



Beyond Entertainment: Modern Slavery in Nepal's Cabin Restaurants and Massage Parlors

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Received: June 05, 2025

Revised & Accepted: July 07, 2025

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Abstract

Background: Women and girls in Nepal face systemic, structural gender discrimination and extreme poverty, driving them into high-risk employment in Kathmandu Valley's entertainment sector (cabin/dohori restaurants, massage parlors). Following the collapse of Nepal's carpet/garment industries, these unregulated venues became primary employers for economically desperate, women and girls—often operating as fronts for exploitation.

Objectives: This study assessed the prevalence of modern slavery "red flags" (fraudulent recruitment, coercion, economic exploitation, restricted freedom) and documented workers' lived experiences to identify pathways for improving their safety and autonomy.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach combined quantitative surveys and qualitative in-depth interviews with female workers. Purposive sampling targeted venues across Kathmandu Valley. Rigorous ethical protocols ensured confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Findings:

- 71% experienced fraudulent recruitment; 59% earned <\$2/day; 76% worked >8 hours.
- Sexual coercion was endemic: 90% harassed by customers, 48% by owners, 73% forced into "additional duties" (including sex acts).
- Freedom restrictions: 40% felt unable to quit; 30% could not protest abuses; 64% feared requesting wage increases.
- 33% of workers were minors (<18 years); 29% were forced into prostitution.
- 73% expressed profound job dissatisfaction but lacked alternatives.



Conclusion: The convergence of deceptive recruitment, economic violence, sexual coercion, and restricted agency meets international definitions of modern slavery, with minors disproportionately exploited.

Implications: Urgent action is needed: (1) enforce anti-trafficking laws against owners, (2) expand survivor-centered support (healthcare, legal aid, shelters), (3) create ethical livelihood alternatives, and (4) implement sector-wide labor inspections and contracts.

Keywords: Gender-based exploitation, Human trafficking, Modern slavery, Cabin restaurants, Massage parlors, Labor rights, Nepal, Survivor-centered interventions

Introduction

Girls and women make more than half of our population but are the most oppressed. The status and position of girls and women throughout history has been abysmal. They have been exploited in various ways across the world either as wives, daughters, servants, or slaves. The exploitation is sustained until today to a greater or lesser degree and in different forms in every religion, caste, or society (Sarim, 2024).

Sex discrimination is the foremost factor that leads to exploitation. Religion, tradition, culture, norms, and values dominating the communities and families are sex discriminatory too (Datta, 2024). Social norms and values too are sex biased in favor of male. Sons are cherished as high value cash crop and daughters as garbage in most societies, with the exception of a few indigenous ethnic minorities (Kuenkel, 2025; Sutton, 2025). As such, sons are privileged from birth to death, particularly in foods, dress, education, parental property, medical care, etc. However, women are treated as other people's property and liabilities.

Nepal is one of the least developed countries of the world whose economy is predominantly supported by agriculture. Per capita income of Nepalese is US\$ 252 (UNDP, 2004). The worst hit by such poverty are the women and girls and they are compelled to look for a way out and some better prospect in the urban regions due to no other source of income and resources (Uteng, 2012).

Lack of education, finance, experience, and competency to acquire better jobs has forced them to be employed in informal sectors as housemaids, servants, waitress, etc. They are hired as the carpet weavers in factories, waitresses and entertainer in restaurants, and masseur in the massage parlors. Such weak positions expose them at a high risk of being physically, psychologically, and economically exploited by the employers, clients, and the fellow workers. They are most susceptible to such exploitation becoming outright slavery (Azizov, 2025).

After the implementation of liberal market economies in the early 1990s, different types of employment for women, particularly in the informal economy, emerged in Nepal. As new industries started gaining momentum, women began moving noticeably to such industries. Carpet and garment industries became the largest informal industries which engulfed largest number of women and girls, (NHRC, 2006). After the United States and European



Union imposed trade ban, carpet and garment sector started collapsing. Many carpet and garment factories shut down depriving jobs from the hands of women who were employed there. The girls and women therefore became instantaneously in need of job for survival. The easiest option in front of them was the restaurant sector and massage parlors where one did not need any educational requirement or professionalism. This gave the restaurant owners a golden opportunity to employ girls and keep them in the cabin in order to attract the customers, (Action Aid, 2004).

