

TRIP REPORT



Stories from the CARE Learning Tour to Nepal, August 27-31, 2023



The delegation meets with labor migrants at the Shramik Sanjal Pre-departure Orientation.

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OVERVIEW

A delegation of four U.S. Congressional Representatives traveled to Nepal with CARE to learn first-hand how U.S. investments are helping build communities that are more resilient against economic and environmental shocks and more empowered to assert their agency in the face of gender and caste discrimination, labor exploitation, and human trafficking.

While Nepal has made significant progress in recent years to improve labor rights and gender equity, the country remains one of the least developed nations in the world. Today, the ongoing disruptions of the pandemic are compounded by structural constraints such as slow domestic job creation, high vulnerability to natural disasters amplified by climate change and environmental degradation, political volatility, and large gaps in technology, infrastructure, and public services. With few prospects in the domestic economy, many Nepalis look abroad for economic opportunity, exposing them to potential exploitation, isolation, and abuse in order to support their families back home and sustain dreams of a prosperous life. Meanwhile, women and girls in Nepal still face significant barriers to opportunity, as only a fifth

of women have completed a secondary education, with many adolescent girls dropping out due to social norms around girls' education and lack of gender-sensitive accommodations for girls.

Over their five days of travel in Nepal, the delegation visited development programs training adolescent girls from marginalized communities to advocate for their rights within their homes and with community and political leaders at the local, provincial, and federal levels. They learned how adolescent girls who are empowered to fight for their right to an education and against their own child marriages are less vulnerable to human trafficking. They visited one of many public libraries and community resource centers that demonstrate how community-led and integrated programming is helping to provide information about safe migration to those community members seeking foreign employment, while providing educational and livelihood opportunities for those who wish to build healthy and prosperous lives for themselves and their families in their homeland. They witnessed how NGOs are working with carpet factories to eradicate forced and child labor through an innovative incentive system that both protects workers and

benefits businesses. They learned how NGOs and governments are partnering to disseminate information on safe migration and prevent human trafficking at the open border between Nepal and India. And finally, the delegation met trafficking survivors who are providing long term support to their peers in the form of shelter, mental health counseling, livelihood skills training, and formal and informal education.

→ DAY 1

SETTING THE SCENE

The delegation hit the ground running after arriving in Kathmandu on the 27th. They first met with Ujjwal Sundas and Tirupati Pariyar of the Samata Foundation for an informal lunchtime conversation about the challenges facing Nepal's historically marginalized Dalit community. The delegation then departed for a tour of Kathmandu's Durbar Square, a UNESCO World Heritage Site dating back to the 3rd century AD that is a culturally and historically significant palace complex in the heart of the nation's capital.

The Learning Tour was formally kicked off that evening with an introductory briefing led by four NGO experts. Dr. Ganesh Gurung, a leading sociologist and founder of the Nepal Institute for Development Studies provided background on labor migration in Nepal, charting the course that the nearly 2000 Nepali workers who formally migrate abroad each day typically take from their home villages to the foreign lands of their employment and highlighting the threats of fraud and exploitation they face along each step of the migration process. Dr. Renu Adhikari, Founder and Chair of the Women's Rehabilitation Center (WOREC), described why human trafficking and exploitation in Nepal must be understood through an intersectional lens, and that efforts to

raise awareness about these issues must target law enforcement and policy makers, and not just vulnerable populations. Mona Sherpa, CARE Nepal's Deputy County Director, explained how need-based and localized programs can have a long-term impact as models for policy makers. Finally, Tanka Aryal, Deputy Chief of Party for Winrock International, gave an overview of USAID's Hamro Samman program combatting trafficking in persons. Responding to what was shared, Rep. Veronica Escobar drew comparisons between the context in Nepal and the challenges posed by human trafficking in her own constituency near the U.S.-Mexico border. Rep. Dan Kildee spoke about the need to leverage U.S. trade relations to eliminate exploitation in global supply chains.



Dr Ganesh Gurung and Dr. Renu Adhikari at the Scene Setter briefing

→ DAY 2

PROMOTING SAFE MIGRATION

SHRAMIK SANJAL PRE-DEPARTURE ORIENTATION FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

The delegates started off their first full day in Nepal by sitting in on an orientation session for prospective labor migrants organized by Shramik Sanjal, a worker-led support network for Nepali migrant laborers. The delegation first heard from three prospective migrants who shared their personal stories and motivations for seeking foreign employment. Members of Shramik Sanjal then led interactive sessions explaining the formal migration process, including obtaining necessary documentation, navigating social and cultural life abroad, accessing helpful resources, and avoiding common forms of fraud and exploitation targeting uninformed, vulnerable migrants.

