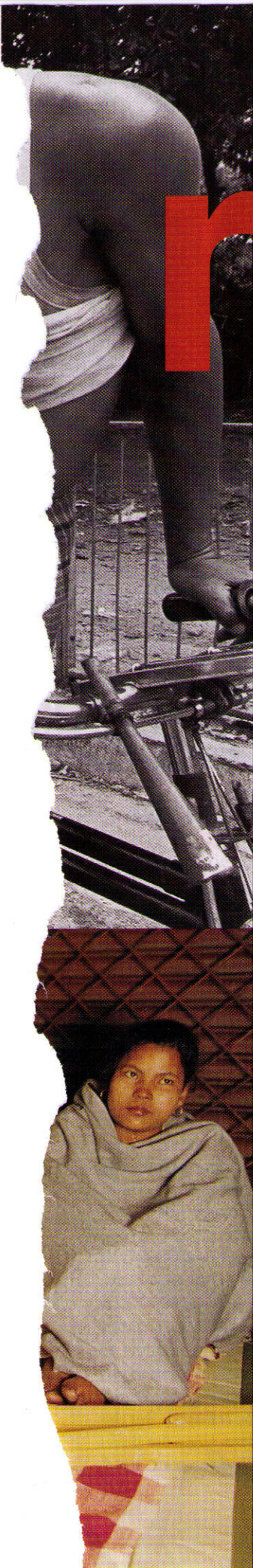




■ Above: Nisha Chettri (far left), a former sex slave, works at a border patrol seven days a week, stopping rickshaws and other vehicles carrying young Nepalese girls whom she suspects are being trafficked.

■ Right: Anuradha Koirala (left), the founder of rescue organization Maiti Nepal, takes care of recently rescued sex slaves.





# rescued from hell

**They're penniless. They're homeless. They're dying of AIDS. But the sex slaves rescued from India's brothels are also angry. And they'll fight the sex trafficking of other innocents until the day they die**

BY JAN GOODWIN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY THOMAS L. KELLY



it is 6 a.m. in Kakavitta, Nepal, the dirt-road border-crossing between Nepal and India, and already the heat is searing, overwhelming. A solid line of pickup trucks and cars stretches miles to the government checkpoint, kicking up a choking mix of diesel fumes and dust.

In these dire conditions, two terminally ill young women, Gita Tamang and Nisha Chettri, move from car to truck to bicycle rickshaw, inspecting them for 12 hours a day, seven days a week. They stop anyone traveling with any young women who aren't clearly family. What are Gita and Nisha on the lookout for? Unsuspecting Nepalese girls in the hands of sex traffickers, who will sell the girls into the notorious brothels of Bombay. With the help of the border police, who supply the muscle, Gita and Nisha separate girls traveling alone or with a single man and interview them individually to find out if their stories match. (Traffickers—most of them male—often cross the border ahead of or behind their victims, joining up with the girls once they've passed the authorities.)

"You can smell the deceit," Nisha says fiercely. "When we see a young girl wearing new clothes—which village girls never have—or shoes she's not used to walking in because she's been barefoot her whole life until now, >



or if she seems confused, we stop her.” If Gita and Nisha’s suspicions are confirmed, the young girls are then taken to a transit center for further questioning, and border police are called upon to arrest the sex traffickers.

Together, Gita and Nisha stop as many as four girls a day from being sold into the sex industry. The reason for their determination is also the reason for their success: They themselves spent years being brutalized in India’s brothels. The U.S. State Department estimates that more than 2 million women—many of them abducted from neighboring Nepal and Bangladesh—work as prostitutes in India against their will.

“Former victims of trafficking can recognize those being trafficked,” says Anuradha Koirala, 52, the founder and director of Maiti Nepal (which, loosely translated, means

“Mother’s House”), the organization that coordinates this and four other such border patrols between Nepal and India. With the police, Maiti Nepal also stages raids on brothels to rescue sex slaves, bringing those who have HIV/AIDS, like Gita and Nisha, back to Maiti Nepal’s hospice to live out their final days.

“Not so long ago, I weighed 126 pounds; now I’m down to just 95 pounds,” says 20-year-old Gita, who was infected with HIV after being forced to service as many as 50 men a day for the three years she was in sexual servitude. “I know the disease is taking over my body. The diarrhea is constant. So are the sweats and headaches.” Gita also has painful bone tuberculosis, a complication of the disease. “I know I don’t have long,” she says. “But stopping the traffickers is my revenge—the only one I have.”