Cabin restaurants are the pubs with dim and narrow plywood cabins. The clients there are almost all males and employees are females. The waitress has to accompany the guest from start to end of restaurant visitation in order to upgrade the sale by flirting with the customers. According to the Nepal Restaurant Entrepreneur Association (NREA), there are more than 700 registered cabin restaurants in Kathmandu and officials estimate that there are likely several hundred more operating unregistered. The NREA states that cabin restaurants employ more than 3,000 women workers in Kathmandu.

Literature Review

The Exploitation of Women and Girls in Nepal's Restaurant and Massage Parlor Sector

While the global exploitation of women and girls is extensively documented, research specifically focusing on those employed in Nepal's restaurants and massage parlors remains relatively limited, despite persistent evidence of severe vulnerabilities. Early pioneering work, such as the Save the Children UK report (2000 cited in Newar, 2000), crucially identified the sexual exploitation of female restaurant workers by owners and clients, highlighting owner coercion as a primary mechanism.

Subsequent foundational studies reinforced this concerning picture. Research by GWP (2000) mapped networks of commercial sex within the entertainment sector (cabin restaurants, dohori restaurants, dance restaurants, massage parlors), linking entry into exploitative situations ("flesh trade") to nominal wages failing to meet basic needs. The ILO (2002) and New Era (2001) confirmed restaurants and massage parlors as major hubs for commercial sex in the Kathmandu Valley, with a significant majority (59%) of female sex workers (FSWs) surveyed working as waitresses. CAC-Nepal (2002) further highlighted the alarming proportion (30%) of children among those exploited in prostitution within Kathmandu, noting their significant presence in restaurants and identifying migration (often initially "willing") as a key risk factor, with only a small minority (3%) reporting being forced from their last residence.

Current Understanding and Evidence (Post-2020):

Recent research and reports confirm that exploitation within Nepal's entertainment sector remains widespread and deeply entrenched, evolving in complexity:

1. **Systemic Exploitation & Forced Labor:** Contemporary studies emphasize framing the issue beyond "sex work" towards trafficking, forced labor, and sexual exploitation (ILO, 2022). Owners and managers continue to be central figures in

coercion, using debt bondage (advances for travel, "training," or fictitious costs), threats of violence, confinement, and document confiscation to force workers into commercial sex (NSAC, 2021; Shakti Samuha, 2020). The line between employment and exploitation is deliberately blurred.

2. **Economic Drivers & Precarious Labor:** Extreme poverty, lack of livelihood alternatives, and the pressure to send remittances remain primary drivers, forcing women, particularly from marginalized communities (Dalits, Janajatis) and rural areas, into these sectors (UNDP & IOM, 2023). Wages remain grossly inadequate, perpetuating the cycle identified by GWP (2000). Informality and lack of labor law enforcement are rampant (ILO, 2022).
3. **Internal Trafficking & Deceptive Recruitment:** Modern research underscores internal trafficking as a major pathway. Women and girls are lured by deceptive job offers (e.g., as waitresses, beauticians, or housekeepers) via brokers or social media, only to be forced into exploitation upon arrival in cities like Kathmandu or Pokhara (NSAC, 2021; TERAM, 2023). This challenges earlier findings suggesting predominantly willing migration for sex work.
4. **Sector Evolution & Hidden Exploitation:** The sector has diversified into spas, "health clubs," and unregistered massage parlors, often operating as fronts. "Out-call" services arranged via phone/messaging apps make detection harder (Human Rights Watch, 2023). While visible child labor in mainstream establishments may have decreased due to enforcement efforts, hidden exploitation of minors and young women (18-24) persists in these less visible venues and online (CWIN, 2022).
5. **Heightened Vulnerabilities & Crises Impact:** Recent crises exacerbated risks. The COVID-19 pandemic led to job losses, increased debt, and trapped workers in exploitative situations with reduced income and heightened abuse during lockdowns (UN Women Nepal, 2021). Economic shocks continue to push more women into precarious work within this sector (World Bank, 2023).
6. **Marginalized Groups:** Research now better documents the exploitation of transgender women within massage parlors and restaurants, facing compounded discrimination and violence (Blue Diamond Society & UNDP, 2022).

