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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone. We're going to call to order this 68th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. We are continuing our study on human trafficking in South Asia.

We have two witnesses joining us today from quite a distance. First, we have Mr. Joshy Jose, the director of implementation for Breakthrough Trust, joining us from New Delhi. In the trust's own words, "Breakthrough seeks to make discrimination and violence against women and girls unacceptable everywhere and in all its forms, including domestic violence, sexual harassment in public spaces, early marriage, and gender-biased sex selection."

We also have Mr. Dipesh Tank, the project director for the Rescue Foundation, a non-governmental organization, who is joining us today from Mumbai. The Rescue Foundation's key activities revolve around the rescue, rehabilitation, and repatriation of victims of commercial sexual exploitation in India, those who are trafficked within India, or from Bangladesh or Nepal. Specifically, the Rescue Foundation investigates reports of missing girls who may have been trafficked, rescues victims with the help of local police, rehabilitates those rescued by providing food, shelter, health care, vocational training, and legal aid, and repatriates these girls to their families or to other NGOs.

Again, I want to thank you both for being here to provide testimony to us for our ongoing study. With that, if I can give you both seven minutes each for opening remarks, then we will open the floor to questions from members of the committee.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Tank, please begin.

Mr. Dipesh Tank (Project Director, Rescue Foundation): Thank you very much, everybody. My warm regards from India.

Rescue Foundation is a non-profit that works primarily in rescue missions. For the last 20 years we have been rescuing young girls, especially girls who are minors, from brothels, red light areas, guest houses, and various other such places across the country. With about 150 spies around the country, we deal with and get sensitive information from them. Our primary job is to get the girls out of the brothels and those places where they are being exploited. Then we bring them to our shelter home and fight a massive legal battle; post

the legal battle part, we give them the ability to bounce back in society.

The primary reason that most of these girls are pushed into prostitution is poverty. The number one state in India where human trafficking happens is West Bengal, and the number one state in India where minor girls are being pushed into prostitution is Rajasthan.

One of the primary reasons in West Bengal is poverty. There is a lack of opportunities in that region, so often young girls, orphaned girls, are fooled by traffickers and pimps in the hope getting a better job and livelihood. They have been brought to larger, metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi, and other places, and sold into brothels.

Unfortunately, because of the social stigma around the whole idea of red light areas and brothels, no sane person travels through them to hear their voices when they're screaming, when they've just been brought to the brothels and realize they have been pushed into prostitution. After a point they give up; then the whole unfairness and exploitation starts.

The Rescue Foundation works closely with the police and security agencies to raid these places, rescue them, and bring them back. In our shelter we give them basic education in English and Hindi and vocational training, and we teach them how they can go back and earn a livelihood with dignity. That's what Rescue Foundation does.

That's about it.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Jose.

Mr. Joshy Jose (Senior Director, Implementation, Breakthrough Trust): Hello.

Breakthrough Trust is a human rights organization working to make violence and discrimination against women and girls unacceptable. Breakthrough's intervention in India addresses the issue of gender-biased sex selection, or the practice of girls not being allowed to be born. Domestic violence, which makes homes one of the most vulnerable places for women, is another issue we address. We've been running a campaign called Ring the Bell, or Bell Bajao, which addresses domestic violence.

In early marriage, a girl is forced to be married before the age of 18 against her own wishes. She completely loses her childhood and faces severe forms of gender-based violence and discrimination.

Most of Breakthrough's interventions are designed to empower adults and girls from vulnerable communities. Breakthrough works in around 4,000 villages in the states of U.P., Bihar, Jharkhand, Haryana, and Delhi. Many of these villages are ruled by upper-caste men. The caste system is very much prevalent in India, and caste-based atrocities are quite common.

Many of the villages are in geographically vulnerable areas. The eastern U.P., where we work, is just adjacent to the Nepal border, where trafficking of boys and girls is quite prevalent both to and from Nepal. These are villages where we work in India.

Most of the villages where we work are ruled by panchayat and are mostly governed by customary law. Customary laws are the laws of these villages, their own laws, which are based on norms. They are more powerful than the constitutional rights of the vulnerable communities, namely the minorities, the girls, the tribals, the women, and the invalids.

I'll give you an example of how customary laws differ from the law of the land. Suppose a girl gets raped, especially if she is from a village community. By customary law, the panchayat, the chiefs of the villages, come together and justice is decided in line with the perpetrator. They feel that justice is done if the perpetrator can marry the girl. In our eyes, this is not the justice we look for. Again, if she is from a village community, then her being alone is questioned. Instead of the perpetrator being punished, she and her family will be punished for her getting raped.

