



Focus group discussion with adolescents working in the adult entertainment sector in Nepal © Fiona Samuels

Use of digital technology among adolescents in the adult entertainment sector in Nepal

Authors: Anita Ghimire, Fiona Samuels and Samjhana Bhujel¹

This brief is part of a series of publications on adolescents working in adult entertainment in Nepal. Findings on the lives of adolescent girls and boys working in the sector can be found in the accompanying [report](#); and cross-border sex work between India and Nepal is explored in this [brief](#).

Overview

While digital technology can help adolescents promote their rights, access information and participate in society, it also comes with risks of exploitation and abuse. There is a dearth of information on how adolescents working in the adult entertainment sector (AES) use the digital technology and its impact on their well-being. This brief aims to bridge the information gap to safeguard vulnerable adolescents working in the AES from the negative impacts of technology use and help them to leverage technology for their protection.

The scale of the challenge

Understanding how vulnerable adolescents use technology and what impact it will have on them will be important in helping build adolescents' capabilities. There is a dearth of data on this for Nepal and this report aims to fill that gap by discussing technology use amongst adolescents working in the Adult Entertainment Sector, a sector where these adolescents are highly vulnerable to physical, sexual, economic and emotional violence.

Key recommendations

- NGOs should make more use of social media and digital technology to raise awareness among adolescents in Nepal about career counselling and risky jobs such as in the adult entertainment sector.
- Digital literacy interventions for girls and boys in schools and for those working in the adult entertainment sector would reduce the risk of online exploitation.
- Programmes should use social media to target 'hard to reach' girls and boys in the AES and develop long-term, cost-effective interventions.
- NGOs/INGOs and the government should revise their monitoring strategies to ensure data on online sex work is captured.

¹ Suggested citation: Ghimire, A., Samuels, F. and Bhujel, S. (2020) 'Use of digital technology among adolescents in the adult entertainment sector in Nepal.' Policy Brief. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence.

Methodology

This brief is based on data from 9 life history, 40 in-depth, and 45 key informant interviews, as well as 28 focus group discussions and 3 case studies. The 211 participants included girls and boys engaged in the AES, people of all ages from their home towns, key informants and boys working in hotels (India only). The interviews took place in 4 Nepali districts: Sindhupalchowk (as the home town), Kathmandu, Jhapa and Sunsari (as destinations for work in the AES); in Delhi in India (for cross-border AES work); and at 2 points on the India-Nepal border in Jhapa. Associated AES websites, social media, Phulchowki Media and YouTube videos were also analysed.

The study follows the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) conceptual framework,² which examines issues through a context lens – the family, household, community, state and global contexts in which adolescents are situated (see Box 1).

Literature review and background information

Why is a focus on adolescents important for Nepal?

Adolescents (aged 10–19 years) make up 16% of the world's population (UNICEF, 2019), and 22% of Nepal's 28.5 million citizens (UNFPA, 2017). There are 3,207,821 male and 3,199,583 female adolescents in Nepal (NPCS and CBS, 2012).

Despite its young population, citizens of working age (15–64)³ currently outnumber dependents in Nepal due to falling birth and mortality rates. This demographic dividend, which began in 1995, has created a window of opportunity for growth and sustainable development that will continue until 2047 (Amin et al., 2017) (see Figure 1).

Nepal has one of the fastest ageing rates in the world and will be classed as an ageing society⁴ by 2028 and as an aged

Box 1: The GAGE programme

GAGE is a nine-year (2015–2024) mixed methods longitudinal research programme, exploring gendered experiences of adolescents. It follows lives of 20,000 adolescents in six focal countries in three regions of the world: Ethiopia and Rwanda in Africa; Bangladesh and Nepal in Asia; and Jordan and Lebanon in the Middle East. GAGE aims to fill the vast evidence gap on 'what works' to enable poor adolescent girls to emerge from poverty and fast-track social change for themselves, their families and communities, and their countries. GAGE's research addresses two broad questions:

- What do adolescents' lives look like as they evolve over the second decade of life and how are their experiences gendered?
- What impact have change strategies (e.g. through programme interventions) had on adolescents' development?

society by 2054 (UNFPA, 2017).⁵ There are currently enough people of working age to support the older population, but this is expected to change over time. In 2015, there were 11.1 people of working age for every older person – by 2050, this will halve to just 5.6 people (Amin et al., 2017). The working population will also need to support other groups, such as people with disabilities and vulnerable indigenous groups.

