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TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACTS: TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN AN EMANCIPATORY STUDY IN NEPAL

Rita Dhungel

University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada

Email: rdhungel@ucalgary.ca

Abstract

Trafficking of girls and women for sexual exploitations and their reintegration have become serious social issues in the world, particularly in Nepal, drawing the attention of local and international communities, including United Nations, government, academia, practitioners and activists. Nevertheless, the paucity of research on reintegration of trafficking survivors in the Nepalese context exhibits the need for further research. For example, in previous studies, the experiences of trafficking survivors in their reintegration have been examined and some strategies have been proposed through a qualitative approach. However, no studies have been conducted from social justice and feminist paradigms, and therefore the study was designed to bridge the gaps identified in academic investigations. Through the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR), the purpose for this study is to promote transformational/experiential learning opportunities to trafficking survivors and measure its transformative change. By using a number of PAR tools, eight trafficking survivors as co-researchers have examined under researched experiences of survivors on transformational learning opportunities and its implications to transformative impacts. For the purpose of the study, the survivors were significantly involved in analyzing data, mainly in categorizing and coding, however, a praxis (action-reflection-action) encouraging participants to engage in meaningful dialogues and actions, was executed as emancipatory research and liberatory educational tools throughout the study period. The results demonstrate that personal and social transformations were achieved, grounded in experiential evidence in personal narratives. Implications of the study are discussed in the conclusion.

Keywords: Actions, Praxis, Reintegration, Survivors, Transformation

1. Introduction and Purpose

Trafficking of girls and women, specifically sexual exploitation, is an increasingly complex social issue in this global society, drawing the attention of local and international community, including government, academia, practitioners and researchers. Using the case of Nepal, much of the information about human trafficking is gathered in NGO and INGO publications. A considerable number of the documents and reports were prepared by the United Nations, which focus on the causes, consequences and process of trafficking together with policy recommendations and program development. Nevertheless, very few studies, through a qualitative lens, have focused on reintegration (Acharya, 2008; Bohl, 2010; Chaulagai, 2008; Chen & Marcovici, 2003; Evans & Bhattarai, 2000; Locke, 2010; McNeill, 2008; Sharma, 2014). These studies have identified resettlement and reintegration of trafficking survivors as an

always challenging and difficult process however some studies have reported that with the support of anti-trafficking agencies some survivors are successful in their reintegration (Acharya, 2008; Chaulagai, 2009; Locke, 2010, Sharma, 2014). The studies suggested the need for further study on reintegration (Chaulagai, 2009; Hennink & Simkhada, 2004; Locke, 2010; McNeill, 2008; Sharma, 2014). Sadly, none of the studies attempted to gather the collective voices and knowledge of trafficking survivors associated with the actual need for their reintegration from critical lenses. Further, none of the studies offered trafficking survivors with an opportunity to be involved in an emancipatory research, allowing them to construct a comprehensive definition of reintegration and to play meaningful roles in addressing their own reintegration issues. By recognizing the need for a paradigm shift from traditional quantitative and qualitative dimensions to participatory action research (PAR) as a transformative tool, this research project was designed in collaboration with trafficking survivors in Nepal. The purposes of this study are to: (1) promote transformational/experiential learning to trafficking survivors; (2) measure transformative impacts of the involvement of survivors in this emancipatory research process, mainly in praxis (action-reflection-action). By acknowledging the values of PAR, the terms co-researchers and peer researchers are used interchangeably for trafficking survivors throughout this paper. Likewise, the research team includes the researcher and co-researchers for this study. This paper is structured into five sections and they are: (1) Literature review and research context; (2) Methodology; (3) Transformational/experiential learning process; (4) Results; (5) Conclusion/Discussions.

