

# Gender bias and sex-trafficking in Indian society

*International Social Work*

2017, Vol. 60(4) 831–846

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0020872815580040

journals.sagepub.com/home/isw



**Nairruti Jani**

Florida Gulf Coast University, USA

**Thomas P Felke**

Florida Gulf Coast University, USA

## Abstract

Human trafficking is a growing crime in South Asia, particularly as economies move post-globalization. This mixed-method study explored several variables fueled by gender biases that create women's vulnerability to human trafficking. Qualitative results supported the quantitative data from the World Development Indicator's report that describe gross gender biases practiced in various South Asian countries. The most important findings reveal the current practices of gender bias, prostitution, and trafficking that are not recorded in the existing literature. A multi-dimensional regional practice model is proposed that could support female empowerment and international efforts to curb human trafficking in this region.

## Keywords

Gender inequalities, human trafficking, sex-trafficking, South Asia, women

India is one of the largest marketplaces for the sex-trade, like most other consumer goods. Extreme poverty, illiteracy, patriarchy, and political corruption provide a perfect environment for sex-trade. Despite being a source, a transit, and a destination for trafficking, not much attention is paid to widening gender gap that gives rise to trafficking in this region (US Department of State, 2007, 2009, 2011). This article provides substantial, newly emerging, cultural information on gender biases that exist in the Indian subcontinent and links it to the growing crime of human trafficking. The finding of this mixed-method study posits that there is a clear relationship between sex-trafficking and gender bias in South Asia. The quantitative analysis is based on World Development Indicators (WDI) and provides a macro-level understanding about gender biases in the area. The quantitative data are supported by a qualitative, phenomenological study of 42 participants from

---

## Corresponding author:

Thomas P Felke, Florida Gulf Coast University, 10501 FGCU Boulevard, South, Merwin Hall, Room 147, Fort Myers, FL 33965-6565, USA.

Email: [tfelke@fgcu.edu](mailto:tfelke@fgcu.edu)

India who were trafficked for sex-servitude. The widening gender gap in the South Asian region poses serious threats of increased levels of violence in this society that would curb a holistic socio-economic development. The authors contend there is a serious need for immediate intervention to reduce gender biases from economic, social, and political arena in South Asia to reduce trafficking and prostitution of girls for sex-slavery.

Studies indicate that gender bias is a significant contributor to sex-trade (Jani, 2009; Moussa, 2008). The dominance of the literature related to sexual trafficking makes it essential to include the potential impact of gender inequality as a 'push' factor for trafficking. However, gender bias is not a holistic construct. The term includes several variables. There is now a body of evidence that suggests women are more economically vulnerable in societies where gender bias is practiced (Agustín, 2003). In patriarchal societies, women are more likely to be affected by conflict and broader social and economic dislocation (O'Connor and Healy, 2006). The prospect of finding a job abroad, despite the level of trafficking risk, is thus likely to become more attractive (Travnickova, 2004). In many gender-unequal countries, women face significant legal and cultural barriers to mobility. In such societies, women are discouraged from traveling alone. Furthermore, a woman leaving the country unescorted by a male family member would violate the ethical norms of morality. Gender inequality is often higher in most parts of rural Indian society, with a woman's leaving home alone being stigmatized. While severely decreasing a woman's freedom and autonomy, restrictions on the movement of women lower the likelihood that they will migrate alone, thus at lesser risk of being trafficked (Anderson and Davidson, 2004). Hausner (2005) confirmed these arguments concerning women's mobility for work and its relationship with trafficking.

As per the United Nations (UN), the profile of trafficked women suggests that it is more educated, urban women who are already in the labor force that tends to be trafficked internationally (ActionAid, 2008). Countries with higher levels of gender inequality also have smaller shares of educated women participating in the urban labor force (Deb, 2013; International Trade Union Confederation, 2009; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). Thus, on one hand, education reduces chances of women's choice to migrate for sex-work; on the other hand, higher level of women's participation in the workforce also increases women's mobility, thus increasing the risk of trafficking (Jani, 2009). Based on the existing literature, it becomes necessary to explore gender bias in layers to explore at what level of bias girls or women would face risk of being trapped into sex-work or human trafficking.

## **Contextual background**

The extent of human trafficking is increasing significantly over the past decade in South Asia (British Broadcasting Company (BBC), 2005). India is the worst hit country with this epidemic where trafficking occurs at all levels. The Indian Ministry of Women and Child Welfare reported that currently there are 2.8 million sex-workers in India, and more than half of them are trafficked, with 35 percent of them entering the trade before the age of 18 years (Free the Slaves, 2005). India is not only a destination country for trafficking of girls and women from lesser-developed South Asian countries but also a source and transit country for women and girls who are trafficked abroad. India is one of the largest players in the world's trafficking industry, harboring in-country trafficking as well as trafficking across international boundaries (US Department of State, 2007). Another quantitative study used the UN cross-country dataset to evaluate the determinants of trafficking origin (Rao and Presenti, 2012).

Past research conducted on the South Asian population with regard to trafficking revealed that a majority of the victims of sex-trafficking are young women who are less educated and from poor socio-economic backgrounds (ACHR, 2003; Esther Benjamins Trust, 2003; United Nations

Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2003). The only reasons widely explained in the literature include their sexual attractiveness or labor power (Esther Benjamins Trust, 2003).

## Patterns of trafficking within India

Trafficking within the boundaries of a nation is the predominant form of trafficking in South Asian countries. Although there are fewer empirical studies on this subject, some data are available through news reports that can describe the various patterns of trafficking and prostitution in India. Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh are the high-supply zones for women in prostitution in India. Belgaum, Bijapur, and Kolhapur are some common districts from which women migrate to cities either through an organized trafficking network or due to socio-economic forces (Menon, 1998).