**There are only two ways out of the brothels: rescue in a rare police raid or death.**

### **Saving others from her own fate**

Nisha, also 20, is called a “tigress” by her colleagues, because of her ferocity on patrol. At age 13, she accepted a job from a family friend to work at a jewelry business in India. She was duped. “What the woman really sold,” Nisha says, “was girls.”

When Nisha first arrived at the brothel, she was locked in a cage for seven days and denied food until she began servicing customers. Nisha’s cage, like others, was a narrow cubicle just wide enough for a thin, stained mattress. She turned tricks for less than \$1 each. It was money that she never saw. Like most sex slaves, Nisha had been sold for a paltry amount—usually \$300 to \$1000—and told she had to pay back her purchase price before she would be released. But that never happens, since the slaves are also billed for rent, food



water, and clothing—and even their forced abortions, should they become pregnant.

“I felt like a caged animal at the brothel,” Nisha says. “All I could think of was how to escape.” After two years, Nisha managed to run away when she was sent to a clinic for birth-control shots. (She went to the police, who put her in touch with Maiti Nepal.) But escapes like hers are extremely rare. Generally, there are only two ways out of the brothels: death or rescue in a police raid, with the assistance of a humanitarian agency like Maiti Nepal.

Rescuing sex slaves is slow, dangerous work. Maiti Nepal receives little help from the police—who are often paid off by the brothel owners—and many of its employees are openly threatened by the traffickers. “They have broken into our offices twice, looking for files,” says Anuradha. “They know that we gather evidence

and make extensive reports. If we don’t do that, the police won’t prosecute.”

Despite such obstacles, Maiti Nepal rescues several hundred sex slaves each year, bringing many of them to their hospice, a tranquil plot of land on the Nepalese border with vegetable gardens and farm animals. Yet even for the lucky young women who’ve been rescued, life continues to be a struggle. Maiti Nepal tries to locate their families so they can return home, but it’s often impossible. Most girls had never traveled outside the village in which they were born until the day they were trafficked; they often don’t know exactly where they came from, or how to get back.

Even if the girls could return home, many communities would shun anyone who harbored HIV or AIDS. In fact, until a few years ago, when Maiti Nepal and similar

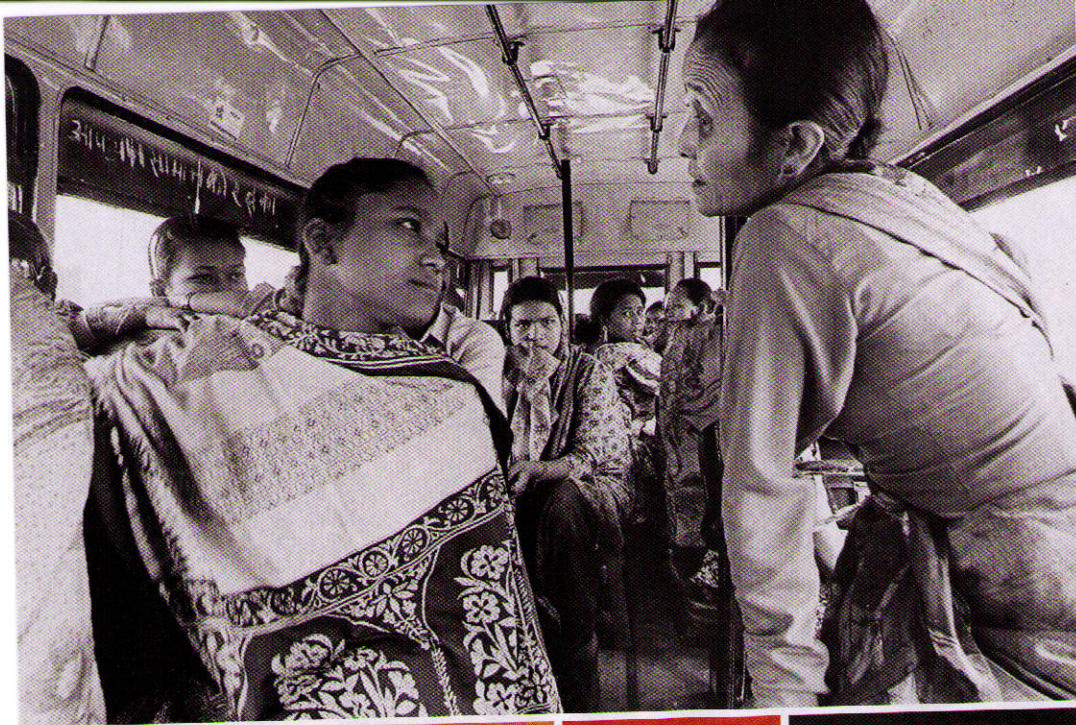
agencies began campaigning, even the Nepalese government was reluctant to accept victims back into the country, for fear they would spread disease.