2. Literature review: Research context

Reintegration of trafficking survivors for sexual exploitation is a comprehensive anti-trafficking approach. The trafficking survivors who escaped and/or were rescued from brothels are provided non-formal education, literacy classes with some vocational and skill building trainings including driving, catering services, animal husbandry, sewing and community health worker training for their economic independence in rehabilitation centers (Bohl, 2010; Chaulagai, 2009; Fisher, 2008; Fredrick & Basnyat, 2010; Hennink & Simkhada, 2004; Locke, 2010; Sharma, 2014; Simkhada, 2008). Evans and Bhattarai (2000) identified some of the training programs, such as sewing and weaving, as not contributing to the development of a stable career because the money made from these occupations is not enough to ensure survival. Despite the services, some survivors experienced psychological abuses or shame during their stays in rehabilitation centers. The survivors, for example, are restricted from going outside of centers limiting their mobility and their exposure to the public, and thereby they do not feel free in the centers (Chaulagai, 2009; McNeil, 2008). Fisher (2008) also reported that the women in the shelter of Maiti Nepal, one of the rehabilitative centers in Kathmandu, are also vulnerable due to the ways they are placed. The study further suggested that by placing metal bars on all the windows of the shelters, one can easily assume that rehabilitation centers can be “prison-like” with “lock and chains” (p. 70). Also, they were perceived as prostitutes and are treated as characterless women when they come out from their shelters. This kind of situation reinforces their stigmatization even in rehabilitation centers making them vulnerable when returning to their communities (Fisher, 2008).

Reintegration is the most difficult stage and also the most challenging time for survivors because they are usually rejected by their families and societies due to the high level of stigma against sex workers (Chaulagai, 2009; Sharma, 2014). Traditional social values in a dominant patriarchal society in Nepal perceive these women as broken eggs which can never be rejoined once they are broken (Bohl, 2010). Women reported feeling doubly victimized in the rehabilitation and reintegration process in the way they are treated after returning from brothels (Acharya, 2008; Kara, 2009; Locke, 2010). Because of this stigmatization, many people attempt to hide their past

from their communities (Locke, 2010); however, hiding the past is not the solution of reintegration (Bohl, 2010). According to Richardson, Poudel and Laurie, “social reintegration into familial relationships through marriage” (2009:269) is one of the keys to securing livelihood strategies for survivors.

In addition, the extended joint family is the major feature of the Nepalese family structure in which living independently is almost impossible (Hennink & Simkhada, 2004). Studies identified that survivors are afraid of being further stigmatized and also possible reactions of the community that make their parents feel humiliated (Chaulagai, 2009; Simkhada, 2008). Hennink and Simkhada (2004) presented that some families are being forcibly migrated from the place of their origin once the community rejected their daughters. Regaining respect and acceptance in their communities is fundamental for trafficking survivors (Fujikura, 2001). Therefore, although survivors want to return to their home, they are unable to go back to their communities. Due to the lack of capacity and resources of the NGOs who are caring for them, the survivors cannot stay longer even in residential homes (Evans & Bhattarai, 2000). The authors further suggested that the government needs to support NGOs in their services regarding reintegration to formulate a strategy of long term support for the survivors who do not return home. At the root, some women are forcibly returned to sex slavery because they experience social stigma and rejection from their families and communities (Chaulagai, 2009; Fujikura, 2001) and have limited skills for alternative employment (Hennink & Simkhada, 2004).

With the help of the government, many NGOs are involved in grassroots-level interventions. For instance, by meeting families and community leaders to advocate for community support and subsequently providing awareness raising campaigns through workshops and group meetings to community residents, Maiti Nepal has attempted to prevent (or at least reduce) the stigmatization of trafficking survivors, and thus help in the process of accepting survivors back into the community (Chaulagai, 2009; Evans & Bhattarai, 2000). Despite the efforts, the country has failed to protect trafficking survivors in their reintegration (Acharaya, 2008; Chaulagai, 2009; Fisher, 2010; Fujikura, 2001; McNeill, 2008).

Chaulagai (2009) suggested that the term *reintegration* is often used to describe the process of reunification with family members and defines the term in the context of sex trafficking as: (a) obtaining the level of social respect and identity she had before she was trafficked, and (b) having equal access to resources and control over the resources as other members of the respective community. Fujikura (2001) identified that family reunion and reintegration of trafficking women and girls are the ultimate goals of rehabilitation processes.