In South India, there are many *dhabhas* (small-scale eating establishments), along the Solapur–Hyderabad highway, which provide women as an ‘additional service’ to truck drivers and travelers. The girls are brought from rural areas. Through threats, beatings, and other harassment, they are forced to service local farmers and police. As found by Menon (1998), the police do not register any complaints of these assaults. In Chennai, Tamil Nadu, an ethnographic study was conducted to map the areas of prostitution for streamlining strategies for HIV prevention among commercial sex-workers in the city (Kannan, 2002). In all, 17 mobile brothels employing 6300 women and staffed by cell-phone toting operators were located. In the eastern parts of India, Calcutta is the hub of prostitution employing over 10,000 prostitutes in the red-light district of Sonagachi. While girls from poorer Indian villages work as prostitutes, the girls brought from Bangladesh are often trafficked through gangs and work under pimps as call girls (Gayen et al., 2004). In Northern India, the engagement of women in prostitution with familial consent is widespread among some of the erstwhile nomadic groups, such as the Bedia, Nat, Sansi, Kanjar, and Bachada. Women born into a Bedia family remain unmarried as they engage in prostitution in order to provide for the economic needs of their biological family, a practice that extends over many generations (Agrawal, 2008).

In Goa, a famous tourist destination in West India, around 2000 girls are engaged in prostitution along the Baina beach (Mohajan, 2012). Selling under-aged girls brings significant income in Goa (Menon, 1998). Mumbai is the epicenter of prostitution in the Western states of India. In the red-light districts of Mumbai, there are over 70,000 prostitutes servicing an average of six customers per day for US\$2 each (Friedman, 1996). Around 60 percent of commercial sex-workers in Bombay's red-light districts are infected with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and AIDS (Coalition against Trafficking in Women (CATW), 2004). Trafficking structures operate at various levels in the bordering districts of Maharashtra and Karnataka, known as the *Devadasi Belt*. Many of the *devadasis*, dedicated into prostitution by the family on the name of goddess *Yellamma*, are found in the brothels and dance bars of India (Menon, 1998).

While the patterns of trafficking are different across South Asia, even within each country, the literature suggests that the primary reason behind women's entry into prostitution, whether willingly or unwillingly, is often a result of poverty and gender bias (Jani, 2009).

## Theoretical framework

India's socio-economic fabric has changed significantly post-globalization and privatization (Jani, 2009; Norohna, 2003). It is becoming difficult in Indian society with a single income to sustain a family that includes children and older adults. In recent years, more women have been required to join the workforce. This is a sign of a progressive society; however, gender equality has yet to be

realized. If anything, the condition of women has become worse with the changing demands of Indian society.

The term 'feminization of the workforce' refers to the sudden increase in women's labor force participation in industrial settings from agriculture (Boserup, 1970). The term is ambiguous in the Indian situation where women are used as temporary replacements of male counterparts, though, for little money. The globalized competitive culture of industries in developing countries forces employers to substitute men's labor with cheap labor offered by females who have been kept away from the employment sector for generations (Standing, 1989). Advances in technological innovation have led to a global trend to reduce reliance on full-time wage and salary workers who earn fixed wages and various fringe benefits. Women are considered a 'reserve labor force' that can easily be hired and fired (Elson and Pearson, 1997). This practice works well in societies with socially constructed myths of 'male breadwinner' and 'female caregiver' roles (Lim, 1997).

In countries like India, where social security does not exist, multi-national companies often implement such a 'hire and fire' policy. With absolute job insecurity, uneducated women who migrate in search of work are left with little to survive on but their bodies, which serve as wealth in those desperate months and years without employment. Most feminist scholars and economists view this as an inevitable economic consequence in developing parts of the world (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Lim, 1985; Razavi, 2002). However, the real issue is not just the question of women's rights to equal employment. In order to compete in globalized markets, the social norms of men being the breadwinners and women raising children at home are changing. More and more women are expected to join the workforce. Jobs are predominantly available in bigger cities where industries are located. These factors combine to create a vulnerable situation, one very conducive for traffickers to exploit. The model that resulted from data analysis in this study suggests a new approach to women's empowerment, which is required to reduce the trafficking of girls and women in South Asia.

## **Site location**

Trafficking and sex-slavery are rampant in South Asian countries. Bangladesh and Nepal are the key sources of trafficking in South Asia and India is the largest market (Huda, 2006). Approximately 200,000–250,000 women and girls from Nepal are currently in Indian brothels. According to Wadhwa (1998),

The girls are sold by poor parents, tricked into fraudulent marriages, or promised employment in towns only to find themselves in India's brothels. They are locked up for days, starved, beaten, and burned with cigarettes until they learn how to service up to 25 clients a day. Some girls go through 'training' before being initiated into prostitution, which can include constant exposure to pornographic films, tutorials in how to 'please' customers, and repeated rapes. (For Sale: Childhood, paragraph 7)

It is estimated that approximately 45,000 Nepalese girls arrive in the brothels of Bombay and 40,000 in brothels of Calcutta every year (PRDA, 1995). In Bombay, children as young as 9 years old are bought for US\$1200 at auctions where Arabs bid against Indian men (Friedman, 1996). There are around 1 million Bangladeshi and more than 200,000 Burmese women trafficked to Karachi, Pakistan (Chakraborty, 2006). More than 19,000 Pakistani children have been trafficked to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Sinha, 2006). Approximately 10,000–12,000 girls from rural areas of Bangladesh are trafficked and prostituted to pedophiles abroad by organized crime groups (Bedi, 1997).

