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The impact of human trafficking

Edmonton – Human trafficking is a form of modern slavery, where people – usually women – are exploited through control or influence of another person, primarily through sexual exploitation and forced labour.

In 2004, Dr. Rita Dhungel, assistant professor of social work at MacEwan University visited dozens of brothels in India. She was hired by Save the Children to study migration between countries, including women who moved from Nepal to work in Indian brothels.

Dhungel spoke to the women in Hindi. “They told me, ‘we’re okay here. We don’t want to leave. We’re sending money home to our families to take care of our children.’” During her conversations with the women she would sometimes slip in a word or two in her native language. “Once the women realized I spoke Nepalese, their tone changed dramatically. They told me they were unhappy, and asked me to take them away.”

But, when the woman running the brothel overheard the group speaking Nepalese, she quickly forced Dhungel to leave. “I felt extremely vulnerable and I was not in a position to do anything. From that point on, I knew I’d be working in the area of human trafficking.”

Dhungel’s research asked one primary question: How do adult female trafficking survivors define successful reintegration into their communities after returning home to Nepal? “Many survivors are met with hostility and discrimination, and though significant research has been done on human trafficking, very few studies have focused on reintegration.”

“I wanted to provide opportunities for the women to explore their own talents and expertise and to ask them what they could do and how they wanted to do it. As a researcher, I want my work to lead to emancipation and transformation.”

Dhungel says it was incredible to witness the women’s transformation. “At first, many of them felt they were responsible for what had happened to them. After working with the women for over a year, they came to see the systemic injustices that led to their situation.”

According to the United Nations, nearly 2.5 million people in countries around the world, including Canada, are actively being trafficked at any given time. Recognizing this, the Canadian government declared in 2012 that February 22 would be National Human Trafficking Awareness Day.

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