“I would like to see my family, but I’m afraid,” says Apshara Pariyar, 17, who was trafficked at 14 and enslaved for a year-and-a-half before being rescued. “When a girl has AIDS, like me, villagers treat her like she is more dangerous than a leper. Other girls have tried to go home, but their families become stigmatized. So most don’t.”

Without enough money for expensive AIDS drugs, these girls essentially come to the hospice to die. “We’re dealing with the constant loss of young people who’ve become our friends,” Anuradha says. “Not long ago, two girls and the child of one died within a few days of each other. I went into a depression. I asked myself, What were their mistakes ▷

■ **Opposite:** In a typical Bombay street scene, prostitutes wait for customers in what’s been called the world’s largest red-light district.

■ **Above:** Nisha Chettri (left) and Gita Tamang are sick with AIDS, but as long as they are healthy enough to walk, they’ll work their shifts patrolling the Nepal-India border for sex traffickers.



diagnosed as HIV-positive at age 9, and she didn't even reach puberty until a year after she arrived at the hospice. Like Pushpa, she now has full-blown AIDS.

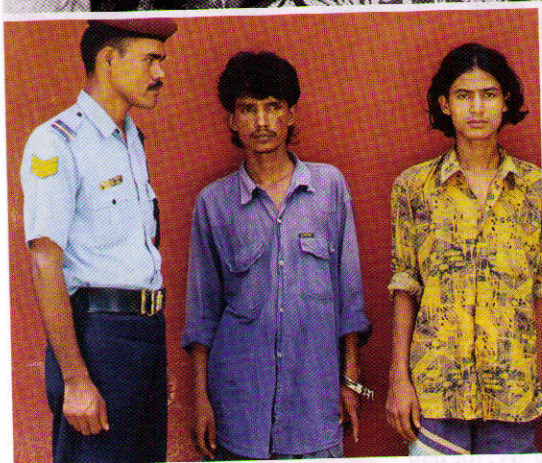
Seven-year-old Jeena had just registered for first grade when she was sold by her employer. (She had been working as a nursemaid for a toddler: not an unusual arrangement in Nepal, where kids as young as 6 are frequently hired to care for neighbors' children.) "I was taken on a four-day train ride to Bombay and left at a brothel," Jeena recalls. "I was told to take a bath, so I'd be fresh. Then they put me to work. Customers tried to have sex with me, but they couldn't because I was too small.

"I cried and kicked and ran," says Jeena. "The *gharwali* [brothel manager] beat me black and blue. She made me sleep under a bed where customers were having sex.

"The next day, they held me down while three men raped me," Jeena says, her voice fading. "I was torn, bleeding badly. Every time after that, there was such pain."

Like Pushpa, Jeena tried several times to escape. Each time, she was severely beaten and nearly starved as punishment. "The *gharwali* told me if I kept running away, she would grind hot chilies and put it in my private parts. She said this was a torture that would make me scream. After that, I just gave up. I was 7; I couldn't fight these people."

Four months later, Jeena was sold to another brothel, where she lived and worked in a cage. Then, one day, she woke up with no feeling in her legs. Doctors discovered that she had suffered spinal-nerve and disk injuries from being raped by men considerably larger than she. They also tested her for HIV. She was positive, and also infected with multiple STDs.



■ Above: Anuradha escorts just-rescued sex slaves to safety.

■ Left: A Nepalese officer interrogates suspected sex traffickers.

■ Right: This woman (holding her son) was trafficked into sexual slavery by her husband. She now has AIDS.



that they were condemned to die this way? What happened is no fault of their own. Others enjoyed them, and in doing so, destroyed them."

### A life no one deserves

Each of Maiti Nepal's hospice residents has her own haunting story. "I'm dead now," says 24-year-old Pushpa Rana, her speech slurring. Her face is slightly lopsided where her cheekbone and jaw were smashed; her right arm hangs limply at her side. "They killed the girl I was before," she says.

Ten years ago, Pushpa was a regular teenager living on her father's farm in western Nepal. Then, after a common ruse in which a trafficker "marries" a naive village girl

in a fake ceremony, Pushpa's new "husband" sold her to an Indian brothel. There, she serviced some 20 customers a day every day for seven years, eventually contracting AIDS and tuberculosis. She is also brain-damaged from the beatings she received whenever she tried to escape. The final battering left her unconscious, bleeding from her ears and nose, her right arm and leg permanently paralyzed; she is now prone to epileptic seizures.