## Methods

This article employs a distinctive research approach that allows the researcher a comparative platform for analyzing national quantitative data alongside qualitative indicators on the topic of research. On subjects like human trafficking or sex-trade, quantitative research is difficult to find and the validity of data is questionable. Similarly, finding qualitative data on these subjects is equally difficult because victims of trafficking are unlikely to be located for a research study. In addition, reliability of data can be a concern in qualitative methodology. For this study, a multi-strategy approach becomes useful in explaining the relationship between gender biases and sex-trade in India (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003).

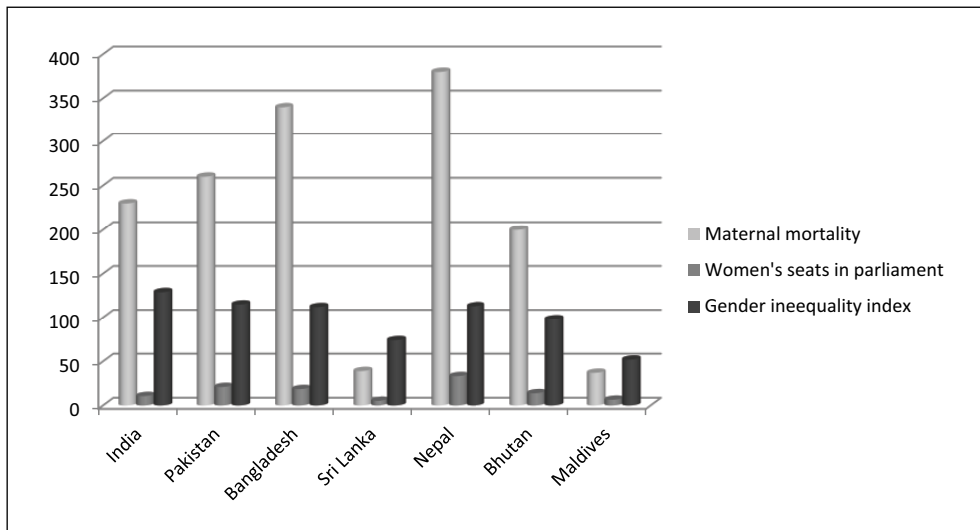
Based on the existing literature, it was clear that in the South Asian region, India was the worst country in terms of destination, transit, and source as it relates to trafficking. Thus, India was chosen as the target location for this study. To narrow the focus, service providers were contacted from Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, and Calcutta in India to determine an appropriate research site. During this process, the primary researcher was informed that rural Rajasthan is becoming a prime source for trafficking of inexperienced, rural women while urban Gujarat had a very high number of urban sex-workers who were HIV positive. Most routes and models of trafficking have been explored in the trafficking literature from India. However, it was difficult to find evidence-based research on this issue from the two states of Gujarat and Rajasthan that were chosen as site locations for this study. In addition, the primary researcher's familiarity with language and culture in these states was a determining factor in choice of site locations where the qualitative study was conducted. The primary researcher sought and received approval from their academic entity's institutional review board for an observational study.

### *Qualitative methods*

In order to derive a mixed-method analysis, a qualitative analysis was first conducted observing phenomenological interviews with rescued victims of trafficking in India. The Canadian Aid Agency and the Women's Collective, organizations working with trafficked women and women engaged in prostitution in India, were contacted. Snowball sampling was used by agency staff to recruit women who were a part of the HIV/AIDS service initiative. Verbal consent was obtained from each interviewee. The researcher observed the interviews conducted in the agency. In order to maintain anonymity of data, participant names have been changed. Agency staff that worked with victims of trafficking were provided an interview guide and trained on phenomenology. The staff from these agencies added questions related to the interview guide in their interviews with participants. The average time for each interview was 1.5 hours. The running themes observed from the qualitative data provided new indicators of gender biases, which are not a part of the quantitative construct that define gender biases in South Asia in the WDI's report (World Bank, 2010).

### *Quantitative methods*

Data were obtained from the World Bank's (2010) WDI dataset. The term 'gender bias' remains a construct in the literature with multiple interpretations, and there are fewer quantitative studies available that can allow scientific investigations on this construct. The strength of this study is that it builds on available scientific evidence in order to advance knowledge base. The World Development Report has identified variables that are classified as 'Gender Bias' indicators. Data on each variable are collected from several countries. For this research, 33 variables were selected