The government wants children and adolescents to be far more productive than today's adults by the time they enter the workforce (ibid.) and views adolescents as central to the country's development agenda. A national youth policy (MoYS, 2015) outlines why investment in the capabilities of adolescents is going to be critical in the coming decades:

- adolescents alive today will need to be self-sufficient in retirement, as the younger population will be too small to support them
- as life expectancies increase, adolescents will need to plan for a longer retirement

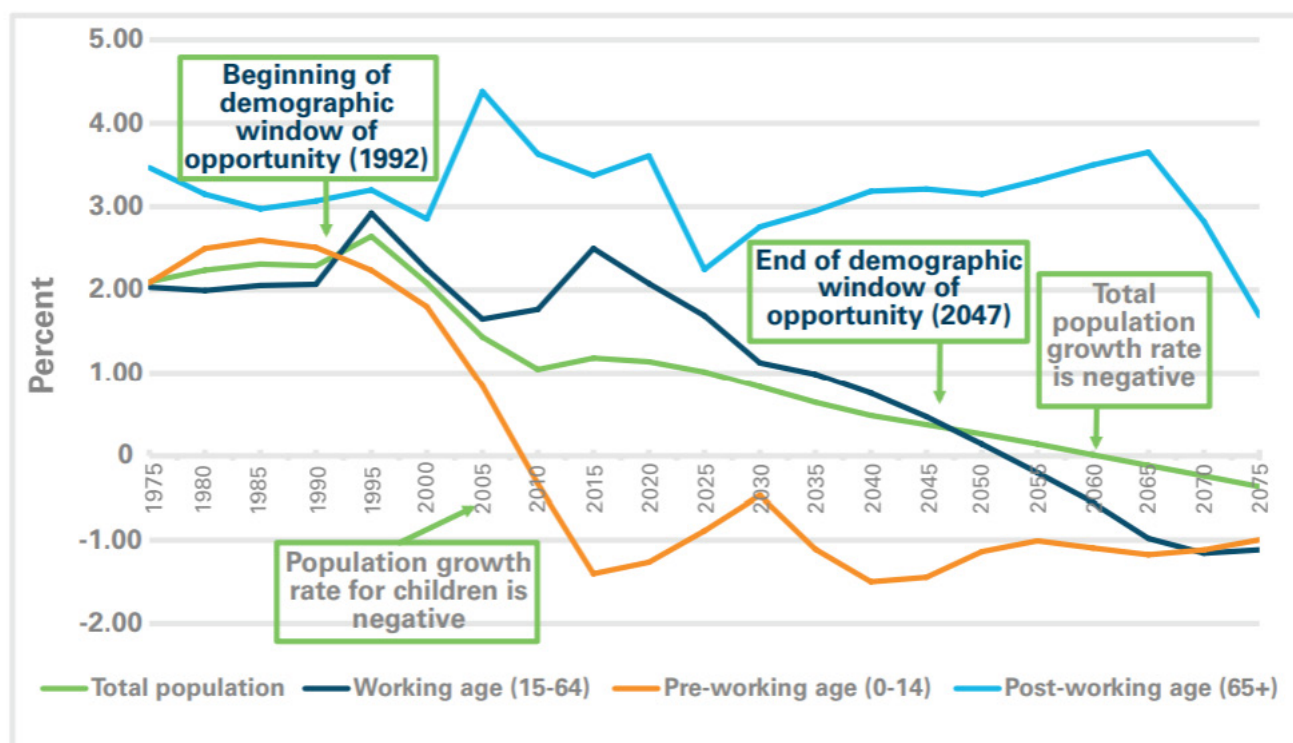
² For details on the conceptual framework please refer to GAGE consortium (2019) Gender and adolescence. Why understanding adolescent capabilities, change strategies and contexts matters. Second Edition. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence.

³ NPCS and CBS. 2019. National labour force survey 2018/2019. Kathmandu: Nepal Planning Commission Secretariat and Central Bureau of Statistics.

⁴ Where people aged 65+ account for more than 7% of the population.

⁵ Where people aged 65+ account for more than 14% of the population.

