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Extent of sexual coercion among young female migrant carpet and garment factory workers in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper explores sexual coercion of young female migrant workers in the carpet and garment factories in the Kathmandu Valley. Information is drawn from 12 in-depth case histories and a sample survey of 550 respondents aged 14-19 years. The survey found that one in ten young women had ever experienced sexual harassment or coercion in their lifetime. Perpetrators included co-workers, boyfriends, employers and relatives. In-depth interviews revealed that the inability of young working women to communicate effectively with their peers and sex partners, lack of self esteem, job insecurity and other socio-economic problems made them vulnerable to these abuses. The results suggest the need for a range of factory-based interventions.

Key words: sexual coercion, migrant workers, Nepal

Note

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Context

In Nepal, owing to poverty, unemployment and lack of educational opportunities in rural areas, migration of young people is very common, especially to cities in the Kathmandu valley. According to one estimate, around 200,000 young people (10-19 years) migrate to urban areas each year in Nepal (National Planning Commission, 1996). Most of the young people who migrate to the capital city obtain jobs in transportation, carpet and garment factories, brick factories, construction sites, and in the service sector. These young migrants experience significant shifts in lifestyles, due to changes in their living arrangements and exposure to a wide range of new social networks, ideas, and behaviours. Particular concern has been expressed that carpet and garment factory workers, especially young women, are sexually exploited by employers and co-workers (FHI, 2001).

Migrants and displaced persons are often exposed to an increased risk of sexual coercion and associated reproductive health problems (UNAIDS, 2000; Geldstien and Pantelids, 2001; UNFPA, 2001; Paudel *et al.*, 2003). Evidence from several countries in the region demonstrates that migrants, especially girls, are victims of sexual coercion. For example, among young women working in an export zone in the Republic of Korea, nine percent reported that sexual debut had been forced by factory supervisors or colleagues (Brown *et al.*, 2001). In China, young migrant women working in carpet factories reported greater sexual freedom when they moved out from the family home but also experienced sexual coercion from their co-workers (Zheng *et al.*, 2001). In Bangladesh, garment workers are under great pressure to engage in sexual activity mainly as a result of the long hours that men and women spend together unsupervised by parents or guardians (Amin *et al.*, 1998). In Thailand, a study conducted among 1210 young factory workers aged 13-25 years documented early sexual experimentation and instances of coercion (Rugpao, 1997).

In 2001, the Centre for Research on Environment Health & Population Activities (CREHPA) –a non profit non-governmental organization - conducted a study on sexual behaviour and risk perception of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections among migrant workers in Nepal. In this study, an effort was made to assess the extent of sexual exploitation among these migrant workers.

No previous study on this topic has been undertaken in Nepal and thus the results represent a first step towards a more comprehensive understanding of sexual coercion among young migrant workers in Nepal. The programmatic implications for adequately addressing their sexual health needs, support and care are also highlighted.

Study methods and materials

The 2001 CREHPA study was conducted in the Kathmandu Valley. The Valley was chosen as the study site because 95 percent of the carpet and garment factories are located there. According to the most recent information, 1170 carpet and 195 garment factories operate in the Valley (CCIA, 1999; GAN, 2000). Both quantitative and qualitative research approaches were adopted. In the quantitative study, a sample survey was conducted in the form of face-to-face personal interviews using a structured questionnaire with young people (both married and unmarried) aged 14-19 years working in the carpet and garment factories. In the qualitative approach, 23 case histories were carried out.

For the survey, on grounds of cost and desired precision of estimates, it was decided to interview about 1000 young people. A two-stage sample design was used. At the first stage, 100 carpet and garment factories were randomly selected with equal probability from a list of all 1365 carpet and garment factories in the valley prepared by Employers Federations. At the second stage, a sampling frame or list of all the young boys and girls aged 14-19 years was prepared separately for each selected factory. The size of the sample for each selected factory was allocated using probability proportion to size (PPS). Finally, the required number of respondents from each factory were randomly selected for the individual interview.