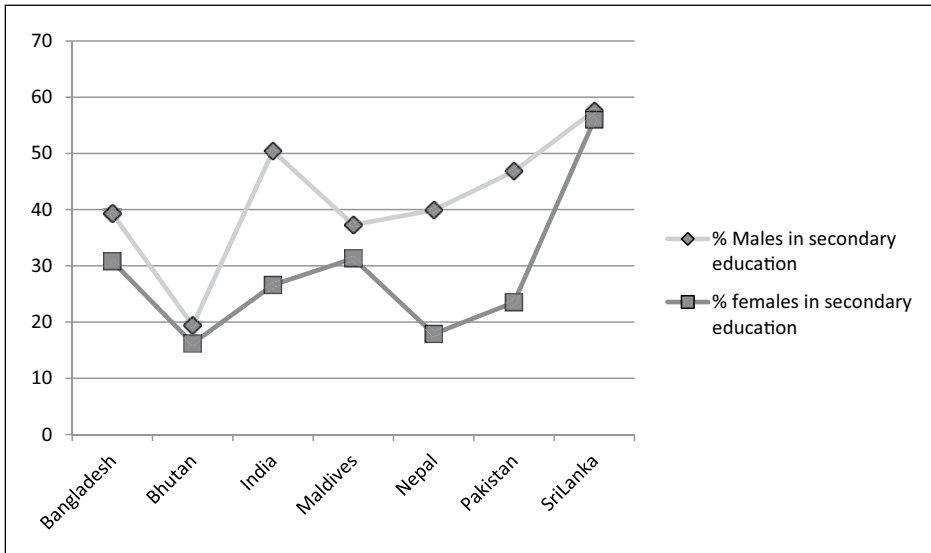


**Figure 1.** Gender inequality indicators by country.

on five indicators of gender biases. Secondary dataset described data on individual South Asian countries. Indicators for this study included poverty, prevalence of HIV, labor force participation, and maternal mortality. These data provided a basis for constituting the construct of gender bias in this study to compare against the results of the qualitative findings. These data were later compared with narrative data collected via interviews on the five indicators of gender biases. While this methodology does not fit the strict definition of ‘mixed-method’ studies as typically applied in social work literature, deriving meaning from existing quantitative datasets and qualitatively analyzing the depths of individual indicators are not uncommon to other social science disciplines such as cultural anthropology and sociology.

**Macro findings.** The two prime source countries of trafficking are Nepal and Bangladesh. It is from here that girls are brought to India and later sent to Pakistan. In both Nepal and Bangladesh, maternal mortality is very high. On the other hand, Nepal has relatively more seats for women in the parliament. However, the kingdom until recently did not allow much political power to politically appointed representatives. As per the WDI, India ranks highest in gender inequalities, followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh. Overall, Maldives and Sri Lanka revealed lesser gender inequality compared to other South Asian countries where human trafficking is rampant (Figure 1).

Gender inequalities persist across South Asia. Sri Lanka is relatively progressive when it comes to gender inequalities. The patriarchal system in some South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, coupled with poverty and limited resources, has resulted in clear distribution of gender roles. Men are expected to be the main source of income with women staying at home and raising the family. However, with the fast-paced globalization, concentrated urban development and increasing inflation have posed several challenges to this traditional system. In the last two decades, more women have joined the workforce to support their families, as the income of men is not sufficient for the family. However, the rate of education among girls remains low (Jani, 2009). Figure 2 shows the ratio of boys and girls who attend secondary school. Nepal and India have the highest level of inequality followed by Pakistan. It is evident from the literature (Jani, 2009; Skeldon, 2002) that trafficking is higher from countries where fewer women attend secondary school as compared to those where there is more equality in educating boys and girls.



**Figure 2.** Participation in secondary education by gender (World Bank, 2010).

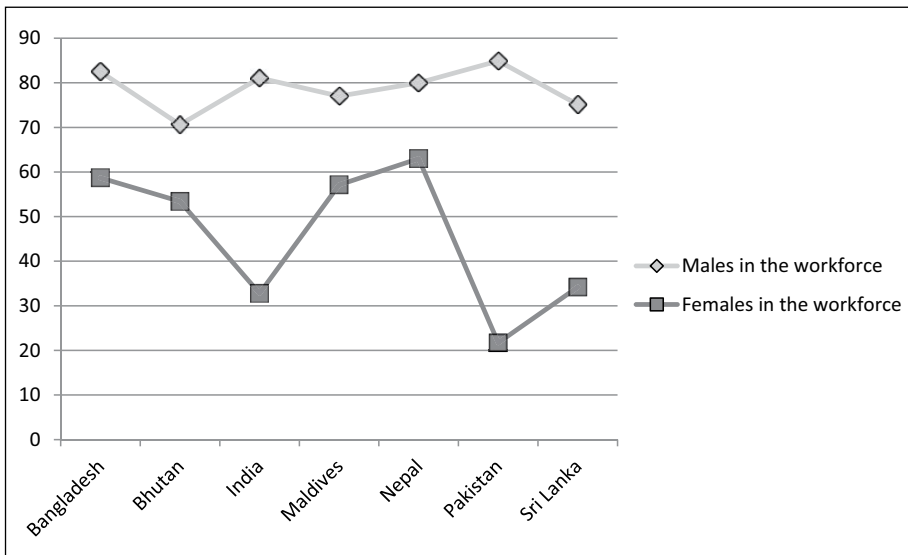
Similarly, as the chart (Figure 3) shows, there is significant inequality based on the gender ratio involved in the workforce. In terms of females to males employed in the workforce, Pakistan has the highest inequality followed by Sri Lanka and India.

With lesser education, there are fewer job opportunities. As a result, women have less opportunity in the competitive job markets of South Asia.

*Qualitative exploration.* Based on existing data, it is clear that gender biases exist in most parts of South Asia. In order to understand whether gender biases had any impact on trafficking of girls for sexual servitude, a qualitative study was conducted. The qualitative data were also collected for the purpose of triangulating the quantitative data. Interviews with 42 women who were trafficked to Gujarat and Rajasthan, India, from different parts of South Asia were observed. The guiding questions were divided into three categories according to the primary types of gender biases: in-family, social, and political. Questions were asked based on the flow of every interview. Often, more questions emerged from the stories shared by every participant.

**Data analysis**

Demographic data of the interviewees were available from the agency staff records. Descriptive statistics were calculated on this information which was anonymously available and the results are shown in the next section. The primary researcher first reviewed the 42 interview transcripts. Another expert from the field who taught gender studies at a university in Rajasthan reviewed the same transcripts. The primary theme of gender biases and its impact on human trafficking were classified into several categories from the transcripts. The themes emerging from the two reviews were discussed in a focus group with the interviewers. The themes derived by both experts were then compared and organized under the following three categories: gender biases at family level, societal gender biases, and political gender biases. The recurring themes that did not fit in the three categories were reported as important themes. The information was analyzed using NVivo in order



**Figure 3.** Participation in the labor force by gender (World Bank, 2010).

to develop a model that related gender biases with possibility of human trafficking. Finally, the qualitative themes were manually compared with the WDI data to see whether any of the indicators were supported.