Figure 1: Forecast demographic changes in Nepal by age group



Source: National Planning Commission and UNICEF, 2017

- adolescents will need to contribute more throughout their lives to support the ageing population – the 65+ age group will become the largest group in 22 years and will increase rapidly thereafter.

Technology use among adolescents in South Asia and Nepal

The literature on adolescents and digital technology is patchy (see Livingstone et al., 2017), but studies have explored internet access; agency; digital skills; patterns of use; IT for education and information (Ibegbulam et al., 2018; Zelezny-Green, 2018); identity; social and romantic relationships; negotiations with clients among adolescent girls (Onyima and Egbunike, 2018); and psychosocial well-being, health and violence (Stonard et al., 2014; Carson et al., 2018).

Globally, there are 3 billion internet users and 7 billion mobile phone subscriptions – South Asia accounts for more than half of the latter (OWIN and ECPAT, 2015). While there is no age-disaggregated data on the use of technology in Nepal, over 75% of internet users in South Asia in 2011 were students and 25% of children send over 50 messages a day (ibid.). Figures from Nepal's Telecommunications Authority show that the number of mobile phone subscriptions (38.3 million) was larger than the total population (28.5 million) in 2018.⁶

Phone use is one area where the gap between rural/urban, class and ethnicity in an otherwise very unequal society is almost non-existent (except for gender – 80% of men and 65% of women use mobile phones).⁷ In 2018, more than half of Nepal's population used a smartphone – this is expected to rise by 10% each year (Nepali Telecom, 2020) – 65% were online, 60% use social media and 58% access news through such sites.⁸ In January 2018, Nepal had nearly 9.3 million Facebook users and more than 6.4 million registered YouTube users (Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, 2018).

In Nepal, studies have at looked adolescents and internet use (UNICEF, 2018; Acharya 2016), including in relation to education (Acharya, 2016), school-based sexual and reproductive health (Shaivitz, 2017), and acceptance of violence among adolescent girls (UNICEF, 2018). As a result of technology, the way today's adolescents socialise, learn and interact is very different from previous generations. However, this rapid growth in technology and internet access has had both positive and negative impacts on adolescents and children in Nepal. It offers them a means to promote their rights, access information and participate in society, but it also brings risks of surveillance, exploitation and further exclusion (Livingstone et al., 2017). Other than gaming, adolescents are active on social media. They create public

⁶ <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/number-of-mobile-phone-users-in-nepal-is-34-higher-than-population.html>.

⁷ gadgetframe.com/blog/nepali-people-ahead-of-india-in-technology-use-72-nepali-uses-mobile-phone.

⁸ Ibid.

profiles and build online relationships on social sites like YouTube – a site also used by traffickers to lure children into sex work (Gupta et al., 2017).

Digitalisation in the AES, including for sex work

The use of technology in sex work globally started in the 1980s with online ads (Cunningham and Kendall, 2011). As countries cracked down on red light districts and street-based sex work, much of this work migrated online (Campbell et al., 2018; MacPhail et al., 2015; Cunningham and Kendall, 2011). Over time, digitalisation transformed the whole sex industry: outreach increased for both sex workers and clients, new online sex services were created, and the way sex work is marketed and organised changed. Digitalisation also changed employment arrangements, leading to a shift from formal employment such as that based in hotels and cabaret bars to more informal self-employment (Cunningham and de Angelo, 2017; Sanders et al., 2016).

Studies on the AES in Nepal largely focus on the involvement of minors (Dank et al., 2019; Frederick et al., 2010; Risal et al., 2018; Shakti Samuha, 2008), international trafficking (Safer Migration Project (SaMi)/HELVETAS Swiss Inter-cooperation Nepal, 2018); protection of women; gender and identity issues, such as citizenship of children born to victims of trafficking; and trafficked women (Poudel and Luintel, 2003; Maiti Nepal, 2010; Richardson et al., 2016). Apart from three studies conducted recently by the Freedom Fund (2018, 2019), the use of digital technology in the AES and its implications for programming in Nepal has not been explored in any depth. Most programmes fail to recognise the impact of digitalisation, and focus solely on the establishment-based AES. Understanding technology use is critical to ensuring policies and programmes address issues faced by girls and boys in this rapidly changing industry.

