

I was sold for \$200
and now I'm a



Jyothi, a 14-year-old prostitute, outside her brothel in Mumbai. We were unable to interview her for this story, because moments after this picture was taken she was beaten by one of the brothel's thugs (see inset, right) for speaking with a reporter.



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.

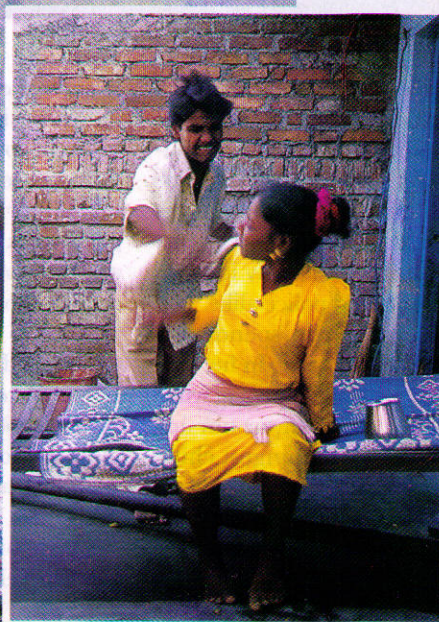
Saving others from her own fate

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 this never happens, since the slaves are also billed for rent, food,

sex slave”

In India, millions of girls—some as young as 11— are sold into prostitution. Beaten, raped and forced to live in cages, they have little hope of escape and run an ever-increasing risk of death from AIDS. Jan Goodwin reports PHOTOGRAPHS BY NAMAS BHOJANI



Mumbai, a megalopolis of 20 million people, best known by its former name Bombay, is a city in which extravagant mansions overlook the largest slum on earth. Not far from Western-style restaurants that serve the bejeweled elite, one-third of the city's residents live without running water in hovels constructed of plastic, cardboard and metal sheeting.

In the midst of such poverty and wealth, and far from the routes cleared for President Clinton's recent state visit, is the world's largest red-light district, Kamathipura. India has more than two million prostitutes, according to the latest government-sponsored survey. But that was nine years ago, and today the number is considerably higher, possibly double. Five hundred thousand of them, half of whom are minors and indentured sex slaves, suffer hellish existences in Mumbai's brothels.

Lured from impoverished villages throughout India, Nepal and Bangladesh, young girls are tapped by local recruiters who promise to give them coveted jobs working as domestics or in factories in the big cities. Or they are sold by relatives or neighbors. "If a father has five daughters, he sells two to feed the other three," says Durga Ghimere, head of ABC Nepal, an agency aiding former sex slaves. Others are duped by brothel procurers who marry them and as many as one hundred other victims. Illiterate and raised to be >



Brothel managers in front of prostitutes' cages.

serviced customers day after day, night after night. She was never allowed to refuse a customer or a sex act. Not surprisingly, Bibi soon fell ill. "I was having bad fevers," she says, "but no matter how sick I was, I had to let customers do what they wanted."

India now has more people living with HIV/AIDS than any country in the world. According to the latest UNAIDS statistics, the country has about four million infected adults and children. And that rate is doubling every 18 to 24 months, says I.S. Gilada, M.D., a leading Indian AIDS expert.

Surveys show that 67 to 80 percent of India's prostitutes are infected with HIV, and a third of those have AIDS.

Tragically, as the incidence of HIV in India rises, the average age of the indentured prostitutes declines. "Now, with HIV, most men prefer 10- to 12-year-old prostitutes," says Vipula Kadri, founder of Save the Children India, "while a decade ago, they wanted more experienced girls." Persistent myths in India hold that sex with young virgins not only restores a man's virility, but also cures him of sexually transmitted diseases. Consequently, very young prostitutes, who are the most vulnerable to HIV because their vaginal and anal tissue is frequently torn, are worked the hardest, servicing up to 40 customers a day. They are also made to work when pregnant, often until a few days before delivery, or are back working within a week after they have abortions.

Kamla was pregnant and 22 when she was sold to a brothel three years ago. Like all the others, she was told she couldn't leave until she had paid back her purchase price. "I didn't want to work because I was pregnant, but the brothel manager told me I had no choice." Almost immediately after Kamla gave birth, she was forced back to work. "I'm very frightened one of the clients will abuse my daughter," she says. "I don't want her to end up like me."

Kamla's fears are very real. The children of sex slaves are often inducted into the profession at an early age. "Customers view the children in brothels as bonuses," says Priti Patkar, a social worker who co-founded Prerana, a volunteer agency that runs a night crèche for the children of prostitutes in India. "Kids are placed under the beds in the brothels because there is nowhere else for them to go. Babies are drugged with opium to make them sleep, so the clients won't know they're there. Not surprisingly, these children become second-generation prostitutes. In the broth-



Children of prostitutes find a safe haven in Prerana's night crèche.

els, girl babies are welcomed, because it's cheaper to breed prostitutes than import them, whereas in normal Indian life, everyone wants to have boys."

The night crèche, in the middle of the red-light district, gives kids a safe place to sleep, two meals a day and a bath. But ▷



MADELEINE K. ALBRIGHT TALKS TO MARIE CLAIRE ABOUT SEX TRAFFICKING:

QUESTION: The U.S. has just given \$1.6 million to fight trafficking in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. With the number of sex slaves so high, is this modest sum really going to make any difference?