## Results

In total, 42 interviews were observed. From those, 36 interviews were of women engaged in sex-work at the time of data collection. The average age when participants were trafficked ranged from 12 to 26 years. The average education level ranged between illiterate and metric (10th grade). The age range of participants was 18–46 years. In terms of religious affiliation, 27 percent of the total participants followed Islam, 51 percent followed Hinduism, 3 percent followed Christianity, and others said they did not believe in god and had no religious identity. Approximately 64 percent of participants reported belonging to schedule castes in their own state of origin. For 86 percent of participants, trafficking was a result of economic necessities that compelled them to migrate for work. Of the respondents, 31 were first trafficked to Gujarat and Rajasthan, while the other 11 were originally trafficked to Maharashtra, West Bengal, Bangladesh, Nepal, Andhra Pradesh, or Bihar. At some point, 14 percent of the respondents were trafficked internationally, with 98 percent brought to cities for sex-slavery from smaller towns and villages. Over 60 percent of respondents were HIV positive and did not have money for treatment. Thematic analysis of transcripts on each sub-category reflecting gender bias is presented below.

### *Gender biases in family*

Based on the data collected, gender biases exist in 100 percent of the families where participants were born and raised before being trafficked. An analysis of the interview transcripts provided seven different types of biases that existed in families. Within these biases, eight themes emerged. Six of these were found to be significant in terms of their strength in supporting the biases. These six were education, right to speak, trust, access to healthcare, employment, and income.

Gender bias in education in South Asian countries was supported by 93 percent of the total respondents who explained that the parents discriminate against girls in the family. Boys are educated whereas girls who wish to go to school are discouraged. It is clear that less-educated girls are sourced for sexual slavery. Some of the transcripts explained different scenarios why girls are not educated in their families.

One of the respondents, Leila (pseudonym), said,

No women in my family are educated. People laugh if any girl wants to go to school. Not just in my family but the entire community. Once when I was young and I told my mother about going with my brother to school, they all laughed over it for several days.

Similarly, another respondent Meena (pseudonym) said,

I did not realize that my family will cut my education even after being the best student in my class. I was very good in maths and science. I wanted to be a doctor. But, my parents said that they did not have money to send me [to] the neighboring town for college. They were too eager to get me married.

Another respondent, Seema (pseudonym), provided a reason why her family discriminated:

I overheard my parents discussing that they will get a lot of money if they got me married. My father was keen on getting me married as he was going to get 10,000 rupees as bride price. I was then in 6th grade. My mother said to my father that I wanted to study. But, he replied saying opportunity of gaining 10,000 for a useless daughter is not common to come by. I don't want to wait for another shameful experience (her older sister ran away with a boy of upper caste).

There is clearly a relationship between education, employment, and income. Two of the other important points where biases exist are in income and employment. Of the total respondents, 60 percent mentioned that 'girls in our families never work'. Of the total respondents, 12 explained that they were thrown in sex-trafficking due to economic hardships in family.

Zareen (pseudonym) said,

After he (her former husband) used me enough as a maid for nine years, he realized that there is no way but to send me to work. He never wanted me to work. But, he lost his job and someone had to work. Now, without education of any kind who would hire me! He told me to join the parlor and I just did anything they told me to in order to feed my family. I lived with my husband at that time.

Another respondent shared,

It is all two face hypocrisy. My father did not let me complete my school. But, he was okay to send me out to the city to work. It was not like he did not know that I will be used in the city. Several girls from my village die in the city. But all they care about is money.

Only 14 percent of responses supported the idea that a gap exists in the income of men and women. Most respondents were unaware of this fact as they had not worked in formal settings. However, even in the informal sector, men are paid higher wages as maids and cooks than women.

Shivani (pseudonym) said,

I worked at their house for six years. The seth slept with me so many times threatening me. But, even then I was paid just 150 rupees a month and [the male servant there] was paid 250 rupees for gharkam (same type of work).

Rosy (pseudonym) said,

I worked as a dental assistant for two years. I am not sure if it was just me or all girls but the other dental assistant with me was paid more than me.

Over 80 percent of the respondents mentioned that they had no right to speak in any family matter including their own marriages or travel for work. All of these decisions were made by the family elders. Some of their statements were 'We just could not speak', 'Who would ask a girl what she wants to do', 'Speaking was just not allowed. If I spoke, they would think I am shameless. I had to be obedient'. One of the respondents said that she had opposed her travel for work and she was beaten as a result:

I was too young at that time. I did not understand where that uncle was going to take me. I just did not want to leave my friends in the village. So, I cried and begged to my parents for not sending me to the city to work as a maid. I was beaten up by a rope. I had to leave home ... I had decided that I would never go back to my parents.

The findings from this research show that parents or families controlled the lives of girls in this study. It was repeated by respondents that parents and husbands did not trust women in the family and their decision-making capacity.

Jinu (pseudonym) said that she was trafficked by her husband who sold her to a pimp:

I don't trust you. You are a bitch. I am sure you slept with my brother. You have no right to stay in this house. Now, go with Chandu and sleep with everyone – just everyone. I can't afford you anymore.

Similarly, Parul (pseudonym) explained that her parents were worried about giving a dowry on her wedding and did not trust that she could have a career like her brothers:

They just don't trust girls. When my brother said that he wanted to go to Mumbai and study, it was okay. When I just wanted to go to the college in my own town, they were angry. My father said to me that he could either afford to pay for my dowry or for my tuition. But, even if I told him to pay for my tuition, he was never going to listen to me. I knew that.