Studies have included cases where children involved in the AES in Nepal have been asked to take photos and videos by their clients (Sath Sath, 2018; CWIN and ECPAT, 2015). The internet also gives children access to pornographic images videos. Additionally, middle-aged men send young girls and boys nude images on Facebook, indicating online sexual exploitation of children (Sath Sath, 2018). The same study finds that men/boys create fake profiles and online identities to establish relationships with girls/women and lure them into sharing intimate pictures in order to blackmail them for money and sex.

Research findings

How adolescent girls use digital technology for work in the AES

The majority of girls reported using social media for work, although some prefer face-to-face contact due to fears of online abuse. Common apps include Facebook, Messenger, YouTube and imo, while the use of Viber and Instagram, according to key informants, is increasing among young girls entering the sector.

There is a general belief that being active on social media attracts more clients. Girls therefore share music, videos, photos and public posts to increase followers, and while Facebook does not allow explicit content, they also post sexual content.

Girls mostly own modern digital phones or smartphones – laptops, tablets and other devices were not commonly owned. Apart from company profiles on Facebook, girls post personal music videos, photos, TikTok videos or public group messages to increase followers. Aside from those working in Dohari, girls reported having two mobile phones and two Facebook accounts; one for work and the other for family and non-work friends. Girls working in Dohari have only one account and the account is in their real name, as they are on the lookout for contacts in the music industry to enhance their careers.

Girls who engage in the cross-border AES use Messenger to stay in contact with clients in India when they are working in Nepal. Relationships with Nepali clients who travel for foreign employment are maintained through Facebook, Viber and imo. Maintaining contact ensures they send gifts and money, remain loyal customers and engage their services when they come to Kathmandu.

While technology has not entirely dismantled establishment-based AES venues, it does offer alternative ways for girls to work and connect with clients. This applies to commercial sex work as well. Female migrants who travel for foreign employment also use apps that connect domestic workers to customers and integrate social sites like Facebook and Instagram to find clients for sex work:

I have heard it internationally from journalists, not in Nepal but, there is an application called 'SALES' where the middleman provides women domestic worker or even GSW to clients.

Key informant interview, Kathmandu

In their free time, girls use the internet and their phones to keep in touch with family and friends back home, as well as new friends in the urban areas where they work. The girls watch videos on YouTube to improve their singing and dancing skills so that they can perform better at work. They also reported making prank calls to random boys for fun.

How boys, middlemen and employers use digital technology

Boys who work in the AES do not have to attract clients as their jobs in the AES are usually in cooking, security and administrative and financial work of the establishments. Even if boys work as dancers and singers (such as in Dohari⁹ and dance bars), they are not pressured to bring in clients like the girls. (For details see our accompanying [report](#)). They therefore use Facebook for personal communication.

Middlemen and employers use social media and digital technology to recruit new girls and move them between employers and clients including for cross-border/international adult entertainment work. The middlemen who supply girls communicate with them through social media to offer them jobs. As they earn a higher commission for younger girls, they are constantly incentivised to recruit young girls into the industry. They do this by adding village girls on Facebook, communicating with them regularly, and luring them to urban areas to work in the adult entertainment industry. Employers also use digital technology to live-stream videos and post photos of celebrities, models and artists to attract girls and boys to work in the industry and clients to their establishments.

Employers use technology to move girls between cities in Nepal to respond to the demand for 'fresh faces'. After a girl has worked in a city for a few months, the middleman or employer will connect her to clients, middlemen and employers in another city and send for a replacement. All these arrangements happen over the phone. The same process is used for moving girls to India. We also found that girls will invite their friends if they find the work is good in a new location. After a few months, they often move together to work in another hub.

Internet access among girls and boys working in the AES

Access to the internet is mixed. Although Wi-Fi is often free at their place of work, boys and girls are usually only allowed to use the internet to contact clients. As explained above, boys are usually not engaged in entertaining clients but have security and management roles and as such their use of the internet is not seen as necessary for bringing in customers, unlike for girls. Hence, employers are strict about not letting boys use internet during their working hours. (For details see our accompanying [report](#).) When not at work, girls and boys either buy a monthly data pack or use passwords to the Wifi given by fellow tenants. They cannot afford unlimited home internet subscriptions.

Yes, I am afraid that parents will know about me. When my husband comes to Kathmandu I change my number. I have been using two SIM cards; one is for my clients and the other one is for my family.

(In-depth interview with girl engaged in freelance sex work, Kathmandu)

Our employer will scold us if we use phones during work. Boys mostly go to the restroom to use internet and mobile. Once inside the restroom, they play games on the mobiles or use Facebook.