Many NGOs have published their reports highlighting that many survivors are successful in returning to their family. However, the literature demonstrate the need to further study what reintegration actually means, as it is clear that a person can be at “home” (physically or geographically) without really being “home” (psychologically or socially). Overall, through a participatory approach and a social justice lens, this study has critical implications to personal and social transformations in associated to reintegration of trafficking survivors for sexual exploitation in Nepal. The following section will present the methodology of the study.

3. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, PAR was used as a transformative approach and collective knowledge-creating methodology. PAR adopts the concepts of conscientization and critical reflection as described by Paulo Freire (1970), a Brazilian philosopher and educator (Selener, 1997). This means that through critical analysis of existing social, political and economic

situations, people who are oppressed act collectively to solve immediate problems and to counter the oppressive aspects of society. Fals-Bordas suggests that PAR is “a complex process which includes adult education, situation analysis, critical analysis and practice as sources of knowledge for understanding new problems, necessities and dimension of reality” (1988: 85). The major goals of the PAR are: (1) to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people through research and socio-political action, and (2) to empower people at a deeper level through the process of constructing and using their own conscientization (Fals-Borda, 1988; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Maguire, 1987; Park, 1993; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Selener, 1997; Smith, Willms & Johnson, 1997). Overall, PAR combines the three major activities which are called praxis: investigation, education, and action as suggested by Maguire (1987). PAR is a method of investigation of issues that amplify the participation of oppressed people in identifying causes of the problems, analyzing the problems and finding ways to address the issues collectively. PAR is an educational process that helps both researchers and co-researchers critically understand the social processes and structures of human trafficking and reintegration within both a historical and a contemporary context. Finally, it is a way of engaging with collective actions that allow researchers and participants to come together for individual and social transformations. By acknowledging the importance of understanding how co-researchers became involved in this emancipatory study process, this paper will highlight how transformational learning process were promoted in the subsequent section, prior to discussing transformative change.

4. Transformational/experiential learning process

This study began with an engagement with eight co-researchers, who were trafficked to brothels in India and currently living in Nepal, which primarily focused on building relationships among the research team. After a month, upon understanding the values of PAR and roles for co-researchers in the study, the co-researchers expressed their interests to facilitate our group meetings and also asked for some trainings for them to be able to facilitate our meetings; the researcher shared some key tips to enhance their facilitation skills. Subsequently, a couple of women started facilitating meetings which inspired others to take the roles, and then each individual proposed their names as facilitators. More importantly, this shifted the power from researcher to co-researchers that changed the dynamics of the study process, for example, agendas were developed and research methods were selected by co-researchers. In an effect, the women appeared to become more motivated to get involved in both meaningful dialogues and collective actions to address their reintegration issues identified.

Simultaneously, the women were involved in developing survey questionnaires for peer interviews together with interviews with stakeholders, working in anti-trafficking interventions, and street dramas. These processes not only allowed the research team to reflect their interviewing experiences and modify the questionnaires as needed, but also to explore commonalities among their experiences in reintegration and develop some other possible activities that need to be instigated. One of the good examples of this process was that the women named for their group called “Community Based Action Research Women Group”. Through the action-reflection-action process, the Women Group later extended their interviews to other professionals such as journalists, police officials and teachers and also expanded their knowledge and exhibited their leadership skills through a number of activities such as street dramas and world cafés. As a result, the group found themselves very empowered and knowledgeable around the socio-political situations of the country and their link to their social locations, which further inspired them to create comprehensive reintegration strategies and were next shared with journalists in a public forum and with the Government of Nepal (for more details please refer to the section five). Keeping in mind that although this study process seems

to be linear, it was not the case; the two areas such as building relationships and action-reflection-action came in play as an enduring transformational learning process (Figure 1). The following section will confirm that the study did not only advance transformational/experiential learning opportunities, but also achieved transformative change.