Although a universal healthcare system exists in India, interviewees noted that biases also exist in this system:

I was married for seven years. I was [forcibly] aborted five times from those seven years because of having a girl child. I always thought that I was losing the child because of weakness. Only when my mother in law sold me to the family brothel [a brothel run by an aunt in her family] I was told that she did not want a girl in her family. Since my mother had all girls I was going to have all girls too. That is what my mother in law thought. So after five abortions [without my knowledge] I was useless to his family. He got rid of me by making me a prostitute and remarried.

Another respondent Shruti (pseudonym) said,

I cried for days to have my child. But, no one listened. My in-laws took me to a clinic. The doctor gave me the injection and I lost my child. My shameless husband later told me that if I gave birth he would not be able to prostitute me. Who will earn then? So, I had my body but no control over my body.

## *Societal biases*

Over 80 percent of the participants in this study believed that girls are sold into trafficking as a result of social customs and traditions. Dowry, female feticide, bride price, and selling daughters are some common social customs noted in the existing literature (ActionAid, 2008; Friedman, 1996; Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1996). All of these were commonly running themes in the interviews. However, some of the social customs that were revealed as resulting in trafficking of girls in South Asia also included customary prostitution, family brothels, and wife selling.

In parts of Rajasthan, there are villages where daughters are born only to be sold. Two of the respondents belonged to this community:

Men in our community do not work. Women work. Girls are produced for prostitution.

Some have 5, 6, 7, some have 14, 15 girls. They all are sent with Kants (Trafficking network) to the city to work. My mother prostituted till my youngest brother was born.

In Gujarat after the privatization of economy, several textile mills and other industries closed down. These industries attracted millions of migrant workers who were skilled labor and less educated. Without any options for livelihood, a new tradition emerged where a family with a flat/*chawl* will run a brothel and prostitute women of their family. The girls born in these families are also prostituted:

Are you shocked? You may not have known but in my family my father pimped my mother and me. Everyone knows this. It is very common. Some men in the community run these brothels and we are passed from one family to another for one or two weeks.

Another social custom that gives rise to trafficking is wife buying:

In our villages, men marry several times. They are lucky. Like my husband, my father paid him a house in dowry. He married twice after me and got dowry. Now he is old and he has a bad reputation, so with all the dowry money he buys girls from Bihar, Orissa and those places. His current wife is from Orissa. Does not even speak our language. He will use her and sell her also.

In parts of India and Bangladesh, selling the bride has become a custom. After marriage, the girls are made to prostitute by the husband to the older family members in his family. Then, these older members are blackmailed to pay a lot of money to keep the secret and not exposing their relationship with the newly wedded bride in the family. If the older members refuse to pay blackmail price, the girls are exposed and shamed. They are then forced to leave their home resulting in fewer options:

My husband said that nothing will happen. He is just an uncle. I was too young. Women don't speak against the husband in our families. So, I slept with his uncle. I cried a lot ... for days after that. I cried on my husband's shoulders. But, I did not know that he was paid for it ... After one year or so when that uncle said in a family gathering that I was a prostitute and I was making thousands of rupees by blackmailing him, my husband started blaming me. The entire community boycotted me. I had to leave home.

The South Asian society is shifting. New societal customs are fabricated due to changing economic factors such as globalization, privatization, and a move from an agrarian economy to an

urban industrial economy. Gender biases and strict social norms that perceive women as a matter of pride and possession have given rise to newer models of unwilling prostitution because of subjugation and lack of options for women. The existing laws are designed to prevent the prevailing gender biases for years and the newer models of trafficking or prostitution are developing new social norms within families that impair a woman's access to legal services.

### *Political biases*

Biases in the political arena were explored as part of this study. It was realized that the responses were lower on this aspect of biases. However, a lack of political awareness among women may be the cause of many responses to be 'I don't know'. Of the 58 percent who responded to the question about political representation of women, 56 percent thought that women had no political representation. The remainder responded that women had lesser representation in the political system. As an example, one noted,

The *khap* is made up of older adults from our village. They are all men.

When asked about a woman *Sarpanch* (leader in the community), most women laughed. One of the respondents was surprised asking, 'Can women be *Sarpanch*? I did not know that'. From those who knew about women's political leadership, one respondent said,

My fufi(aunt) was the Sarpanch when I was young. But it was only to say. My uncle was the real Sarpanch. But, under the yojana (government scheme) my aunt's name was written as Sarpanch.

This reveals that while there is political representation of women in parts of village Panchayats, social discrimination against women does not allow them to be decision makers.

When asked about political biases, some of the respondents talked about their experience as sex-slaves with law and order. One of the respondents, Rubeena (pseudonym), said,

Police and journalists use us the most. They are the [expletive] who rape us day and night and not even pay for it.

Another respondent narrated how she was exploited by the police when asked whether she ever thought of reporting about her sex-slavery to the police:

I have been selling my body for the past thirty years. When I was sold in this market, some of my first customers were policemen. They are the worst. I have served all. Politicians, lawyers, doctors, police.

Another respondent said,

I can't trust anyone. Last month I was all over the news on local news channel. A journalist came through the trafficker, had sex with me, did not pay the trafficker and I was beaten up really bad for that. He exposed me without clothes on the TV and it was just shameful. I don't trust anybody. We are exploited by everyone in society and they call us 'call girls!'.

### **Validity and reliability**

The purpose of this study was to explore whether gender biases exist in current South Asian society and, if they do, how they are related to increasing number of women being trafficked from these

countries (US Department of State, 2011). The qualitative analysis was performed based on WDI dataset made available by the World Bank in 2010. The large number of responses provides reliability to the data obtained. Data collection on gender bias indicators has been conducted using validity-tested instruments (World Bank, 2010). The primary data were collected qualitatively in agency and were observed by the researchers to explore the depth of constructs that indicated gender bias in the WDI dataset. Content validity was maintained in the qualitative analysis and inter-rater reliability methods were practiced while analyzing the qualitative data. The results of this qualitative study explain the existing situation of South Asian women's vulnerability to trafficking. The limitation of these data is that they are not generalizable.