Focus group discussion with boys working in dance clubs, Kathmandu.

How girls in the AES communicate with clients

Initial client conversations commonly take place via text message, while illiterate girls use Messenger and imo. Once the girls have met the clients a few times, they will video call or chat with them over Messenger. It is a common practice to have two SIM cards/phone numbers – one personal, the other for business – to avoid family members hearing about their work.

Yes, I am afraid that parents will know about me. When my husband comes to Kathmandu I change my number. I have been using two SIM cards; one is for my clients and the other one is for my family.

In-depth interview with girl engaged in freelance sex work, Kathmandu.

Clients forcing girls to share their phone numbers is a common challenge for girls. Employers also encourage girls not to refuse the clients. Girls only share work numbers with trusted clients that they have met a few times in case they end up harassing them or being impolite. If they do not trust them, but they are a good source of income (regular, pay well, important to the employer), girls will offer to call them instead of sharing their numbers. The contacts of trustworthy clients are saved to avoid fake and unwanted calls and their other non-work number that is used to contact family members is not shared with clients even if they ask for it.

⁹ Dohari are duet houses where groups of girls and boys sit opposite to one another and the lead sings duets. The songs are flirty and conversational and are composed during the performance itself as an answer to the remark of the opposite group who takes the lead in singing.

🗨️ I give [them my number] if the person seems nice ... Some people are soft-spoken while some are very aggressive. The aggressive people try to force us while the people with good habit will obey us.

(In-depth interview with a girl engaged in freelance sex work, Jhapa)

I give [them my number] if the person seems nice. If the person and his behaviour don't look nice, I don't give.

Interviewer: Can you identify by looking? Can you know their behaviour? How do you know?

Some people are soft-spoken while some are very aggressive. The aggressive people try to force us while the people with good habit will obey us.

In-depth interview with a girl engaged in freelance sex work, Jhapa.

Girls working in the AES establishments and freelance primarily use Messenger to communicate with clients. As with mobile phones, initial contact happens via text. Once comfortable, the girls switch to voice and video calls. Girls with low literacy use Messenger voice calls.

When communicating via social media, clients often request sexualised video calls (involving flirting or the performance of sexual acts) or 'private' pictures. Most girls were cautious about accepting calls or sharing sensitive content, unless it was with a regular, trusted client. However, those who are open to sharing such contents perceive this as necessary to keep clients happy for their own financial benefit. They also feel it is good for work and part of their duty to employers to accept such requests.

He asks me to send pictures and then I send. He sends his picture. We then start to comment on each other's picture.

Interviewer: Do you do video call?

Yes, I do.

Interviewer: Doesn't he ask you to show him your private pictures?

No, he has not asked for that yet.

In-depth interview with girl engaged in freelance sex work, Jhapa.

Girls entering the AES who have completed secondary school tend to use imo and Viber instead of Facebook. They believe these apps are safer, as clients cannot contact them unless they have their number. On Facebook, one does not necessarily need a phone number to call. However, if the clients have their numbers, they can call them over Viber or imo unless the girls block them.

I use Facebook and there are numerous people calling me on Messenger. So, I usually prefer Viber and imo because strangers cannot directly contact without my phone number. On Facebook, the boys sometimes sent pictures of their private parts.

Focus group discussion with girls engaged in freelance sex work, Sunsari.

Use of imo groups

The study finds that imo groups are location specific ('Kathmandu Girls and Boys' and 'Rodhi ghar Butwal (duet singing house, Butwal)'), interest based ('let's chat with couple', 'Indonesian and Philippines girls', and 'Dohari'), or random ('Everyone's dear and fun group'). Anyone can join these groups. Some are international, while others have only local members.