MADELINE ALBRIGHT:

Probably not, but it's a start. People often think foreign assistance is a quarter of our budget. One penny out of every dollar goes to these kinds of programs—and to run our entire department! So, the answer is: No, it is not enough. But it shows that we see this issue as a major problem.

Q: In a country of one billion people, with such poverty, where, as the UN says, prostitution feeds people, how can this problem be solved?

MA: It can't. Instead, you have to develop an economy where women and girls are not trafficked. You can't throw up your hands and say, "We can't do anything about it!" You have to raise the visibility of the issue, talk to politicians, see if they can get their judicial systems involved, and raise the standard of living.

Q: How are we, in the United States, affected by the international sex-trafficking crisis?

MA: It affects everybody. These issues come home to America. I also believe the average American is very generous and feels that the world is better off when humanitarian values are practiced. It's how we can feel more comfortable in a world where there are people who are suffering from HIV/AIDS, or who are abused, or who live in tremendous poverty or who are sold into slavery.

Babies are placed under brothel beds and drugged with opium to make them sleep, so the clients won't know they're there.

because of limited funding, only 80 children can be cared for, and only those prostitutes who have paid off their purchase price are free to drop off their children for the night. In addition to the services the crèche provides, the Prerana staff also tries to empower prostitutes to use condoms. "But if Indian wives can't get their husbands to use condoms," asks Patkar, "how can sex slaves, who are totally powerless, get men to use them?"

With the risk of infection so great, why do Indian men visit these brothels on a regular basis? Sunil, 27, who works in a travel agency, summed it up as he left a brothel on a Saturday afternoon: "I come here for my enjoyment. I like to visit different ones to experiment. The Nepalese girls are the best, because they strip totally naked, and I like their golden skin." He says he always uses a condom, and adds that he'll stop visiting brothels when he marries next year. "Then I'll have a wife, and I won't need to." But he insists his bride be a virgin, and sees no double standard in that. "Why? Because I'm a man, of course."

The number of vulnerable women who find themselves at the mercy of abusive customers, brothel managers and usurious loan sharks (who advance them money to buy food and water while they're in debt to the brothels) is increasing at an alarming rate, but the situation is routinely overlooked by those in positions to change it. In a recent UNICEF report on sex trafficking in Mumbai, the authors concluded: "Politicians are indifferent, and children are seen as commodities. It is rare, if at all, that traffickers and brothel owners are punished because politicians and public health officials are in league with the mafia that runs the lucrative flesh trade."

The police, too, have their hands in the sex trade, collecting weekly protection money from the brothel managers.



Vipula Kadri, left, of Save the Children India, with Bibi, an HIV-positive prostitute.

"The police are involved up to the top levels, and they are making millions off these young girls."

"The police are involved up to the top levels," says Colin Gonsalves of Mumbai's Human Rights Law Network, "and they are making millions off these young girls."

Sex trafficking, of course, is not limited to India. It is now

the third largest source of profits for international organized crime, behind drugs and guns. "It is the fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world," says Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, "and to one degree or another it afflicts every nation, including the U.S."

Some 50,000 women and children from Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe are trafficked into the States every year, according to a new C.I.A. report. In a recent high-profile case, Lakireddy Bali Reddy, a 62-year-old Indian millionaire and the wealthiest landlord in Berkeley, California, was charged with arranging for Indian nationals to illegally enter the U.S., and allegedly importing minors for sex. He is currently free on \$10 million bail.

The case came to light after 17-year-old Sitha Vemireddy died in his apartment and was discovered to be pregnant. Sitha's death was caused by carbon monoxide poisoning from an improperly vented heater. Her 15-year-old sister, Lalitha, was found unconscious and is now in protective custody.

Lalitha told Berkeley police and INS agents that she was turned over to Reddy by her parents at the age of 12. Sitha and Lalitha's parents, who have four girls and a boy, had spent a \$1000 dowry marrying off their oldest daughter and could not afford to arrange marriages for their other daughters. Since the

girls' father worked for Reddy, his two daughters were sent to work in Reddy's home. Lalitha said that Reddy regularly engaged in sexual intercourse with her, Sitha and their 17-year-old roommate, also from India, and continued to do so in the U.S. The U.S. attorney's criminal case against Reddy, who faces up to 70 years imprisonment, is expected to come to trial later this year.

In the meantime, the child-sex trade continues to flourish around the world. At its roots is gender inequality, says Ruchira Gupta, a UNICEF media consultant who works with sex slaves. "It's not about changing laws, it's about the need to change attitudes toward girls and sex and sexuality. But it's hard to get people to talk about the trafficking of women and children because of the underlying sexual component. We have to break that silence."

Only then, perhaps, will young girls stop feeling as one did after her initiation into the sex trade: "The first day someone slept with me, I felt as if God had died." □

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Write the Indian Ambassador, Naresh Chandra, at the Indian Embassy, 2107 Massachusetts Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008, 202-939-7000, to demand that traffickers be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

You can support the work of Prerana by sending a contribution to them % Bank Account Prerana, account 56588, Oriental Bank of Commerce, Hiranandani Gardens Branch Powai, Mumbai 400 076, India.

You can support the work of Save the Children India by sending a contribution to it % American Express Bank Limited, account 22-009-3411, 364 Dr. D. N. Road Branch, Mumbai 4000 01, India.