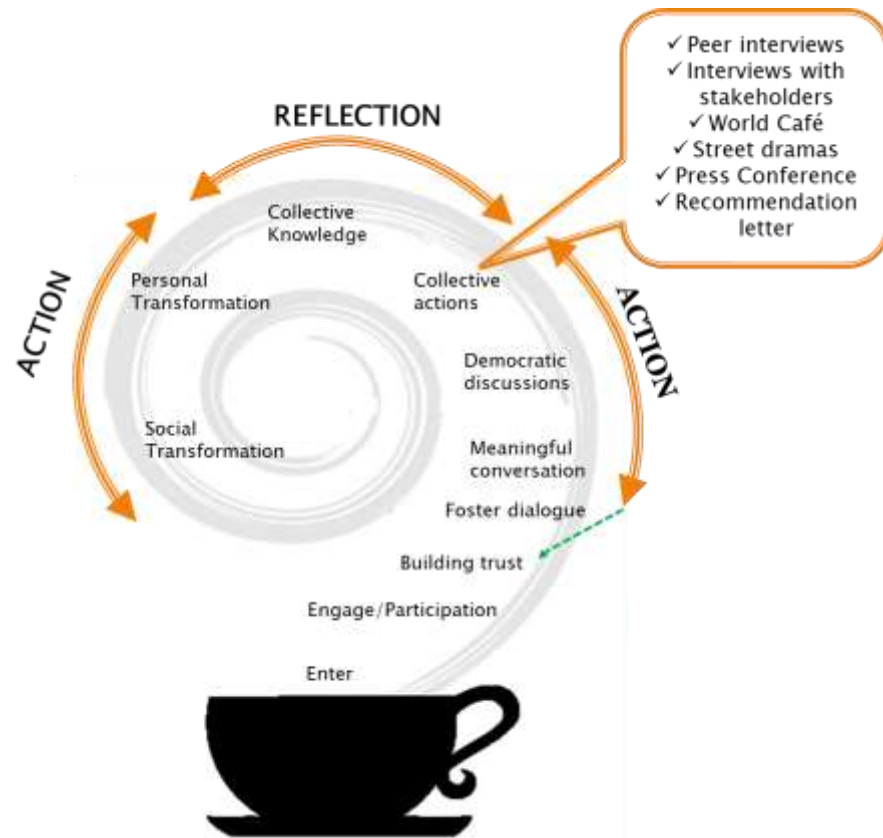


Figure: 1 Transformational/experiential learning process towards transformative change through Praxis (action-reflection-action).

5. Results: Transformative impacts

Though praxis, the research team has identified the key two transformative impacts at different levels including: (1) Personal transformations; and (2) Social transformations which will be discussed in the subsequent section.

5.1. Personal transformations

This section will present the evidences of the achievement of personal transformations through this experiential learning process. The key themes have been identified and they are: (1) Collective knowledge creation; (2) Transferable skills; (3) Interpersonal skills; (4) Technical skills; and (5) Critical thinking.

5.1.1. Collective knowledge creation

The research team collectively identified the issues in their reintegration and they developed reintegration strategies. By using the strategies developed, the research team were also involved in performative actions including interviews with stakeholders, world café and street dramas followed by interviews with audiences and data analyses. This process has allowed the research team to differentiate between the perceptions of trafficking survivors and the anti-trafficking agencies on the term “reintegration”. The co-researchers subsequently collected constructed knowledge on reintegration strategies that needed to be cultivated and educated by community at large, specifically oppressors and perpetrators. The following evidence clearly reveals that the peer researchers recognized their meaningful involvement and contributions for knowledge construction.

One of the co-researchers, narrated,

“I did not even think about what makes me feel more reintegrated as I experience lots of challenges in my reintegration, but since we as a group began to discuss our own issues I recognized that my challenges are not different than others. I always blamed myself ...why I am not educated, smart as others but now I know I can do anything.....anything..... I am damn serious now...you know when we created a chart what needs to be done for our reintegration I was amazed how much knowledge I had. In fact this is the best way that we could engage in knowledge generation and share what we need in our reintegration, an evidence of collective work.”

