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Anti-oppressive Practice in Anti-trafficking Interventions in Nepal

A significant number of stakeholders are working on anti-trafficking interventions and have played a substantial role in both preventing trafficking and protecting trafficking survivors with a focus on rescue and reintegration. This article examines how various stakeholders, including Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), educators, media representatives, police officials, lawyers, and the community as a whole, have defined “successful” reintegration. The goals of this article are two-fold: (1) to explore the range of programs and services available to survivors to assist in the process of reintegration; and (2) to unpack what the construct of “successful” reintegration actually means to stakeholders, as this subjective standpoint will have an impact on the design, delivery and evaluation of the programs and services. Participatory action research was used as a tool to construct and refine knowledge around the two goals, and the article's content is based on the research production of eight female trafficking survivors, recognized as co-researchers in this paper, who interviewed a range of stakeholders, and analyzed the resulting data by coding and categorizing. The findings of the study, together with implications for social work practice, will be discussed in this article.

Context

By signing the TIP (Trafficking in Persons) 2000 Protocol, Nepal, as a source country for trafficking in persons for both sexual and labor exploitation, has demonstrated the Government's commitment to prevent trafficking and protect survivors through the use of the "3Ps" (Prevention, Protection and Prosecution) approach (Dhungel 2017). National plans, laws, and policies, and a variety of other approaches, such as the National Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons, Trafficking in Women and Children 2012, and Human Trafficking and Transportation Control Act 2007, are concrete evidence of the Government's ongoing attempts to support anti-trafficking efforts. In collaboration with the Government of Nepal, Non- Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working in anti-trafficking efforts have played a crucial role, mainly in preventing trafficking and protecting survivors, however, the Government of Nepal's role in protecting victims is surprisingly limited (Chaulagain, 2009; Dhungel, 2017; Sharma 2014). There is also limited research assessing how many trafficked women have successfully reintegrated into their families and communities, and what the indicators for successful reintegration actually are, however some studies claimed that reunifications of trafficking survivors with their families and their participations in income generating activities in the areas of agriculture and small businesses are major evidences of "successful" reintegration (Adhikari, 2011; Buet, Bashford & Basnyat, 2012; Chaulagai, 2009; Shakti Samuha, 2013).

Additionally NGOs often experience difficulties in supporting victims and providing services meeting their aspirations due to insufficient funding and unclear reintegration policies (Dhungel 2017). Although most grants coming from foreign governments and International Non-Government Organizations (INGOs) often go directly to the Government of Nepal for anti- trafficking initiatives, the money frequently does not reach those for whom it is intended, due to the various forms of corruption. (Adhikari, 2011; Chaulagain, 2009) and nepotism (Dhungel, 2017). Not surprisingly, given this state of affairs, the United States has placed Nepal in the Tier 2 rank of countries due to its noncompliance with the minimum standards of TIP protocol (United States of Department of State, 2018).

Methodology

Participatory Action Research (PAR), as a community-based research, was selected as the most appropriate method for knowledge creation. PAR offers an opportunity for people (especially oppressed populations) to critically and collectively analyze existing social, political, and economic situations, and act together to address immediate problems and advocate for social change. This method changed the traditional “objective” role of the researcher to one of a “committed” co-investigator or facilitator, and the customary participant role as “informant”/ subject evolves to one of “co-researcher” in the research process (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The eight female trafficking survivors who acted as co-researchers in this collaborative study process, ranged in age from 23 to 37. The women were born outside of Kathmandu, mainly in rural communities, and were first trafficked from the ages of 7 to 25. Four survivors were married, and four of them had children. With respect to their faith, five were Hindus and three were Buddhists. All the women were currently employees of the anti-trafficking agency, Shakti Samuha, Nepal.

The two qualitative approaches, semi-structured individual interviews and conversation cafés, were used to understand how stakeholders perceived the term “successful” reintegration. The co-researchers were involved in developing questionnaires for interviews and facilitating both the interviews and conversation cafés together with analyzing the resulting data. The stakeholders included the Government of Nepal, NGOs working in anti-trafficking interventions (19 agencies), media representatives, lawyers, police officials, educators and the general public. The key findings of the study will be briefly discussed in the following section.

Unpacking “Successful” Reintegration

The agencies working on anti-trafficking interventions were asked to describe the programs and services they had for survivors in their reintegration. Agencies reported that once the survivors are back to Kathmandu, they are taken to a rehabilitation center close to their home community (there is 14 rehabilitation centers), where they could stay from six months to one year (The process for the reintegration of trafficking survivors is shown in figure 1). The goal of the center is to support women in the initial steps of the journey of reintegration.



Figure 1. Programs/services and the process for reintegration Source: Adapted from Dhungel (2017), p. 337.

A rehabilitation center provides a number of services such as counselling, food/clothing and legal services. The centers also offer some recreational activities for physical and health wellbeing, together with some vocational trainings such as knitting, jewelry making, jam making, and opportunities for both informal (adult education) and formal (grade 1- 12) education in public schools. At the same time, the organizations attempt to meet families and communities to prepare for family reunification purposes. The agencies first verify if survivors are safe to go back to their families/communities and, if so, they ask their families to welcome the survivors back to their communities. The survivors can maximum stay in a shelter for 12 months, and once they leave the shelter their names are added to the list of the “successful” reintegration survivors and their files are closed.