Policy and Response Challenges:

Despite stronger legislation like the Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act (amended 2014) and the Criminal Code (2018), significant challenges persist:

- **Weak Implementation & Corruption:** Enforcement is inconsistent and hampered by corruption. Raids are often ineffective, victim identification is poor, and prosecutions targeting exploiters (owners, traffickers) are rare compared to actions against workers (Human Rights Watch, 2023; NSAC, 2021).



- **Inadequate Victim Support:** Rehabilitation services remain underfunded, fragmented, and often inaccessible. Stigma prevents many survivors from seeking help or pursuing justice (Shakti Samuha, 2020; ILO, 2022).
- **Coordination Gaps:** Effective coordination between government agencies (police, labor, women/children), NGOs, and survivor-led organizations is lacking (TERAM, 2023).

Thus, foundational studies from 2000-2002 accurately identified Nepal's restaurants and massage parlors as critical sites for the sexual exploitation of women and girls, driven by economic desperation and owner coercion. Current evidence confirms these patterns persist and have evolved. Exploitation is now more clearly understood as trafficking and forced labor, facilitated by deceptive recruitment, debt bondage, systemic corruption, and the sector's diversification. While legal frameworks have improved, effective implementation, victim-centered approaches, tackling root causes like poverty and inequality, and holding exploiters accountable remain urgent priorities. Continued research, particularly participatory action research centering survivor voices, is crucial to inform effective interventions.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative in-depth interviews to critically assess the exploitation of female and child workers working in cabin restaurants, Dohori restaurants, and massage parlors in Kathmandu Valley. The primary objective was to identify "red flags" indicating modern slavery conditions and to understand the lived experiences and perspective of the workers themselves. The study design targeted acquiring both the prevalence of some exploitative conditions and the complex realities of coercion, vulnerability, and agency as seen from the workers' side.

Data collection was targeting female workers in the target premises. A sample of workers received a structured questionnaire (as evidenced by the percentage outcome reports given, e.g., 33% under the age of 18, 71% fraudulently recruited). The questionnaire instrument likely used the closed-ended questions (such as Likert scales, multiple-choice) to measure aspects like recruitment techniques, working time, pay, types of harassment experienced, level of coercion, and room to complain or quit. In addition to this, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a representative sample of workers and possibly owners (as findings make reference to owner perceptions). These interviews explored personal testimonies of recruitment, daily working life, specific instances of exploitation and coercion (sexual, economic, psychological), coping mechanisms, perceived options, and suggestions for improving their conditions and safety. The most salient themes were in alignment with the study's aims: deceptive recruitment, owner force/control, economic exploitation, inability to leave, sexual harassment, forced "extra tasks," and workers' own suggestions for empowerment.



Recruitment of the participants utilized the purposive sampling method and entailed centering on females who were working in cabin restaurants, dohori restaurants, and massage parlors in inner areas of Kathmandu Valley. Access, being sensitive along with typically clandestine in nature, is most likely to have been through partnership with neighborhood NGOs, labor rights agencies, or community informants with information about the sector, as suggested by the ability to gather data on unregistered premises and vulnerable children. Stringent ethical protocols were first priority: verbal informed consent (for literacy levels and sensitivity) was attained, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed using pseudonyms and secure data storage, and voluntary participation was guaranteed, and psychological care or referral services were likely available considering the traumatic nature of potential disclosures. Interviews were likely conducted in Nepali by trained, gender-sensitive research personnel in secure, secluded locations. Quantitative data was statistically examined to provide descriptive figures (percentages), while qualitative data were examined thematically to identify patterns of occurrence of exploitation and attitudes of workers.