Another co-researcher echoed and added,

“this study has not only provided us profound opportunities to share our own knowledge individually/collectively and but also to identify as a group what this oppressive society needs to do for our reintegration. We also documented what gaps are in programs and services provided for survivors. I found individual voices will not take that much time to convert into collective voices if opportunities are given. We are in one now. Well! Very good solidarity team... Honestly speaking, I would not have any guts if I was not a part of this group.”

5.1.2. Transferable skills

The peer researchers have exhibited increased knowledge and skills, obtained from training sessions on computer, questionnaire development, interviewing skills development, data analyses and Word café, in different settings. For example, one of the co-researchers narrated how the process has built her capacity:

“I cannot believe that I learnt profoundly through this study process which built my self-confidence and self-esteem a lot. I still remember the day when we were going to develop a peer survey questionnaire and I thought I would leave the room because I think as I did not have the abilities in this types of work. But after we discussed in a group how to develop questionnaire I thought it was an easy task. Also, after doing a mock exercise and then actual interviews with my peers and stakeholders, I built my self-confidence....moreover, once I was involved in data analyses, I believe I can be a part of any research projects in future if opportunities are provided. Now I am confident in my abilities on community based research.”

Another peer researcher echoed her,

“This study provided me a forum not only to learn new things but also to put them in practice. While I was doing as a master of ceremony job for the first time in one of the

interactive sessions, my heart was pounding and getting nervous but once I continued to do this job until the end of this study I felt like I am good in public speaking. The best part of the study was that when I did emcee at the press conference. Wow! Unbelievable I never thought I would speak in such a large gathering of journalists. Guess what now! everyone including my boss, co-workers and friends view me differently and give me nice compliments.”

5.1.3. Interpersonal skills

This study identified that the peer researchers built their interpersonal skills, for instance, one peer researcher said,

“I was trafficked at the age of seven and since then I have been very afraid to talk to people. I never talked to people anyone except with the people at work and home.....only work related conversations. Now look at mesomeone told me yesterday that I have become a new person as I engage in conversations; I interact with people; I do eye contacts while speaking, and also make jokes around people. Yes, I began to socialize with people since I have joined this research project. I am very happy that I can go and easily talk to my daughter’s teachers.”

Another peer researcher stressed,

“As you know I was very silent over the first month of this study and was very nervous when I found each has some roles for this study. Our researcher used to encourage us to speak up and express anger but I was not sure what to say. Gradually, I started sharing my thoughts/ideas and then I realized that everyone liked my ideas. I still feel afraid with people but I guess I have become strong and taken initiative to engage with people. I am also famous.. hahahha....at work from the day when I made a comment on our programs in a meeting.”

5.1.4. Critical thinking

Findings of the study show that the co-researcher has developed abilities in critical thinking and have analyzed their socio-political situations of Nepal during the study process. For example, one of the co-researchers said:

“I was the first child who was born in an impoverished family so I felt obligated for financial support to my parents. Well.....I did not want my siblings would starve and then die. Thus, I did escape from home for employment purposes to India. When I came back to Nepal, I was rejected by my family and community. I accepted this as a norm. But once we as a group discussed our political, social and economic situations and their link to our vulnerability from a critical lens during our study, I came to know that neither it was my fault to be born in a poor family nor my parents’ chose to live in poverty.I must say it is a completely wrong to think that way. Now, I am very angry at this unjust society who first made me vulnerable to trafficking and then viewed me as ‘others’ especially in my reintegration. It is not acceptable anymore.”

Another co-researcher added,

“We go very often in villages as a part of our job. When we were going to do street dramas for our research project, we were told by our management team that we could not speak representing the agency we work for because they thought we do not have good enough knowledge and potential to talk about the agency. I used to think that were right because I am not educated and I do not have any abilities to speak with people. But, guess what! This study allowed us to prove them that they were wrong. In the last

meeting, when I heard the same comment I spoke them back by saying we are survivors and our experiences are more valuable so we do not need any education to share what our agency does and what the goals of our agency are. How sad it is to think that a survivor is not capable enough to represent an agency formed by survivors.”

