well as working to stamp out trafficking, CWISH is teaching young children, many of whom work in tea shops and at other menial jobs, to read and write the Nepali language and script. This is for the purpose of enabling them to provide their families with assistance, by earning money outside of the home. CWISH has also been provided with a teacher and looms, to teach girls to weave. It is common practice for Kathmandu households to search the villages for young girls to work without wages in city homes. These girls are often badly housed, given few clothes and no opportunity for education. CWISH is training and educating such girls, as

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*Stefanie Gude has completed an honours degree in literature at McGill University and recently returned from living and working in Kathmandu, Nepal.*

well as looking to open a hostel to make it possible for them to leave such homes. **Refuge:** How does AATWIN approach the struggle to end trafficking? What is its role as a lobby group in relation to SAARC (the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation)?

**Shanti Adhikari:** AATWIN is a network of 17 organizations fighting against trafficking. It has carried out many advocacy, protest, and training programs. On the last Friday of each month, members of AATWIN wear black dresses or saris as one form of protest. Thousands of pamphlets have also been distributed, in a massive effort to educate the public about trafficking. AATWIN hopes to continue harnessing the energies of committed people and organizations dedicated to solving the problem of trafficking.

AATWIN is currently co-ordinating a concerted effort to inform the public in those regions where trafficking takes place. The communities in such regions are visited frequently, and women and girls receive information about methods of operation used by the traffickers, in the hopes of preventing contact altogether. Returnees from Indian brothels are questioned about their recruitment, and efforts are made to arrest and punish their abductors.

A campaign has been instituted throughout Nepal, orchestrating the sending of 200,000 letters to each SAARC head of state. The letters express the views of concerned Nepalese people about the trafficking of Nepalese citizens, and the lack of action by SAARC countries to prevent its occurrence. In 1996, a SAARC conference held in the Maldives addressed the subject, but none of the activities upon which that conference agreed have since been implemented. AATWIN presented its concerns again in June of this year, prompting an agreement by leaders to abolish trafficking in the region. The letter campaign has succeeded in drawing the attention of all SAARC heads of state to this major issue.

**Refuge:** Which socio-economic factors do you believe contribute to the trafficking of women and children in Nepal?

**Shanti Adhikari:** A lack of education on the part of villagers, lack of employment opportunities, and the lack of social status held by women and children. Many families are conscious of the decision to send their girls to Bombay, stepmothers and uncles often playing a significant role in sending the girls away. Some girls are lured by the chance to receive money. While few actually make money, many are beaten and abused.

**CWIN  
(Child Workers in Nepal  
Concerned Centre)**



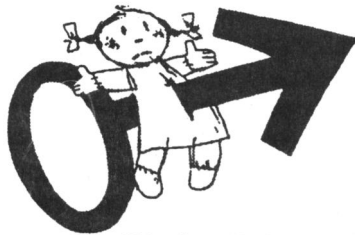
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Established in 1987, CWIN works to protect the rights of the child and to end exploitative child labour in Nepal. The main areas of concern include child labour, prostitution, and marriage, the trafficking of children, and children on the streets. Besides lobbying governments, and promoting public awareness and increased social consciousness, CWIN works directly with children, running programmes for the rescue and rehabilitation of children at risk. It has implemented street and community-based actions to provide shelter, food, health care, education, and skills training for such children.



In Kathmandu alone, there are over 200 brothels, crowded with minors. About 5,000 children under 16 years of age are involved in the sex business in Nepal. As far as the trafficking is concerned, the number of Nepalese girls forced into sex slavery in Indian brothels has reached nearly 200,000. Every year about 5,000 to 7,000 children are trafficked to Indian cities to be forced to work as prostitutes.



*"She is called a prostitute. But that's not her name."*

Large numbers of uneducated rural girls in Nepal are migrating to bigger cities in order to seek employment. Lured into urban areas by the promise of prosperity, a good job and a bright future, lots of them end up in the street where they easily fall into the sex industry. Some girls end up in carpet and garment factories, sometimes used as conduit points for trafficking girls to India. The girls are also themselves prone to drift into commercial sex as a means of surviving.

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For the most part, lower caste and casteless people are targeted, as they lack the close protection existing within higher caste families. There are some areas of Nepal in which prostitution is a woman's only means of earning money, and even the community accepts this.

**Refuge:** When and if trafficked women are returned to Nepal, what is life like for them? Is there any assistance available?

**Shanti Adhikari:** There are four organisations who travel to India and bring back the girls—Maiti Nepal, ABC, WOREC (The Women's Rehabilitation Centre), and CEWIN (Child Workers in Nepal). When the girls return, they are housed together and provided with

medical assistance, training, and rehabilitation. If possible, they return to their own homes and families. These girls would otherwise be left homeless, as the community does not normally accept them again. They are given skills training, such as weaving, sewing, woodcarving, and bamboo crafting. Some are able to attend literacy programs and awareness classes. Some have actually attained quite high levels of education prior to being taken and can return to high school to continue their studies. Those with individual talents are encouraged to pursue them.

**Refuge:** What kind of action do the region's leaders propose to take?

**Shanti Adhikari:** The Foreign Ministers in attendance at the latest SAARC summit have met again since then. At the SAARC summit to be held in Nepal next year, the host country plans to have all leaders sign a convention abolishing the trafficking of women and girls. AATWIN believes this convention will be signed, but may not be implemented by each country. AATWIN will be working to lobby and pressure governments, as well as individual parliamentarians.

**Refuge:** What are the consequences of trafficking in terms of HIV/AIDS?

**Shanti Adhikari:** The majority of girls tested are HIV positive. Very few have developed full-blown AIDS as yet, but hospices or hospitals will be a need in the future.

**Refuge:** What is most important to CWISH? to AATWIN?

**Shanti Adhikari:** The top priority of CWISH is to stop all girl trafficking, and to empower women and girls, to close the gap between the status of men and women in Nepalese society.

AATWIN's top priority is to abolish girl trafficking in Nepal by working closely with the SAARC countries, which have an effect on Nepal.

**Refuge:** What are the largest obstacles you face in trying to meet your goals?

**Shanti Adhikari:** With regards to trafficking, the main obstacle is Nepal's open border with India. We have 17 border crossings. Also, there are no strict punishments given to people involved in trafficking. There are minor laws in

place, but AATWIN is lobbying for stronger penalties.

Nepal's poverty is also an obstacle. Some of these girls actually return to India as they consider their chances of rehabilitation to be hopeless, and they prefer life in the brothel.

About 200,000 Nepali women and girls have been taken to India in the last 20 years. Twenty percent have been less than 16 years old.

**Interviewer's note:** Pratima Khadka, President of the Bhutan Women and Children Organization, in exile in Kathmandu, has expressed great concern regarding the tenuous situation of young Bhutanese women living in Nepal. Crowded by the hundreds into refugee camps, these girls lack adequate income and job opportunities. Demanding immediate repatriation of the thousands of Bhutanese forced into exile on the basis of their ethnicity, Mrs. Khadka points out that it is their vulnerability, living the precarious existence of refugees, that makes these girls likely targets for traffickers. ■

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*\*Defends the rights of children*

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*\*Portrays and promotes itself in a way which does not demean persons nor places*

*\*Ensures that the economic benefits of its activity reach to all sectors of society*

*\*Promotes positive values of peace and justice, harmony and understanding between peoples*

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