Out of the 100 selected factories, 16 were found to be non-operational and 5 had no workers aged 14-19 years. As a result, the required sample were randomly selected from a sampling list of 921 boys and 643 girls aged 14-19 years working in 74 (52 carpets and 22 garments) factories.

A total of 23 in-depth case studies (11 boys and 12 girls) were purposively selected from among those who had reported high-risk behaviours (multiple partners, casual sexual relations), unwanted pregnancy, abortion, sexually transmitted infections, or coercive sex in order to further explore the context of these experiences.

A team of three male and three female interviewers conducted the individual interviews and the case histories. Interviewers were similar in age to the respondents, university graduates and experienced in conducting research on sensitive topics. They were given a one-week intensive training on sampling procedures, administration of structured questionnaires and in conducting case histories.

Fieldwork was conducted from January to March 2001. For quality control, the interviewers did not conduct more than three interviews in a day. During the case histories field notes were taken as often as possible. The expanding of field notes was done in the same day as the interview. Several visits were made while conducting case histories. The principal author of this paper closely supervised the interviewers in order to control the quality of their work. Spot checks and re-administration of selected questions were carried out for the selected respondents. Weekly meetings were held to discuss progress and problems faced in the actual fieldwork.

Interviews were often conducted outside the factory environment. None of the respondents selected for the study refused to give an interview. However, it was necessary for the research team to spend a considerable amount of time before interview to gain support from the factory owners and consent from the respondents.

Ethical approval from Nepal Health Research Council (the government's ethical clearance body) was obtained for conducting the study. Participants involved in case histories and sample survey were fully informed about the nature of the study, research objectives and confidentiality of the data. Participants' full verbal consent was obtained regarding their participation in the study.

The survey questionnaires were derived from adolescents' sexual behaviour questionnaire developed by World Health Organisation, Geneva, with modification to the local context (WHO, 2001). Most of the questions in the questionnaire were closed, although a few open-ended questions were also used. Topics covered in the instrument included employment

history, knowledge of reproductive and sexual health and sexual conduct. The following main questions were asked in the survey to measure the extent of sexual harassment and coercion.

- A. *“Young boys/girls are sometimes touched on the breast or some other parts of the body when they do not want it, by a stranger, relative or an older person. Has this ever happened to your friends?”*
- B. *“Young boys/girls are sometimes touched on the breast or some other parts of the body when they do not want it, by a stranger, relative or an older person. Has this ever happened to you?”*
- C. *“Young boys/girls are sometimes forced to have sexual intercourse against their will by a stranger, relative or an older person, teacher, owner etc. Has this ever happened to your friends?”*
- D. *“Young boys/girls are sometimes forced to have sexual intercourse against their will by a stranger, relative or an older person, teacher, owner etc. Has this ever happened to you?” IF YES “When did it happen?” “If yes, then please say who?”*

Respondents answering positively to questions B & D were defined as victims of sexual harassment. Those answering positively to question D constitute the cases of reported rape.

The circumstances of sexual debut were also investigated. Sexually experienced respondents were asked about the types of sexual activities, characteristics of sex partner, reasons of first sex, extra-marital sex and use of contraception.

In the case histories these topics were explored in much greater detail. A detailed topic guideline was prepared for case histories. The case histories were tape recorded, transcribed, and translated from Nepali to English for analysis. Analysis followed five key stages: familiarisation, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation were implemented in the process of analysis of case histories.

This paper utilises information obtained from the 550 young women interviewed in the sample survey and the 12 in-depth case studies with the young women who had reported coercive sex, high-risk behaviour, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancy or abortion. Young men were excluded from the analysis because very few instances of sexual coercion were reported. However, an analysis of the sexual behaviour of both young males of females can be found somewhere else (Puri and Busza, 2004)

Findings

Background characteristics of the survey participants

Among the young factory workers covered in the sample, 89 percent were migrants from 45 districts of the country and India. Their mean age was 17.1 years with a range from 14 to 19 years. Most of the respondents (71%) were unmarried with a low level of education. About half (47%) belonged to the Tamang ethnic group who are one of the most economically disadvantaged groups in the country. About 5 percent of the population in the country are Tamang and they are mostly concentrated in the hill zone, adjoining the Kathmandu Valley

(Central Bureau of Statistics, 1995). Although Tamangs speak their own dialect, the young Tamangs in the study also spoke Nepali. Two-thirds of the young female workers lived (68%) in mixed-sex hostels. The workers were usually kept within the factory in order to facilitate work for long hours and at any time. The accommodation for boys and girls was not sex segregated in the carpet factories neither was there any segregation of adults from teenagers. In most factory accommodations, the bathing space and toilets were shared by both sexes. It was observed that workers usually sleep in small dormitories of 5-15 people. Most of the workers are compelled to, or chose to, work late at night, giving opportunity for sexual exploitation.

About half of the respondents reported using some type of substance such as: tobacco, marijuana, injecting drugs, and alcohol. Their level of income was very low, averaging Nepalese Rupees 1952 (US \$ 25) per month which is considerably lower than the legal minimum wage in Kathmandu of US \$ 35 per month. About two-thirds of the respondents reported that they sent money to their homes. On average, they sent Rs.1232 (\$16) at a time, which is 69 percent of their total income. Regarding the frequency of sending money, around one-third of the respondents mentioned that they send money every month. One-quarter of them (25%) assisted their family financially by sending money once every 2-3 months. Negligible proportions of the young workers possessed a working contract letter for their job, an indication of the economic vulnerability of these workers.

Extent of sexual harassment

Over one-quarter of the girls (28%) reported that their friends had experiences of sexual harassment as defined by the questionnaire items described in the previous section. One in every nine girls (11%) reported that their friends had been victims of rape. One in ten girls (11%) reported personal experience of sexual harassment. Twelve out of 550 young females interviewed (2.2%) said that they had been raped at least once (Table 1).

(TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

Coercion takes place not only for sex but also to force girls to take alcohol or to watch pornographic movies. One in three sampled women was pressured to take alcohol by their co-workers. One in twenty was forced to watch pornographic films. One of the respondents who were forced to watch a pornographic film by the son of the factory owners described her experiences as follows:

"...Once the factory owner's youngest son had invited my friend and me to watch "Chhada film" (pornographic film) since no one was at home at that day. I didn't want to go but he and my friend forced me to go to his room and watch it. I can't say no to him because he is the son of factory owner"

-Urmila, 16 years old, married, 9 years of education

Socio-economic demographic and life-style correlates of sexual harassment were assessed. Only three significant factors were found. Young women who had seen pornographic films, who had used substance such as tobacco, marijuana, injecting drugs and those who had taken alcohol were more likely to report harassment than other women (Table 2).

(TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE)

Most coerced sex reported in this study were by individuals known to the study respondents contrary to the common perception of violent rape by a stranger in a dark place. In our sample, girls described the coercive and manipulative means that boys used to obtain sexual favours. These ranged from the more playful attempts to rush and “grasp girls’ breasts” whenever factory lights go out in a power cut, to violent rapes within the hostels.

Perpetrators

Co-workers (4 out of 12), boys from their villages (2 out of 12) and close relatives such as cousins or brothers-in-law (3 out of 12) had raped the girls in most of the cases. In two cases, their husband or boyfriend had raped them. In fact, only one respondent reported that a stranger had raped her. The following is an excerpt from a case history of a girl who had been raped twice in her life by co-workers.

“ We took a group picture with that boy. We had taken a normal photograph but later he changed it and developed it with (indicates with her hands) this big hug between us..... He said that I had to have sex with him or else he would disgrace me by sticking those pictures everywhere on the walls.... I was turning back and getting down the stairs, when he pulled me and made me sit. I asked him "what are you doing?" He said, "keep quiet, fulfil my desires". He raped me forcefully right down on the stairs...”

-Samu, 15 years old

“The boys and girls have to use the same toilet in the factory. One day he (Ramesh) met me outside the toilet at 7 o'clock in the evening. It was winter season so it was quite dark at that time. Then he caught my hand and said to me; Do you go to my room or not?. I said to him; No I will not go,... Then he said to me; Let's go behind the toilet just for once. ... Then he pulled me towards that place (behind the toilet) where nobody could see us and he had a sex with me out there forcefully”.

-Binda, 15 years old, two years of education

“I met him in Patan when I had gone to the mandir. His name is Rajan and he is from Biratnagar.....he works in another factory. He asked me to come with him to have something to eat. At first I said no but later when he persisted I went.... We had samosas and tea. He told me that he is staying with his friends. He took me to his friends room saying it'll take just a few minutes and that he wanted to introduce me to his friends. We went through a small alley and came to his friends' room. The door was locked; he got the key from below the flower pot and went in. He asked me to prepare a pot of tea. I was getting late but I made the tea...Then he asked me if I would give (sex) him once. He locked the door from inside and tried to have sex with me. I tried to escape from there but I could not. Finally, he did it to me”.

-Urmi, 16 years old, 10 years of education

Contrary to the common assumption that managers or owners of factories exploit young women, the case histories study revealed that such events are rare though by no means entirely absent. In some occasions, male employers (Thekedar) exploit their position of power over dependent female employees. Girls reported being forced to exchange sex for withheld wages, and boys openly admitted to taking advantages of the hierarchical management structures within the factories:

".....Thekedar (employer) won't pay unless sex is provided; he helped her out with job and shelter when previous partner turned violent.....At first I used to say no, but later I had to compromise as I have to live with them. The 'Thekedar' said I won't pay you unless you come to me....."

-Ani, 18 years old, illiterate

In the factory, if the employer or boys knew that a girl was raped or exploited sexually before then she is more likely to face sexual harassment. For example, one girl who had previously been raped said:

"...A boy named Raju from that factory said to me "come lets' have sex". I scolded him "Go and do it to your own mother and sisters". He said "you have already been used, do you think yourself virgin and untouched (Sati Sabitri). I wonder why he said that. Some times when I go to get wool the master (Supervisor) passes saying "the boil (breast) is ready to be squeezed"

-Indra, 19 years old, 5 years of education

Instances of rape were not confined to the Kathmandu Valley. Several young women reported coerced sex in their village before migrating to work in a factory. As in many societies, parents in Nepal attempt to strictly control girls' behaviour and limit opportunities for contact with boys out of fear that they will become involved in sexual behaviour and are put at risk of sexual exploitation. Despite attempts to impose restrictions, young girls encounter sexual coercion while they were working unaccompanied in the fields or nearby. Gathering fuel, tending crops, or grazing goats are among the routine agricultural tasks assigned to young women that may expose them to sexual risk. An 18-year-old unmarried girl (Bima) who was raped by a boy in the village narrates her story as follows:

"..... It happened to me two months ago, just before coming to Kathmandu..... I know him since my childhood. He used to tease my friends and me since I was very young. It happened in the jungle. As always, I was busy collecting fodder that day. I saw him standing in front of me. He first asked me for sex but I ignored him. Then he tried to persuade me but I did not agree with him...., however, I fought with him to escape, but I couldn't. I tried to hit him with the shackle but he snatched it and tore my clothes. Then he knocked me on the ground and gave a big slap on my cheek and did it to me.....I cried for a long time....."

Manju, a 16 years old girl with no formal education, unmarried who was raped by a boy from the neighbouring village while tending crops said:

"He was a guy from the other village. I knew him when I was 12or13 years old through my friends in the Manthali bazaar.....I was living with my sister, but she (sister) did not turn up... His sudden arrival scared me, however, I spoke to him in a friendly way.He said to me; 'Oh! Don't worry, your sister won't come.Today, I'll make you my wife. I threatened him 'If you touch me I'll tell my parents'. But he moved closed to me and caught

me very tightly. I fought to escape from the situation but I couldn't. I screamed! I cried! But there was no one to help me. He pulled off my clothes and tore them. (Looks very serious...) He also pulled off my pants. I was completely naked, however, I was still fighting to protect myself. I was trying to strike him with a bamboo stick and sickle but he snatched them as well. I was completely helpless. Then he knocked me on the floor and did it to me. ...”

In some cases men take advantage of girls' innocence. Another girl narrates her story:

When I was 12 years old I didn't know anything about the sexual matters..... One day I was playing on the way to his house on my own, he came and called me to his house and said, “ look! Your clothes are very old so I'll buy a new one for you” I just smiled and said nothing at that time. I was not aware of what he was going to do to me. Again he said to me, “I need measurement to buy clothes, take off your clothes, I will take the measurement”. But I hesitated to take off my clothes so he moved very close to me and took off my all the clothes. Then he started fondling my whole body. I could not say anything, I wanted to cry but I did not.and started doing it to me. It was hurting so I cried ...

-Ram Devi, 19 years old, two years of education

As with other matters pertaining to their bodies, most of the women in the study were largely ignorant about the detailed nature of sexual relations between men and women until their wedding night. Of the 62 women who had experienced sexual harassment or rape in their life, 37 (59%) reported that their husband was the perpetrator. One respondent described her experiences as follows:

“..... In the first night of our wedding, when my husband asked me to take off my clothes I was very embarrassed and scared I did not sleep with him for 2 or 3 nights. I did not even stay in the same room with him; I used to go out of the room whenever he came.... After few days he did it to me by forceI had no other way..... I could not make any sound or cry out because I was scared that my husband's brother would wake up..”

-Babita, 18 years old, married, illiterate

Another respondent narrates her story as follows:

“...The first night of our wedding, he did not sleep with me because I was scared and did not agree to go to bed with him. But on the second night he convinced me he said to me “We should have sex otherwise our relationship wouldn't be better”. He again said to me “After getting married everyone has sex, why don't you agree? I said to him “I am afraid”. Finally he did it to me. It was very painful”

Sometimes young women tried to resist unwanted sex by feigning menstruation or by physically resisting unwanted advances.

Respondents were asked to report on the consensual nature of their sexual debut. One in three (33.4%) sexually experienced young female factory workers reported that their first sexual intercourse was unwanted. Among married young women whose first sex partner was not a husband, one in five (21%) reported that the pressure from their partner was the reason for having sexual intercourse for the first time. Among the unmarried girls, although love was the

main reason cited for first sexual intercourse (46%), over one in four (28%) reported pressure from the partner as the main reason.

(TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE)

Reasons for possible under-reporting of sexual harassment or rape

Despite legal provision of 5-15 years imprisonment of the perpetrator, Nepalese girls who become victims of sexual harassment or rape rarely report incidents to anyone in authority because of the fear of being condemned by the family and by the community. The statement given by an 18-year-old girl further clarifies this.

"..... I did not scream. I cried quietly. I was scared of what my neighbour would think of me if they heard me....."

.....I did not tell this event to anybody. I thought if people heard about it, they would call me a slut. You know, villagers never understand such kind of circumstances, they just blame the girl".

Another respondent raped by her brother in law said:

.....I could not defend myself. I was feeling so tired. Finally he did it to me.....I did not scream. I cried quietly. I was scared of what my neighbour would think of me if they heard me.....(shame).....I told my mother about it but she did not believe me.....

Conclusions

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, non-consensual sexual activity is difficult to research. The topic is especially sensitive among young people, the age group in which coercion is perhaps most likely to occur. This is one reason why sexual coercion has received relatively little attention from family planning and reproductive health practitioners and researchers. This study is the first of its kind in Nepal and begins to address a severe dearth of information particularly on the extent and nature of sexual coercion in Nepalese society as well among migrant workers.

It is clear from this study that unwanted sexual experiences are not uncommon among migrant young women irrespective of their marital status. Coercion ranges from pressure to drink alcohol or take other drugs, forced exposure to pornographic movies, harassment and, less commonly, rape. The study further confirmed that coerced sex takes place mostly among individuals known to each other. Despite attempts to impose restrictions on mobility by their parents in the villages, young girls go to the fields or forest unaccompanied where they encounter sexual assault or coercion. Thus the results suggest that sexual abuse of young women is by no means a new urban phenomenon. Rather it has probably been a hidden part of rural life in Nepal for centuries.

Contrary to the common assumption that the factory owners or employers often abuse young women, the study suggests that such instances are rare. However we found some cases of

male employers or factory owner who exploited their position of power over dependent female employees. The most common perpetrators are male co-workers, boys from the village and close relatives such as cousins or brothers-in-law of the girls.

One striking pattern to emerge from the study is the prominence of sexual coercion at the start of marriage. It may be no exaggeration to claim that many Nepalese marriages, especially those involving young brides, are consummated with force and scant consideration for the welfare of the woman.

Several factors contribute to the vulnerability of young Nepalese women to sexual abuse. Communication between the sexes is difficult. By tradition women are expected to be unassertive, modest and ignorant about sexual matters. Most importantly, societal norms demand that women resist sexual advances even when these are welcome. Such “scripted refusal” provides men with a justification to proceed with sexual demands and to ignore the protests of women. Abused women cannot protect themselves by threatening to report perpetrators for they will do far more harm to themselves than to the man by such exposure.

The results of this study were disseminated at a national conference “Young people's sexual health in Nepal: The way forward” in April 2002 in Kathmandu. The participants were young people, researchers, parents, teachers, practitioners, youth representatives, carpet and garment factory owners, the media and policy makers and delegates from both government and non-government organizations. During the meeting, some organizations such as Nepal Red Cross society and BP Memorial Foundation expressed their interest to launch factory based interventions in the Valley. Subsequently, BP Memorial Foundation used our results and has started to implement a project which provides family health education and mobile sexual health clinics to some of these young factory workers.

In our view the broader policy implications of these results relate to advocacy and consciousness-raising rather than service-provision. As in other societies the sexual abuse of women in Nepal is deeply rooted in gender inequalities. Ideally what is required is a transformation in gender relations that would allow young men and women to communicate with each other more easily and to relate to each other on a more equal footing. Such changes will not come about quickly but could be accelerated by skilfully designed sexuality curricula for school students. In the meantime NGOs might perhaps be able to facilitate the legal prosecution of sexual abusers and thereby send powerful messages that such behaviour by men should no longer be tolerated.

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Table 1. Sexual harassment and rape among young female migrant workers: Nepal, 2000-2001

	Percent
Aware of friends who have experience of sexual harassment (excluding sexual intercourse)	27.6
Respondent has experience of sexual harassment (excluding sexual intercourse)	11.3
Aware of friends who have been raped/coerced sex	10.9
Respondent has been raped/coerced sex	2.2
N	550

Table 2. The percentage reporting sexual harassment by selected characteristics of young female migrant workers: Nepal, 2000-2001

Characteristics	Percent	Total number of cases
Exposure to movies*		
Pornographic	40.4	10
General	10.6	236
Neither	10.2	304
Use of any substance (cigarettes, tobacco, marijuana, injecting drugs etc)*		
Yes	13.2	301
No	8.0	249
Use of alcohol*		
Yes	13.6	279
No	8.1	271
Total		550

* Significant at 95 percent confidence interval (Fisher's Exact Test)

Table 3. Reasons for the first sexual intercourse of young female migrant workers: Nepal, 2000-2001

Reasons for first sex	Married *		Unmarried		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Love	12	63.1	23	46.0	35	50.7
Pressure from friend	1	5.3	4	8.0	5	7.3
Pressure from partner	4	21.1	14	28.0	18	26.1
Curiosity	0	0.0	4	8.0	4	5.8
Getting carried away	1	0.0	3	6.0	3	4.4
Not to be left out	1	5.3	1	2.0	2	2.9
Natural follow-on in relationship	1	5.3	0	0.0	1	1.5
Being drunk	0	0.0	1	2.0	1	1.5
<i>Total</i>	19	<i>100.0</i>	50	<i>100.0</i>	69	<i>100.0</i>

* Excluding those whose first sex partner was a husband

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