LUNCH BRIEFING WITH U.S. MISSION

Members of the U.S. Mission briefed the delegation on the U.S. government's development and humanitarian investments in Nepal. Ambassador Dean Thompson praised Nepal's commitment to free and fair elections and its peace and reconciliation efforts in the wake of the country's

recent civil war. He also stated that he is focused on promoting entrepreneurship and helping to create an improved investment climate in Nepal so that more Nepalis are incentivized to remain in Nepal and contribute to strengthening the economy. Jason Meeks, Deputy Chief of Mission, spoke about the U.S.'s strong relationship with Nepal, pointing out that Nepal has the second highest number of students per capita studying in the U.S. Sepideh Keyvanshad, USAID Nepal's Mission Director, described how USAID is devoting its resources to building the capacity of local institutions and leveraging homegrown innovation to lead development efforts in Nepal. Senior Defense Official Michael Forester explained how the U.S. is helping to bolster Nepal's sovereignty while Troy Kofroth, Peace Corps Country Director in Nepal, discussed the return of the program in country following the COVID-19 pandemic.

MAITI NEPAL ANTI-TRAFFICKING BORDER SCREENING CHECKPOINT

After lunch, the delegates packed their bags and traveled to Lumbini Province, where they made

an evening visit to Maiti Nepal's anti-trafficking screening checkpoint at the India-Nepal border on the edge of the Siddharthnagar township. Maiti Nepal has worked for three decades to prevent human trafficking in Nepal while providing short- and long-term support to survivors of trafficking. Maya Chhetri of Maiti Nepal gave an overview of the organization's anti-trafficking screening program, highlighting how her team works with local government officials and law enforcement to ensure that potential victims of trafficking are able to return home if possible and have access to social services supporting recovery and rehabilitation if necessary. Maiti Nepal's women-led team of border screeners then conducted a simulation of how they identify and approach suspected cases of human trafficking and led the delegation on a tour of the small office in which they conduct intake interviews. The delegation was able to observe the Maiti staff in action as they boarded a passenger bus heading for India to conduct a screening.



The delegation speaks with Deputy Mission Director Jason Meeks.



Rep Escobar observes an interview to vet migrants for potential situations of human trafficking.

SELF-EMPOWERMENT AND SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

BREAKFAST CONVERSATION WITH UDAAN GIRLS

The delegates spent their third morning in Nepal having a breakfast conversation with two adolescent girls, Indirawati and Archana, who shared their experiences participating in CARE Nepal's Udaan program. Udaan, which means "flight" in Nepali, is an accelerated education program for adolescent out-of-school girls aged 11-14. Factors such as poverty, child marriage, and taboos around menstruation are driving drop-outs among adolescent girls in Lumbini Province. The model provides these girls with an intensive and high-quality condensed 11-month curriculum, including leadership and life skills, and helps them to successfully transition into formal public schools. Indirawati and Archana spoke about how the Udaan program has empowered them and allowed them to envision a more independent future for themselves.

TIPPING POINT GIRLS' RIGHTS FORUM

After breakfast, the delegation sat in on a Girls' Rights Forum meeting facilitated by CARE's Tipping Point program. The Tipping Point program was designed to address the root causes of child marriage in rural Nepal. The project's approach is rooted in challenging repressive social expectations and norms while promoting adolescent girl-led movements. The program combines a focus on girls' agency, the supportive relationships around them, and the structures that set rules for their lives, so girls and their allies can assert their rights through girl-led collective action.

One of Tipping Point's key vehicles for action is the Girl's Rights Forum (GRF). Members of the GRF explained to the delegation how it provides a space for girls to come together and organize advocacy initiatives around four priority areas: child marriage, sexual abuse, social agency and mobility, and access to higher education. The girls then led a simulation of a GRF meeting, where there 12 girls discussed updates on past and ongoing advocacy activities, upcoming plans for national children's day, and how best to use the budget allocated to the GRF by the local government. After sharing lunch with the girls, the delegation split into two groups and visited the respective homes of two of them, Archana (whom the group met over breakfast) and Sunita. At each home, delegates sat down with the girls' parents and discussed what their hopes were for their daughters and how they planned to continue supporting their further education and personal growth. Rep. Susan Wild stated how inspired she was by the girls and encouraged them to continue pursuing new forms of education, stressing the importance of language skills in today's job market.

MAYA DEVI TEMPLE TOUR

Between site visits, the delegation got a chance to tour the Maya Devi Temple, another UNESCO World Heritage Site, marking what is traditionally considered to be the birthplace of Gautama Buddha.