## **Conclusion**

In a South Asian context, it is difficult to separate prostitution from trafficking (Jani, 2009). Prostitution is a strong taboo in conservative cultures with women who are engaged in prostitution being controlled by someone else. From this perspective, it is nothing more than a form of trafficking. In South Asia, gender biases begin with the birth of a girl child. Starting with aborting girls in the womb, there are biases that do not allow the basic rights of education, healthcare, or speech to women. Due to this patriarchal social system, women are subjugated and oppressed within the family, community, and society at large. These factors create vulnerability that leaves women with fewer options, if any. As a result, women have been bought and sold. The hypocritical cultures still retain strong taboos concerning women's character and shame those who are forced into prostitution. Women from lesser-developed areas of South Asia have no political representation, reinforcing the patriarchal societal norms. Politicians, lawyers, and police, which are entities that should protect the rights of women, have exploited trafficked and prostituted women. It is clear from the demographic analysis that places in South Asia that are source areas where traffickers find girls are also where gender biases are highest. Nepal, Bangladesh, and rural parts of India and Pakistan are the primary source regions from where women are trafficked. Family-based prostitution also results in trafficking girls of the family to unknown parties who buy and sell women for sex.

### *Model to prevent trafficking of girls from South Asia*

Based on the results of this study, a multi-dimensional approach has been developed to curb the trafficking of young girls who are coerced, lured, and sold from South Asian countries (Figure 4).

In recent years, the global South has been forced to match the pace of Western industrial societies. Post-globalization, South Asian countries have followed a centralized development model. To compete in global markets, women are increasingly required to migrate for work and join the labor force (Hossain et al., 2005). A long-term multi-dimensional approach to reducing trafficking from South Asia requires decentralized development and creation of employment as well as educational opportunities in all parts of this region. Coming out of the taboo on sex education from conservative belts of South Asia, a long-term woman's health awareness and human trafficking awareness program should be made available to girls and women living in cities, small towns, and slums, rural, and tribal areas. Regular monitoring and evaluation of these programs should include data on the number of girls trafficked periodically from each section of South Asia from where girls are currently sourced.

### *Implications for international social work*

The international community has been very active in attempting to eradicate human trafficking globally. However, this mission is difficult to establish without understanding the regional and



**Figure 4.** Model for women's development to reduce trafficking in South Asia.

cultural factors that hamper these efforts. The widening gaps between males and females could potentially lead to increased trafficking and prostitution in South Asian region. Economics of demand and supply makes it clear that, with gender imbalance, the crime of trafficking will thrive. Similarly, the pillars of development rest on education and willful dignified employability.

Along with Japan and China, India is the third largest consumer market in Asia (OECD, 2012). However, strong biases in this region are hampering overall growth by forcing women out of the organized labor force. Equal education for women has the potential of bringing more awareness and political power to women in this region who can be harbingers of change. While the commoditization of women in India dates back to the pre-colonial era, changing global competition and economic realities as well as newly emerging family norms are creating an unsafe environment for women from the time they are born. Changing the social development models, introducing fast track focused development planning, and targeting gender biases from all three perspectives are essential to prevent an increase in violence against women from South Asia. Local-level awareness and educational efforts by social work organizations are a dire need at this time to reduce the fast growing industry of sex-slavery in South Asia.

### Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### References

- ActionAid (2008) 'Migration and Policies of the Asia-Pacific on Migration-Situation and Impacts on Poverty Reduction in Southern Countries', Report no. 54. Dhaka, Bangladesh: ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB).
- Agrawal, A. (2008) *Chaste Wives and Prostitute Sisters – Patriarchy and Prostitution among the Bedias of India*. New Delhi, India: Routledge.
- Agustín, L. (2003) 'Sex Gender and Migrations: Facing Up to Ambiguous Realities', *Soundings* 23: 84–98.