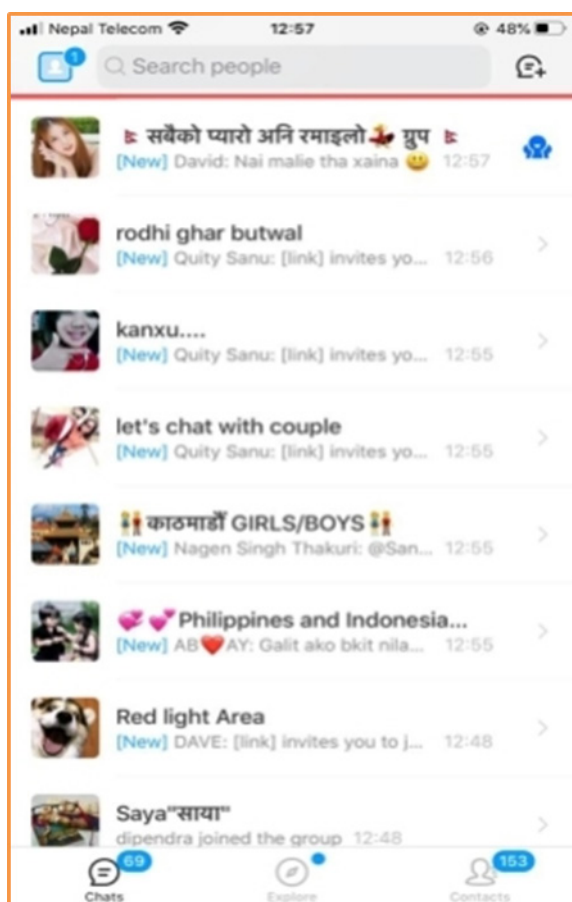
Fake accounts were active in all the imo groups looked at. A review of the messages in group chats finds that conversations are flirty, usually have double meanings and include the exchange of sensitive and sexual images. Any user can start a private chat from a group chat. Requests for private chats with girls are common. It seems that clients make contact with girls through groups, and then move on to private chats to negotiate sex, meeting time/place and payment.

The study finds that imo groups used by sex workers appear to have been created by girls (as administrators). However, key informants were of the opinion that men or boyfriends who work as middlemen often open and operate the groups using a girl's name. Invitations are sent to boys who in turn invite their male peers, increasing the size of the group. Typically, an administrator will connect a group to several other groups to expand their networks and connect users to new groups.

🗨️ I usually prefer Viber and imo because strangers cannot directly contact without my phone number. On Facebook, the boys sometimes sent pictures of their private parts

(Focus group discussion with girls engaged in freelance sex work, Sunsari)

Figure 2: A typical active imo group linked to the AES by age group



Source: AnitaGhimire/NISER

YouTube and online TV channels

Our analysis of YouTube channels owned by girls working as freelance sex workers finds that girls upload video interviews, photos and contact information to publicise their work and attract new clients. Online TV channels such as 'Pulchowki Media' also provide links to sex work. The channel was closed and the owners arrested in 2019 for paying girls for highly sexualised scripted interviews. The government has also closed YouTube channels which show restricted pornographic content.

Positive impacts of digital technology on sex workers

For girls and boys working in Dohari, social media gives them exposure and a way to showcase their talent. They join professional groups like 'National Dohari Association' on Facebook to connect with people who might progress their careers. They believe that this opens avenues to participate in Dohari programmes in other cities or abroad. Similarly, girls feel that YouTube has helped them improve their dancing and singing skills (through watching new films), helping them perform better at work.

In Jhapa, we found freelance sex workers from relatively wealthy families (who were influenced to enter into sex work through friendship circles) used technology to exclude middlemen once they had established relationships with a few well-off clients. This gives them the freedom to choose clients as well as increase their earnings. First, the girls meet groups of clients through hotel staff or middlemen who work in hotels. Once they have worked with a group, they then make personal arrangements (instead of using a middleman) with selected clients. This can increase their income considerably, as expressed by one girl:

I make around 2-3 lakhs in a month if I save.

Interviewer: In one month? You make that much money?

In the job?

Yes.

Interviewer: Do you go around?

Box 2: Case study: NGO uses social media to reach sex workers

In Jhapa and Sunsari, NGOs are updating their engagement strategies and using technology to reach girls who may otherwise have been excluded from programmes. Here, NGOs are using social media to target women and girls with health and awareness campaigns. Sahara Nepal, a national NGO based in Jhapa that works with vulnerable groups, noticed a decrease in establishment-based sex work – that women and girls were soliciting in digital spaces. In response, they trained staff to identify and join social networks used by sex workers. Once established within the networks, they shared messages on sexual and reproductive health and rights, alternative livelihoods programmes, and HIV prevention and testing. They start with web messages, and subsequently provide information via webchat. Sex workers who previously did not want to identify themselves now come to drop-in centres. Based on insights from joining these networks, Sahara Nepal offered HIV testing in the community to enable sex workers to be discreetly tested in their own home. This resulted in a considerable increase in people accessing HIV tests and key informants feel that this has reduced the gap between the estimated and actual numbers of people living with HIV in Nepal.