JAHADA COMMUNITY LIBRARY AND RESOURCE CENTER

The day's final activity was a visit to the Jahada Community Library and Resource Center, one of 69 such centers facilitated by the non-profit READ Nepal. Each one offers a wide range of services determined by the specific needs of the community, including information on safe migration and vocational and informal education programs. Upon receiving a warm welcome from members of the local community, the delegates were led on a brief tour of the Jahada center. They then met with members of the center's Tech Age Girls (TAG) initiative, which provides digital literacy and leadership training to adolescent girls in the community. Afterward, they heard from participants in the center's Practical Community Solutions program, about how the livelihood training and support they received helped them pay off debts and consider continuing to work in the community rather than migrate abroad.



Rep Pocan at the Read Nepal's Jahada Community Library.

The delegation spends the morning with adolescent girls from CARE's UDAAN and Tipping Point programs.

PREVENTING LABOR EXPLOITATION

MEETING WITH SURVIVORS OF CHILD LABOR AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The delegation caught an early morning flight back to Kathmandu to meet with two survivors of child labor and human trafficking who are now working to help others overcome the same forms of exploitation they once experienced. They first heard from Hem Moktan, a survivor of three separate instances of child labor/child trafficking. At 13 he was rescued by GoodWeave and enrolled in a GoodWeave transit home for rescued children. Now, in his capacity as program officer, he designs Nepal GoodWeave Foundation's remediation and rehabilitation programs for rescued children. The delegation also heard the story of Urmila Shrestha, who had been trafficked as a child and was rescued and admitted to the Shakti Samuha survivors' shelter at age 13. She has been working as a counselor and project coordinator at Shakti Samuha for the last 10 years.



Hem Moktan of GoodWeave and Urmila Shrestha of Shakti Samuha share their stories.



The delegation learns about carpet production at the Tibet Carpet Factory.

TIBET CARPET FACTORY TOUR

After lunch, the delegation toured the Tibet Carpet Factory where they learned about how GoodWeave partners with businesses to eliminate child labor in Nepal's carpet industry. GoodWeave audits facilities like Tibet Carpet's with those found to uphold certain standards such as having decent working conditions and being child labor free eligible for a GoodWeave fair trade certification. The factory's management team explained how the system has helped their business, particularly in the area of staff retention.

GOODWEAVE HAMRO GHAR CHILDREN'S HOME

The final visit of the day was to the Hamro Ghar, a shelter home and boarding school operated by GoodWeave for children rescued from child labor. While touring the Hamro Ghar, the delegation met with teachers, counselors, and case managers and learned how the facility provides the children with a safe environment to overcome their challenging experiences, restart their education and rebuild their lives with the support of a team of specialists. The residential facility includes a tailored "accelerated education program" for children to reach their age level learning. Hamro Ghar's programming takes a holistic approach to rehabilitation, helping residents reclaim their childhoods through a range of extracurricular activities including music, dance, drama, and sports.

After the tour the children performed a dance they had prepared for the delegation. This was followed by an open conversation in which the delegates introduced themselves to the children and explained the purpose of their visit to Nepal, while the children had the opportunity to ask questions of the delegation.

RECEPTION

On Wednesday night, the delegation attended a reception hosted by CARE at Dwarika's Hotel. The event provided a chance for the delegation to interact and share notes with members of the U.S. Mission, civil society and NGO leaders working on the issues of development, forced labor, and human trafficking, and local government officials.



The delegation meets with students at Good Weave's Hamro Ghar shelter home.

REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION

SHAKTI SAMUHA WOMEN'S SHELTER

The final day of the Learning Tour began with a visit to Shakti Samuha, Nepal's first shelter home for survivors of human trafficking founded and operated by survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. As the delegation toured the facility, they learned that while Shakti Samuha provides a safe home for survivors, it also offers a range of services including legal assistance, employment and counseling services, and educational and income generating skills programs. The organization also conducts advocacy activities aimed at shaping policy and raising awareness around the needs of survivors and to minimize the risk of future trafficking. The delegation heard from two members of Shakti Samuha who shared their personal stories and described how the organization had empowered them to reclaim agency over their own lives and hope for a better, more independent future for themselves. Following these interactions, a group of Shakti Samuha residents put on a powerful dance performance on the theme of "turning tears into power."

BRIEFING ON ACCOUNTABILITY

The delegation closed out the trip with an evening briefing on multisectoral approaches to holding powerful public and private institutions accountable around issues of labor exploitation and human trafficking. They heard from the leaders of four organizations, each one adopting a different strategy to promote the rights of Nepal's most vulnerable communities including investigative journalism, strategic litigation, comprehensive field research, and public-private fair-trade certifications.



The delegation with the team at Shakti Samuha.



Briefing on Government Accountability with Blitz Media, LAPSOJ, NIMJN, and GFI.