Many girls at the hospice were trafficked young, but none as young as 16-year-old Jeena Shrestha, who was just 7 when she was sold into prostitution. "My baby teeth started falling out after I had been in the brothel for eight months," she says. She was

**7-year-old Jeena had just registered for first grade when she was sold to a brothel.**



■ **Left:** Anuradha takes to the street, displaying photos of known sex traffickers—some of them women—to increase awareness of the issue.

■ **Right:** In Kathmandu, Nepal, young girls march in protest against sex trafficking. Outside cities like Kathmandu, Maiti Nepal conducts traveling educational camps to inform young girls and their parents.



Jeena was 11 when she came to the hospice. She was underweight and needed help walking. She still suffers pain from her spinal injuries.

### Dying so that others may live

"The girls in the hospice have lost their youth and their futures. They are dying before they have lived," says Anuradha. "After the hell they've been through, I want them to live in a peaceful environment with companionship and affection. My dream is that they will be able to die in peace, with dignity." Watching the hospice residents play with the young children fathered by unknown brothel customers (who, like their mothers, have HIV/AIDS), Anuradha appears to have achieved her goal.

The healthiest women at the hospice take part in touring prevention camps held in villages across Nepal, where they use play-acting and songs to tell their cautionary stories to parents and girls. These awareness programs are the only effective way to disseminate the message. In Nepal, most of the population is illiterate. Few villages have electricity, and fewer people can afford a transistor radio or the batteries to operate it. Consequently, most girls who end up in India's brothels have never even heard of sex trafficking until they are victimized.

## sex trafficking: a worldwide problem

■ **Trafficking is the fastest-growing criminal enterprise in the world, and the third-largest source of profits (behind narcotics and arms dealing). The sex trade has victimized an estimated 30 million women and children worldwide over the past three decades, according to the U.S. Senate foreign-relations committee.**

■ **Sex trafficking affects nearly every country—including the U.S. According to the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, of the 700,000 women and children trafficked worldwide each year, 50,000 are brought into the U.S. In an effort to halt this practice, the United States will place economic sanctions on any nation that refuses to take action against trafficking starting in October.**

Twenty-two-year-old Anita Khadka has taught at a number of camps. But, while Anita helps educate, she never admits that the story she tells is her own. "I'm too ashamed to tell them the truth. It's too painful," she says. "People will say that I'm diseased, and that I shouldn't be there."

Anita was trafficked when traveling to the home of her best friend's fiancé; the two women were sold together by the fake bridegroom. Anita's trafficker, who is now serving a 20-year sentence, was one of the first in Nepal to go to jail. A law to curtail trafficking was enacted in 1963, but until organizations like Maiti Nepal started making waves, it was never enforced.

"Twenty years is not enough. He gave me a death sentence. He should get the same," says Anita, who has AIDS. "In my brothel, I saw two girls hang themselves from the ceiling fan. They couldn't stand it anymore. They died in India, far from their homes. There was no one to cry for them."

Anita is the self-appointed mother to the orphaned children in the hospice. "They are the children I'll never have," she says, shampooing the hair of one of the 11 youngsters she bathes and dresses every day. Pregnant at 15 in the brothel, Anita begged to keep her baby. "They forced me to

have an abortion, then put me back to work three days later. I bled for nine months," she says bitterly. "My life is ruined. Working with the children helps me forget—until a child or girl here dies from AIDS. It's very hard to watch. You know *you'll* die like that. Soon, it will be *your* turn."

She is silent for a minute. Then she adds, "But everything happens for a reason. Maybe this awful thing happened to me so I could stop it from happening to others." □

### support the crackdown on trafficking

■ **Help fund Maiti Nepal's hospice and keep the border patrols running by donating to Friends of Maiti Nepal, 63-8 Commercial Wharf, Boston, MA 02110. Log on to [www.maitinepal.org](http://www.maitinepal.org) to learn more.**

■ **Demand that traffickers be prosecuted to the full extent of the law by writing to the Nepalese and Indian Ambassadors to the U.S.: His Excellency Jai Pratap Rana, Royal Nepalese Embassy, 2131 Leroy Pl. NW, Washington, DC 20008; His Excellency Lalit Mansingh, Embassy of India, 2107 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20008.**

■ **Learn how you can stop sex trafficking in the U.S. Visit the website for The U.S. Campaign Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children at [www.stopcsec.us](http://www.stopcsec.us).**

■ **Join Equality Now's campaign for the human rights of women worldwide at [www.equalitynow.org](http://www.equalitynow.org).**