No, it's through the contact. So the thing is at first I came in contact with one hotel where I used to do business with 15–20 people per day. I collected guest from that process. Before they used give 5,000 to the broker and 4,000 to us. Now with the same guest I get 10–15,000 or 7–8,000.

Interviewer: How do you do it yourself? Through your mobile?

Yes.

Interviewer: How do you make contact? Can you please tell me in detail?

I tell them that I am available outside the hotel. They take my number and call me later.

In-depth interview with a girl engaged in freelance sex work, Jhapa.

Some girls have used a mobile phone to escape trafficking/forced sex work by calling the police. According to key informants, girls also use phones to call their contacts in NGOS for help if the police arrest them or treat them badly.

Negative impacts of the internet and technology on sex workers

The study finds social media has several negative impacts, particularly for girls. According to key informants, it widens girls' social circles, connecting them to new peer groups who lead them into sex work. Similarly, social media has made it cheaper and easier for middlemen to reach out and befriend girls, assess their lives, see if they are destitute and lure them into sex work.

Social media makes it easier for men to track girls down online. They find out their names in Dohari restaurants or dance bars when they perform on stage. Unlike other girls, performers in Dohari in particular use their real names on Facebook so that music producers can easily find them. They subsequently feel forced to accept unsolicited friendship requests from men for the sake of business or pushed by their employers. This opens up avenues for abuse by clients, including unwelcome calls, messages and pornographic content. Similarly, in adult entertainment venues, girls are under pressure to attract as many clients as possible. Even if they initially resist, we found they end

Before they used give 5,000 to the broker and 4,000 to us. Now with the same guest I get 10–15,000 or 7–8,000.

(In-depth interview with a girl engaged in freelance sex work, Jhapa)

up sharing numbers and social contacts making them vulnerable to future online abuse.

Social media also gives clients continuous access to girls. Respondents said that clients send pornographic videos out of working hours. They feel pressured to respond, even if they are not working and spending time with family. Some girls were followed by clients even after they had left the sector to get married and eventually the marriages ended when the husbands and their families came to know about their previous engagement in the AES. Access to technology has changed the needs/aspirations of clients, as well as the range of services they expect. For example, clients used to only have contact with girls inside establishments. Now, they expect them to always be available, including during out-of-work hours. As girls are not allowed to use their phones at work, this can create tension with regular clients who feel ignored. They become hostile, send vulgar images and videos or threaten them via instant messaging services.

We also found that social media increases the risk of exploitation from intimate partners. Boyfriends/husbands use social media to coerce girls into sex work and extort their earnings. According to the girls, their partners open accounts in their name and negotiate with clients, forcing them to provide the agreed services. This can be under harsh conditions, such as sex with multiple people at the same time. Girls often only become aware of these accounts much later and thus also suffer the emotional violence of betrayal by people close to them.

Some girls feel freelance sex work and advertising online is dangerous and could risk exposure. They find it safer working in establishments like hotels and using middlemen who offer protection and negotiate with clients on their behalf:

I didn't give him my number even though he was a regular customer. If he wants to meet me he can come here but I don't want to take risk meeting him outside. If I meet him at the hotel the owner is responsible if something happens to me, but if I meet him outside who will be responsible?

In-depth interview with a girl engaged in freelance sex work, Jhapa.

Girls who leave the sector are constantly afraid that their boyfriends or husbands will find out about their former work in the sex industry using the internet. Key informants said that for single mothers, the fear that their children (and the parents of their children's partners) will find out about their sex work is a strong motivation to change jobs. Technology makes it possible to find out someone's work history long after the event – a major fear among women who have left the sector.

▶ A client was taking a video in his mobile. Instantly I went near him and seized his mobile then slapped him.

(In-depth interview with a girl engaged in sex work, Jhapa)

They (women who have now left the sector) say things like, 'Now my daughter is married. I worked as sex worker so I could bring them up. What will happen to her life if her in-laws find that her mother was doing such work? So, I left the sector.'

Key informant interview, Jhapa.