- Anderson, B. and J. Davidson (2004) 'Trafficking: A Demand Led Problem? Part I: A Review of Evidence and Debates', Available online at: [http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/anderson\\_o\\_connel\\_davidson\\_2004\\_trafficking\\_a\\_demand\\_led\\_p\\_1.pdf](http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/anderson_o_connel_davidson_2004_trafficking_a_demand_led_p_1.pdf) (accessed 12 December 2011).
- Bedi, R. (1997) 'Bid to Protect Children as Sex Tourism Spreads', *London's Daily Telegraph*, 23 August. Available online at: <http://www.oocities.org/tokyo/5342/INDCHILD.HTML>
- Boserup, E. (1970) *Women's Role in Economic Development*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- British Broadcasting Company (BBC) (2005) 'India State Bans Dancing Bars', Available online at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/4706295.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/4706295.stm) (accessed 12 December 2011).
- Coalition against Trafficking in Women (CATW) (2004) 'Coalition Report 2003', Report, CATW, New York, February.
- Deb, N. (2013) 'A Study of Global Human Trafficking – A Menace in the Way of Woman Empowerment', *International Journal of Social Science & Interdisciplinary Research* 2(1): 7–12.
- Elson, D. and R. Pearson (1981) 'Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers: An Analysis of Women's Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing', *Feminist Review* 7: 87–107.
- Elson, D. and R. Pearson (1997) 'The Subordination of Women and the Internationalization of Factory Production', in N. Visvanathan, L. Dugan, N. Wiegiersma and L. Nisnof (eds) *The Women Gender and Development Reader*, pp. 191–203. London: Zed Books.
- Esther Benjamins Trust (2003) 'A Report on the Use and Abuse of Children in Circuses in India', Available online at: [http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/the\\_esther\\_benjamins\\_trust\\_pdf](http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/the_esther_benjamins_trust_pdf) (accessed 12 December 2011).
- Free the Slaves (2005) 'Recovering Childhood: Combating Child Trafficking in Northern India', Available online at: [http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/free\\_the\\_slaves\\_2005\\_recovering\\_childhood\\_northern\\_india\\_051213.pdf](http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/free_the_slaves_2005_recovering_childhood_northern_india_051213.pdf) (accessed 12 December 2011).
- Friedman, R. (1996) 'India's Shame', *Nation* 262(14): 11–20.
- Gayen, S., D. Chowdhury, N. Saha and R. Debnath (2004) 'Durbar's (DMSC) Position on Trafficking and the Formation of Self Regulatory Board'. *15th International Conference on AIDS*, Bangkok, Thailand.
- Hausner, S. (2005) 'The Movement of Women: Migration Trafficking and Prostitution in the Context of Nepal's Armed Conflict', Report, Save the Children, Nepal, June.
- Hossain, I., A. Tahmina, M. Rahman and T. Uddin (2005) 'Rethinking the Approaches to Women Empowerment: Bangladesh Perspective', *Journal of Applied Science* 6(5): 1159–64.
- Huda, S. (2006) 'Sex Trafficking in South Asia', *International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics* 94(3): 374–381.
- International Trade Union Confederation (2009) *Gender (In)equality in the Labour Market: An Overview of Global Trends and Developments 2009*. Brussels. Available online at: [http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/GAP-09\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/GAP-09_EN.pdf)
- Jani, N. (2009) 'Exploring Vulnerability and Consent to Trafficking-Related Migration: A Study of South Asian Bar Dancers', Doctoral dissertation, Available online at: <https://uta-ir.tdl.org/uta-ir/handle/10106/2015>
- Kannan, R. (2002) 'Ethnographic Study for Awareness', *The Hindu*, 22 March. Available online at: <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2002/03/23/stories/2002032305560100.htm> (accessed 12 December 2011).
- Lim, L.Y.C. (1985) *Women Workers in Multinational Enterprises in Developing Countries*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.
- Lim, L. (1997) 'Capitalism Imperialism and Patriarchy: The Dilemma of Third-World Women Workers in Multinational Factories', in N. Visvanathan, L. Dugan, L. Nisnof and N. Wiegiersma (eds) *The Women Gender and Development Reader*, pp. 216–29. London: Zed Books.
- Menon, M. (1998) 'Women in India's Trafficking Belt', Available online at: <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/52a/062.html> (accessed 12 December 2011).
- Mohajan, K. (2012) 'Human Trafficking in Asia: A Heinous Crime against Humanities', *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Studies* 2(1): 29–41.
- Moussa, G. (2008) 'Gender Aspects of Human Security', *International Social Science Journal* 59(1): 81–100.

- Norohna, E. (2003) 'Globalisation: The Impact on Port and Dock Workers in India', *Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 46(4): 611–21.
- O'Connor, M. and G. Healy (2006) *The Links Between Prostitution and Sex Trafficking: A Briefing Handbook*. Stockholm: Joint CATW-EWL Publication.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012) 'Gender Equality in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship', Report, Ministerial Council Meeting, Paris, May.
- Policy Research for Development Alternatives (PRDA) (1995) *Trafficking in Women and Children: The Case of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Narigrantha Prabartana, pp. 7–46.
- Rao, S. and C. Presenti (2012) 'An Empirical Analysis of the Determinants of Human Trafficking', *Feminist Economics* 18(2): 231–63.
- Razavi, S. (2002) *Shifting Burdens: Gender and Agrarian Change Under Neoliberalism*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Sinha, I. (2006) 'Paper on Globalization & Human Rights', Report, SANLAAP, India, May.
- Skeldon, R. (2002) 'Trafficking: A Perspective from Asia', *International Migration* 38(3): 7–30.
- Standing, G. (1989) 'Global Feminization Through Flexible Labour', *World Development* 17(7): 1077–95.
- Tashakkori, A. and C. Teddlie (2003) *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Travnickova, I. (2004) *Trafficking in Women: The Czech Republic Perspective*. Prague: Institute of Criminology and Social Prevention.
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2003) 'End Child Exploitation: Stop the Traffic!', Available online at: <http://www.childcentre.info/projects/traffickin/uktraffickingreportfinal.pdf> (accessed 12 December 2011).
- US Department of State (2007) 'Trafficking in Persons Report 2007', Report, United States Department of State, Washington, DC, June.
- US Department of State (2009) 'Trafficking in Persons Report 2009', Report, United States Department of State, Washington, DC, June.
- US Department of State (2011) 'Trafficking in Persons Report 2011', Report, United States Department of State, Washington, DC, June.
- Wadhwa, S. (1998) 'For Sale: Childhood', *Outlook India*, 23 February. Available online at: <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?205123> (accessed 12 December 2011).
- World Bank (2010) 'World Development Indicators Databank [Data file]', Available online at: <http://data.worldbank.org> (accessed 15 December 2011).

### Author biographies

Nairruti Jani is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Work at Florida Gulf Coast University. Dr. Jani specializes her research and teaching in international social work. Her specific research contributions are in the fields human trafficking, human rights, education, and disaster mitigation.

Thomas P. Felke is the BSW Program Coordinator and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Work at Florida Gulf Coast University. He teaches primarily in the areas of social policy, research, and macro social work topics. Dr. Felke has previously conducted research on refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan.