

BOOK REVIEW: Sex Trafficking in South Asia – Telling Maya’s Story

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Sex Trafficking in South Asia: Telling Maya’s Story by Mary Crawford is a profoundly revealing book that analyzes the reasons behind sex trafficking and how social constructs of gender and class enable it. The book’s title mentions Maya, a woman that Crawford meets at a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Nepal. The author investigates and analyzes Maya’s tragic story, which is similar to many testimonies in the book. The focus is not so much about Maya’s particular story, however, but rather the framing of Maya and women like her as the “perfect victims.” Crawford argues that the stereotypical perfect victim portrays the female victims of sex-trafficking as naïve, backwards, and gullible. She states that these are the cases that generate the most attention and aid, and she argues that perfect victims are significant to the investigation of the complex gender roles present in Nepal. Portrayals of these victims only helps them in the present without getting to the root problem; short-term solutions don’t focus on the human rights violations or solutions to stop them.

Crawford’s observations come from an academic, feminist perspective. She is a Professor of Psychology and Women’s Studies at the University of Connecticut. She is the author of many articles and books including: *Women and Gender: A Feminist Psychology*; *Transformations: Women, Gender, and Psychology*; and *Talking Difference*. Crawford’s work is the result of extensive field research with ABC-Nepal, an NGO focused on the rights of girls and women with a special focus on human trafficking. The group helps rescue and rehabilitate victims of trafficking. Crawford’s unique feminist perspective aids

her study of local beliefs and ideologies attributed to gender, as well as the role they play in trafficking. The book mainly focuses on Nepal, where an estimated 7,000 young girls and women are trafficked (usually to India) for sex work annually.

Sex trafficking can be a difficult problem to study and assess. For instance, it isn't always easy to determine if someone has chosen to work in the sex industry or if she was coerced. Crawford writes about global sex trafficking and the controversial use of the word "consent" in United Nation's definition of trafficking. The controversy stems from friction between organizations that want to protect trafficking victims and feminist groups that believe in women's rights to migrate and engage in commercial sex. Crawford states: "At the core of these debates is the moral question of whether commercial sex work is a legitimate form of work when it is entered voluntarily and with consent, or inherently a form of degradation and violence against women" (p. 4). Aside from those who are trafficked into sex work, many women voluntarily migrate for sex work or are forced into prostitution by poor life conditions, such as poverty. Crawford acknowledges the difficulty of deciding whether a woman's decision to work in the commercial sex industry is voluntary or not. She notes that life circumstances, mental illnesses, and prior victimization can all lead to a life of "choosing" prostitution when a choice was not clearly present.

Discrimination and political factors in Nepal contribute to sex trafficking. Discrimination is based on gender, class, and caste, and a Maoist insurgency has also led to much vulnerability for girls and women. Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world with a huge divide amongst the rich and poor. Crawford finds that extreme poverty faced by many families has made young girls extremely susceptible to sexual abuse and/or trafficking. Parents will sometimes send their daughters off to work in the city or to live and work for a family, usually with the intent of the daughter earning extra money and sending it to the family. These lifestyle changes are very dangerous for young girls coming from underprivileged families, and many of these "jobs" are actually tactics used for trafficking.

Gender inequalities are deeply rooted in Nepal's culture and can lead to trafficking. Sons are preferred over daughters, since the Nepalese believe that having a son is the way to gain access into heaven. Crawford claims that these biases towards males are destructive for girls in society because they make females susceptible to trafficking; Nepali women sometimes face extreme poverty and life-threatening oppression, and lack of education serves as another risk factor for trafficking. Crawford writes that trafficking is prevalent in areas with low female literacy. Often girls from lower income families are not allowed to go to school, making it all too easy for perpetrators to coerce them into migrating away from their homes and families. Furthermore, gender discrimination in Nepal often leads young girls to face unwanted marriages and pregnancies, while older females are stigmatized as witches. This very oppressive social structure, where gender roles are clear and deeply rooted in culture and history, is the reason why Crawford believes that females are more prone to being trafficked in Nepal. The internalization of these social gender roles is a major problem that will be difficult to change, and caste is also a medium for discrimination and an enabler for the internalization of gender roles. To illustrate the issues of caste and gender within marriage, Crawford tells a story about a young woman who was sold into sex slavery by her husband. When her husband was arrested and she was freed, the woman was intent on staying faithful to her husband and continuing their marriage once he got out of prison. She cited their mutual membership in the Brahman caste as a reason for staying together.

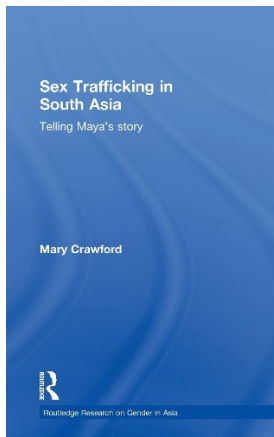
The Maoist insurgency that started in 1996 is another factor that Crawford links to sex trafficking. The conflict led to intense consequences for the nation including: strikes, traffic blockades, shortages, and disruptions of agriculture, education, and foreign aid. The insurgency was led by Maoist Communists and lasted for a decade. The conflict resulted in 13,000 deaths; about two-thirds of the fatalities were caused by the royal army. Around two million people fled to India during the political violence, and those who stayed suffered immense physical and/or psychological trauma. The insurgency was very detrimental to rural women who were often left on their own when the men fled from Maoist

occupied areas. With no income and a bleak future, migration seemed like the only option for many women. The migration that took place during this period of unrest likely increased sex trafficking, according to Crawford. She argues that female migrants and internally displaced people were tremendously vulnerable to trafficking, especially those who moved from rural areas to the capital or across the border to India. She writes that “trafficking increases when poverty and desperation are exacerbated by destroyed economies” (p. 24).

A strength of this book is how Crawford incorporates testimonies from various women and men to illustrate the issue of human trafficking. The use of testimonies and reflections of victims adds to the book’s credibility. Although the testimonies do make this a hard and depressing read sometimes, perhaps that was Crawford’s objective. The book appeals to both logic and emotion because her theories are supported by her field research; they are logical in terms of facts and law, yet personal testimonies remind the reader of the direct affects this abuse has on victims. Crawford entwines her research and concepts with the reflections of victims, giving the reader more insight into the reality of trafficking in South Asia.

Crawford’s book is an important human rights text because she gets to the heart of a complex problem and undertakes extensive research to understand the reasons behind sex trafficking. This work is unique because Crawford explores the social constructs that are involved within Nepalese human trafficking, which inspires solutions to this problem that will actually help people. For instance, some solutions she suggests are: researching the problem and its underlying causes, creating a human rights approach to the issue instead of viewing the females as victims that need aid, and educating the Nepalese about sex trafficking as a human rights violation. Crawford’s feminist perspective is very helpful because she is researching and writing about girls and women who are directly affected by this global trade. Her opinions on this issue do not feel judgmental or hostile, but rather they are very open to discovering the truth. Her research points to the conclusion that sex trafficking needs to be examined

within a local context if we are to fully understand it. This conclusion draws attention to how we approach human rights issues on a global scale, and raises questions about whether a global focus is productive. Crawford's book sheds light on the need for carefully analyzing cultures to better understand violations and abuses. By examining cultures, advocates can try to change the social discrimination at the root of sex trafficking and many other human rights violations. Read *Sex Trafficking in South Asia: Telling Maya's Story* to better understand and gain a new perspective on human trafficking, sex trafficking, and Nepal's social role within this human rights epidemic.



Book Information

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