Boys who engage in substance abuse also use social media to exploit girls. Key informants who helped file cases against violent partners shared that boys who abuse substances entice girls into relationships via social media to extort money for drugs. They film sex videos with the girls and threaten to post them online or expose their work as sex workers:

A boy made a video of my friend. He hasn't posted it on Facebook yet. She was telling that he has clicked her pictures too.

Interviewer: Why do they make videos? What type of people are they? Are they married people?

The drug addict boys make that [videos].

Interviewer: What do they do with the videos? Do they blackmail girls or what do they do?

Yes. They do so to get money.

In-depth interview with a girl engaged in freelance sex work, Jhapa.

In Kathmandu, girls working in establishments said that they are forced to share explicit images to attract clients to the establishment. Those engaged in freelance sex work also send images to attract and keep clients. In Jhapa and Sunsari, where all respondents were freelance sex workers, sharing pictures and doing video calls seems to be common. This might make girls more vulnerable to abuse by middlemen and clients.

Some girls who have attended NGO trainings talk about their right to privacy and said they refuse to send videos to clients. We can see, therefore, that girls have a certain amount of power and control in their negotiation with clients. However, we are not sure if in practice girls can keep up with the pressure from clients and their own financial needs. This may be a result of awareness training and female empowerment interventions.

We tell the clients in a very straightforward manner that it is not the place to take selfies and we would not allow it. After that, if they want to spend time with us they can or else just leave. A client was taking a video in his mobile. Instantly I went near him and seized his mobile then slapped him.

In-depth interview with a girl engaged in sex work, Jhapa.



Anti-trafficking checkpoint at Nepal-India border © NISER

Conclusions and recommendations

As in other parts of the world, technology is increasingly being used in Nepal's adult entertainment industry and is changing its structure and how the AES is organised/mediated, particularly in relation to sex work. All girls and boys working in the sector have access to mobile phones and the internet. Facebook, Messenger and imo are the most commonly used apps, while younger and more educated workers increasingly use Viber, Instagram and YouTube.

Technology has changed the nature of client interaction, opened up new avenues for girls who are looking to enter the industry and has facilitated cross-district and cross-border sex work. It is also used outside of work to keep in touch with family and friends. Girls typically have two SIM cards and two Facebook accounts to keep their families from finding out about their work.

The positive effects of technology for sex workers include the decreased influence of middlemen and greater decision-making powers (and sometimes income). Girls use technology to limit exposure to abusive clients and dangerous situations. Programmes have also started using technology to target freelance sex workers, who tend to be hard to reach.

On the negative side, it has made the recruitment of adolescents into sex work cheaper and easier, exposed adolescents working in the sector to pornography, opened up avenues for middlemen and sexual partners to exploit girls, and has made it difficult for girls to establish a family life once they have left the industry.

The research also finds that technology pushes more adolescents into sex work, as middlemen have increased access to girls online. In addition, girls and boys become curious about joining the sector after seeing online ads and live videos produced by adult venues. Technology has not totally displaced establishment-based sex work, but it has expanded the scope of the adult entertainment sector and the volume of sex work.

Recommendations for donors, civil society and NGOs include the following:

- **As technology use is widespread, it can be leveraged to raise awareness of the risks associated with entering the adult entertainment sector** and promote alternatives, such as encouraging young girls to stay in education or take vocational training.
- **Digital literacy classes for girls and boys working in this sector**, as well as those in school, would help raise awareness of the risk of exploitation online and promote safety precautions.
- **Programmes should use social media to target 'hard to reach' sex workers** who are at increased risk from clients, middlemen and partners (ie, those who do not work in establishments, are not unionised and are not linked to NGOs). Lessons should be taken from programmes already engaged in such activities.
- **NGOs/INGOs and the government should revise their monitoring strategies to ensure data on online sex work is captured.** Their interventions should also shift from targeting girls who work in establishments to account for the growing trend of girls working on a freelance basis using personal contacts.
- **NGOs have expressed the need for long-term commitment and resources for successful reintegration/rehabilitation of former sex workers.** Technology could provide low-cost dissemination and programming solutions to maximise existing resources.
- **Current training programmes are overly focused on running beauty parlours and tailor shops. These should be broadened to cover other skills** such as hotel management, driving, and mobile phone and TV repairs to provide instant jobs and encourage young people to find alternatives to working in the AES.

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