One question, revealed a significant diversity of answers, showing a lack of consistency in how stakeholders understand integration in the Nepalese context. When asked, “In your opinion, what percentage of women are successfully reintegrated in Nepal?” the answers ranged from forty- to eighty- percent, with half the respondents declining to answer at all, as they were not certain about the actual percentages. Stakeholders, however, were more confident in their replies to this question: “What is your understanding of the term successful reintegration of trafficking survivors?” The responses are illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Perceptions of stakeholders on successful reintegration of trafficking survivors Source: adapted from Dhungel (2017), p. 334

A majority of participants reported that family acceptance is instrumental for successful reintegration. To be reunited with parents and siblings, and to live with them stands as a symbol of successful reintegration. The study also found that community acceptance is another important indicator stakeholders used to measure the reintegration success of trafficking survivors. Stemming from this, participants expressed a belief that in many cases, a survivor is accepted by her family but rejected by her community. Therefore, without community acceptance, a survivor's reintegration is only partial and incomplete. In fact, it could be argued that this is not actually

reintegration at all. Additionally, according to stakeholders, a married survivor is perceived as a more successfully reintegrated woman in the society. Participants reported that getting married for survivors is a challenge due to stigma attached to them. Until a survivor gets married she is not considered reintegrated by the participants.

This study also found that employers generally do not hire survivors regardless of education, skills, and experiences once their trafficked past came to their attention. According to stakeholders, employers are afraid that if they hired the survivors they would ruin the image of their organizations. As a result, according to participants, survivors are expected to work mostly in restaurants, and massage parlors. The study highlighted the importance of survivors being able to make a sustainable living in a job of their choice.

A small number of stakeholders also expressed concern about survivors' rights to live with respect and dignity in the society with their future secured. For instance, the participants said that survivors should be entitled to live with the same respect and dignity as any other women, and no one should be able to take away those rights. One participant said, "Women should not be discriminated against based on their past". A handful of participants suggested that the government should provide free health services to survivors (healthcare is private in Nepal). For example, one participant shared that,

"We spend enormous amounts of money for the medical treatment of our women. One visit costs Rupees five-hundred. Medicine is even more costly. Our funding is often spent for their medical treatment and thus we sometimes could not even focus on their basic needs. The government needs to promote healthy lifestyles and well-being of the women through free public health services."

Another participant narrated that,

"expenses for health care is ridiculously expensive. Most survivors especially those who are diagnosed with HIV Aids are

required to take medicines daily and they are, sadly, not in positions to pay for the medicines."

Most participants reported that survivors' futures should be secured by providing them sustainable employment and appropriate education. This study identified the Nepalese Government as having the responsibility to ensure that these changes occur. Participants also suggested that to prod the government into action survivors need to take initiative to bring their reintegration issues into a public forum, through a variety of channels including storytelling, awareness raising campaigns and policy advocacy. In the words of one stakeholder:

"Taking initiatives and playing a lead role in responding to their own oppressions is reintegration for me. You need to stand for yourselves as part of your own reintegration."

However, while unpacking the term "successful" reintegration from stakeholders' standpoints, the co- researchers did not always agree with some of the indicators that stakeholders shared in the interviews, such as the meaning of "marriage", together with family and "community acceptance". One co- researcher, for instance, reported:

I do not care if my family accept me or not...I really mean it. I am surprised why marriage is important to our lives- it is just a societal thought. Women are not completed until they get married and I do not believe in that...you know. They do not even know what we want in our lives and how we think reintegration should be.

Another co-researcher echoed her comments and added:

I agree... I do not want to live with my brothers and also the community that always discriminate me and blame on my own vulnerability. I rather prefer to stay on my own and do the

things that I want to do. If we make money and become rich I am sure they will come to us and treat us differently.

Conclusion

The implications of the study for social work practice are significant. There is a disconnect between the perceptions of the stakeholders and the reality of the co-researchers when it comes to the actual meaning and practical experience of “successful” reintegration. Programs available for survivors would be more supportive and effective if they helped survivors define their own aspirations and outcomes, and engage with them in the process of developing reintegration laws, policies and programs. The need for the development of reintegration laws and policies grounded in survivors’ experiences is of critical importance. It is also important to amend health policies to make the public health care system accessible to survivors, and provide free medication for HIV affected people in their reintegration.

This study suggests that reintegration is intertwined with multi-layered systems of social injustice and gender violence, and that solutions must take all these structural factors into account. The study proposes some specific practice-oriented recommendations for change, for instance, to focus on the aspirations of survivors while conducting assessments of survivors, and develop programs based on these aspirations, instead of simply focusing on the mandate of donors and NGOs is essential. Additionally, an integrative programs and services developed outside of patriarchal paradigms and an integrative rights-based approach instead of a victim-centered approach in programs and services for survivors’ “successful” reintegration are indispensable. Overall, this study reveals that a community-based collaborative study is needed to investigate the numerous under-researched areas affecting survivors, particularly those that require government, agencies, survivors, citizens, and academia to work together, and allow all the players to identify and critically understand issues of reintegration, develop strategies to address those issues and act collectively and collaboratively to address them. Most importantly, this process should involve and be led by the survivors themselves.

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