5.2. Social transformations

This study reveals that social transformations were also achieved through the study process, specifically actions such as world cafés, street dramas and a press conference. The key themes have been identified and they are: (1) Raising awareness; (2) Counsel to Editorials; and (3) submission a recommendation letter to the Government of Nepal.

5.2.1. Raising awareness

The study team acknowledged that the actions such as street dramas and world cafés were very helpful not only to change the perceptions of people, mainly oppressors and perpetrators, around survivors, but help to further understand the need of allies in reintegration of trafficking survivors.

For example, one of the audiences said to a co-researcher with full of tears,

“I did make your life miserable by treating you badly ...so many bad words I probably used for you. After this drama I came to know that you had lot of difficulties to go through just because we did not know anything about you.now I know we should treat our girls who were returned from India in a respectful manner. The drama helped me to recall what I did you and I am sorry for my naivety.”

In another audience, a school teacher stated,

“I was involved in lots of interactive sessions on trafficking issues in my life but this was the first time I got an opportunity to learn about the challenges that our girls face in their reintegration. I never thought that they would have so much issues. I admire the women who came all the way here and did this session for us to understand their issues. I am going to share this learning with other students who were not here today and will encourage them to share with families and friends. This is the way we can support them in their reintegration.”

5.2.2. Counsel to editorials

Through a press conference, the survivors shared their systemic challenges and its impacts on their psychosocial wellbeing. Further, some key suggestions were proposed to editorials for their considerations while interviewing with survivors and writing about survivors. For example, one co-researcher addressed the conference by requesting, “I have been asked several times to share what happened in brothels. This is something that I do not want to remember and also you do not need to know this. What you need to know that we need all of you and you can do a lot through the use of your pen.”

One of the journalists stated, “It was a good learning opportunity for me who just began a career in this field. I will be very cautious and sensitive what I ask and how I write about them. ”

More importantly, a number of national and local newspapers highlighted the press conference together with the challenges the survivors face in their reintegration and the expectations and supports that need from the community on their reintegration.

5.2.3. Submission a recommendation letter to the Government of Nepal

A group of researchers first went to the Ministry of Women, Children and Welfare to share their roles for and contributions to this study. The group further advised that they wanted to submit a

recommendation letter for government to incorporate in the new Constitution of Nepal which was in the process, and also to consider allocating more of the budget for anti-trafficking interventions, especially reintegration. The Minister of Women, Children and Welfare acknowledged the women for their resiliency and committed to support them in whatever ways they could do. The recommendation letter was subsequently submitted to the Minister of Women, Children and Welfare in person. The Minister of Women, Children and Welfare expressed her concerns around this area and assured the team that she would certainly forward this letter to the respective committees for their considerations. More importantly, after a year the new Constitution came in to effect on September 20, 2015, projecting changes to reintegration policies.

6. Conclusion/discussion

As I documented above in literature review section, the existing literature presents a miserable picture of trafficking women who experience difficulties, increasing their vulnerability in their reintegration. Moving beyond traditional research methodologies, this study has provided a shared platform to the disenfranchised women with an opportunity not only to exchange ideas/insights and share transformational learning experiences, but also to promote solidarity and advocate in amelioration for social injustice. In an effect, the survivors reported that they as a group have empowered each other and also have transformed the unjust society. Overall, as mentioned earlier in this paper, the purpose of the study was to promote transformational/experiential learning to trafficking survivors and to measure its transformative impacts. The evidences provided in the previous section revealed that the study has advanced both personal and social transformations through the execution of praxis.

For further research, it is crucial to carry out similar studies using critical approach with other survivors including men and women who were trafficked to labour purposes, mainly in Middle East and Asia. A further study is also needed to critically analyze the new reintegration policies and existed programs. For a program development purpose, it is indispensable to conduct a further study from a feminist perspective to have a better understanding of the challenges of survivors with HIV in their reintegration and its implications in their health and psychosocial wellbeing.

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