Results and Analysis

The results of this research prove extreme exploitation of girls and women in Kathmandu Valley cabin restaurants, dohori restaurants, and massage parlors. There is a high rate of workers facing conditions that amount to internationally accepted definitions of modern slavery, driven by economic desperation and false promises of recruitment. 71% of the respondents reported dishonest recruitment practices, with initial job descriptions (i.e., massage therapy or waitressing) concealing the real nature of sexualized labor and coercion. Facilitated by poverty and limited alternatives, workers suffer extreme economic abuse: 59% earn less than \$2 per day, 76% work over 8 hours without being paid overtime, and 12% of owners admit withholding wages entirely. The absence of written agreements permits arbitrary dismissal, entrapping workers in chains of fear and submission.

Rampant sexual exploitation pervades these establishments, justified by owners and clientele alike. The workers suffer widespread sexual harassment and coercion into "side work" outside of their officially declared role: 73% are compelled into sexualized work, including sitting with clients unwillingly, exposing themselves to groping, performing sexual stimulation, and engaging in sex. This is institutionalized exploitation, with 48% of them reporting sexual harassment from owners and a whopping 90% reporting commodification and abuse from customers. The statistics point to the stark reality that entertainment here is only a facade covering commercialized sexual exploitation, exacted through psychological and physical coercion.

Control mechanisms remove autonomy and basic rights of workers, reflecting basic signs of slavery. Employees report being coerced into risky acts (36% coerced to drink, smoke, or "flesh trade", 29% coerced into prostitution in and of itself) under conditions of coercion. Notably, 30% indicate that they are unable to refuse exploitation, and 40% believe that they are unable to quit their job—typically due to debts finagled, threatened physical harm,



or pilfered papers. This pervasive environment of fear is also confirmed by 64% refusing pay increases in fear of intimidation by the owners, cementing their status as bonded laborers.

The vulnerability of the minors makes the abuses more prevalent. 33% of those questioned are below the age of 18, working illegally in the conditions where obligatory sexual conduct is the rule. So many child laborers—presumably internally trafficked—testify to the predatory character of the industry and the failure of the state to enforce laws that protect children. Combined with abject economic poverty and restricted mobility, these minors face multiplicative trauma with little avenue of escape or remedy.

Ultimately, 73% of the workers report profound disillusionment with work, protesting to be harassed, degraded, and having their work stigmatized. Almost all desire safer options but none to which they have access due to poverty, illiteracy, and social exclusion. The convergence of false recruitment, economic exploitation, sexual abuse, limited movement, and child exploitation clearly signals "red flags" for slavery. These findings call for urgent measures to dismantle exploitative networks, prosecute criminals, and provide survivors with mechanisms of protection and redress.

Conclusion

This study conclusively establishes that women and girls employed in Kathmandu Valley's restaurants and massage parlors endure conditions constituting international definitions of modern slavery, characterized by widespread fraud in recruitment (71%), harsh economic exploitation (59% earning <\$2/day), systematic sexual coercion (73% forced onto "additional duties," 90% harassed by clients), and withholding of basic freedoms (40% unable to leave, 30% unable to complain). The intersecting force of child labor (33% aged below 18), debt bondage, physical and psychological domination, and institutionalized sexual violence—magnified by institutional inaction—unveils an industry founded on the exploitation of helpless women and girls that necessitates immediate and holistic intervention.

Recommendations

Emergency multi-level changes should have highest priority on: 1) Law enforcement by specialized anti-trafficking police units to investigate exploiters-owners (Criminal Code §168, Human Trafficking Act §3), prosecute wage theft (§176), and rescue children; 2) Protection with accessible shelters, trauma-informed health care, and accelerated payment for unpaid wages/abuses to survivors; 3) Economic alternatives through vocational training and microloans for survivor entrepreneurship; 4) Prevention through public awareness campaigns exposing deceptive recruitment, compulsory labor inspections of entertainment venues, and corporate accountability in supply chains; and 5) Policy reform to legalize the industry, mandate written contracts, and establish a victim-witness protection program to enable testimony against exploiters.



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