"It was a privilege to lead this delegation to Nepal to learn how US investment is making a positive impact in the region. From fighting human trafficking, child labor, and exploitive practices, our investments are making Nepal a more equitable and safer place to live. Thank you to CARE USA for highlighting these important issues, and I look forward to getting back to Washington to help strengthen our partnership with the Nepali people." – Rep. Mark Pocan



A Story from the field

Archana is from a marginalized community based in a rural part of Nepal's Lumbini district. Due to the generalized poverty in her village and a number of circumstances that left her family in a particularly difficult economic position, Archana had to drop out of school because her parents could no longer afford to pay her school fees.

Through CARE's Udaan program, however, Archana was able to resume her education and is now a leading advocate among her peers and in her community against child, early, and forced marriage. Archana is thankful that her parents have been supportive of her dreams, despite ongoing financial hardship, and says that her father believes that "what sons can do, daughters can do."

→ POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

LEGISLATION:

Current opportunities:

- Support robust funding, at no less than FY23 levels, for foreign assistance in the FY24 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bill
 - Within the broader foreign assistance budget:
 - Increase funding for gender, specifically the GEEA fund, education, and GBV prevention and response
 - Amplify investments in pooled/multilateral support funds for all forms of care work
- Support the Keeping Girls in School Act when introduced, which would:
 - Authorize USAID to enter into innovative, results-based and traditional grant programs designed to reduce the barriers that adolescent girls face to receiving an education.
 - Outline and bring attention to barriers that girls face in their pursuit of secondary education.
 - Require the development of a U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls in consultation with other departments and agencies in the federal government and civil society, to be reviewed and updated every 5 years.
 - Continue to ensure that gender remains a priority of US foreign assistance legislation and is not cut or disproportionately impacted
- Cosponsor and support passage of the Safe From the Start Act, which would:
 - Formalize the State Department's and USAID's existing Safe from the Start program, thus ensuring continuous attention and resources for the issue of GBV in humanitarian emergencies;
 - Update the objectives of Safe from the Start, including goals related to protection and empowerment of women and girls in emergencies, and broad partnerships to improve and scale-up NGO and local capacity;

- Establish a Congressional reporting requirement to ensure accountability towards the goals and objectives of the Safe from the Start initiative;
 - And recognize that the U.S. Government should provide assistance and protection where needed, but also build the capacity of women and women-led local organizations to act as first responders, community leaders and drivers of sustainable change.
- Support emergency humanitarian and long-term agriculture funding in potential FY 2023 supplemental package

Potential opportunities:

- Ensure U.S. international humanitarian and development programs include sex- and age-disaggregated data in reporting that informs programs through executive action and in appropriations language.

ADMINISTRATION ENGAGEMENT:

- Implement the USG's Women's Economic Security Strategy's recommendations for addressing GBV in the workplace
- Ensure the implementation of the Administration's GBV strategy reflects the intersection of GBV and WEE – particularly as it relates to GBV in the workplace, GBV referral pathways, gender mainstreaming in livelihoods programming and norms change programs among men and boys.
- Utilize multilateral spaces like the International Labor Organization (ILO), the UN SDG implementation and monitoring process and the UN Joint Program on Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) to defend and advance worker's rights, gender equality and combat child exploitation

Promote the meaningful participation and partnership of women's and girls' rights organizations in relevant political processes and multilateral spaces including the ILO, CSW and the SDG process as well as across the implementation of the Administration's relevant strategies.

Issues to champion through future legislation, appropriations, or letters:

- Promoting an agenda that prioritizes decent work and strengthens labor conditions by:
 - Upholding international labor standards in diplomatic engagements and continuing monitoring/data collection on workers' rights and protections
 - Utilizing USG leadership in international spaces to increase accountability, protection, and safeguarding against exploitation
 - Utilizing existing USG tools (via trade policy, etc) to push international trade partners to end the use of forced labor. All US bilateral and multilateral trade agreements have good provisions against trafficking and forced labor, however, few have enforcement mechanisms built in.
 - Promoting social protections and living income standards for workers; addressing issues of access to bathrooms, childcare, healthcare, and other support (especially for women and girls)
 - Strengthening grievance mechanisms for workers
- Gender and Work
 - Advance social protections for workers in the informal economy (the majority of whom are women)
 - Continue to invest in education for workers to build skills that allow them to increase their economic empowerment
 - Improve women's access to land use and rights, as well as remove barriers to justice
 - Continue to strengthen investments in women's economic empowerment programming (such as Savings Groups) that supports women's capacity to build capital, increase their incomes, improve their financial literacy, entrepreneurship and joint decision-making

We are deeply grateful to the many people who generously gave of their time to make this visit to Nepal a success.



If you are interested in learning more about CARE's Learning Tours program, please contact:

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