Girls are considered a burden as per the village norms, and since their safety is closely associated with the family's honour, their mobility is restricted, as well as access to critical services like health services. Education and skills are not considered a priority, compared to the safety concerns. According to this perception of girls, once they achieve puberty and are groomed to be married, they drop out of school and get malnourished and anemic. Since she is not aware of her rights and was taught early on to be silent and guard the honour of the family, the violence she faces at home and with her relatives is never spoken about. It doesn't come out.

Once she gets married, she doesn't have agency. With little negotiation skills, she faces huge domestic violence, physical and mental, but doesn't even realize this is violence.

In Haryana, where we work and where the practice of gender-biased sex selection is prevalent, in many of the villages there are 40-year-old men who are not married because there are no women in the villages. Instead of seeing that as something they need to change, they actually bring women from the other states, say from Jharkhand, where early marriage is quite prevalent. They literally buy them. Bride-buying is a practice that is being followed in Haryana, with brides from Jharkhand and other vulnerable states where tribals and different other minorities stay. They buy girls and bring them back to Haryana.

• (1310)

So this is one practice. For us this is very close to trafficking, so these girls are trafficked, and in many parts of India this practice is there.

In the districts where we work, closer to Nepal, the children, including boys and girls, are used as conduits to traffic goods,

[*Inaudible—Editor*], petrol, and sometimes drugs across the border to Nepal, and from Nepal girls are trafficked to India. This happens in three stages. One group is trafficked to the border, and from the border to the nearest transit city, which is Gorakpur, or Gaya. From there, they are trafficked to the bigger cities like Mumbai and Delhi.

It's something that work on at Breakthrough to try to address the issue that emanates from poverty and lack of agency among girls. The girls can be rescued. The girls can be empowered so that they understand their rights and can escape trafficking.

I will stop here.

The Chair: Thank you very much to you both.

We'll move right along to questions, and we'll begin with MP Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being with us here today.

Mr. Jose, I'd particularly like to acknowledge you and thank you for the work you're doing on gender-based sex selection. Unfortunately, it's a topic that our Parliament hasn't had the courage to deal with.

To both of you, I would like to talk about the return to the community of these young ladies. We've heard both in this study and in others of the challenges that face women if they go back to their community, particularly after they've been trafficked or involved in exploitation.

I'm just wondering how successful are you at reintegrating young women back to their families and to their communities. Or, do you have to find alternative communities for them in many places so they can then begin a new life removed from the old one?

Can you talk a little bit to us about that? I think, Mr. Tank, you talked specifically about trying to do that. If either of you have comment on that, I'd like to hear it.

Let's hear from Mr. Tank first.

• (1315)

Mr. Dipesh Tank: There are different scenarios in this. When a girl gets trafficked and she's into prostitution, there's a huge social stigma for the families connected or associated with her, because the family does not know that she's been pushed into prostitution. The trafficker tells the family that he's going to take her daughter or his daughter to a better job opportunity and then brings her to metropolitan cities and pushes her into the sex trade.

When the girl stays there for about a year, two years, or three years and then, when we rescue her and bring her to our shelter home, there is a legal process until that is done, depending upon her age. If the girl is a minor, then she cannot leave our shelter home until she is 18, and she's allowed to make a decision on her own and of her choice.

Until then she is in our shelter home, but if she is an adult, above 18, then we do the proper home verification. It's important for us to understand under what circumstances that girl left that place, so we will send our people to any corner of the country to find out through the neighbours and through the communities in that area how that girl was sent from that place.

Depending upon that, her repatriation orders are placed because that particular report will be submitted to the court, to the police, and to the child welfare committee in India if she is a minor. Based on that, they will decide whether they want to send her back home or to keep her in our shelter home.

Many times the girls are really embarrassed and feel that something terrible has happened to them, and because of that, they can't go back to their village. Then we try to bring her opportunities within the city.

We have a group home scheme whereby we hire a place, a small place in Mumbai for about two or three girls, and they all stay together and work for themselves. That's how they've been working. But also in India, ultimately, the social rehabilitation is when you get them married.

As a non-profit, we find grooms who are willing to marry our girls, and there are proper steps and procedures for that. They have to give x amount of money that is kept in her name. There are certain laws and regulations that you have to follow once they get married. There are so many things that we do, and we get them married also, if she wants to.

At times girls come to us or our president and ask if we can help get them married, so we find the right people, and while she is living there we ensure, by making surprise visits, that she is fine and safe, and there are no problems for her.

We've been very successful on that front. It totally depends on the girl and what she wants to do.

Mr. David Anderson: I want to ask a little bit about caste discrimination and whether that's a factor in this as well. Some of our information indicated that up to 62% of women in the commercial sex traffic belong to the scheduled castes. I'm wondering if you can talk a bit about that.

I assume that you have different challenges in trying to reintegrate those young ladies, as well as some of the other caste groups in the society.

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Yes.

There are communities in India, which I don't want to name, where they sell their own daughters into prostitution. Unfortunately, it's a tradition where there is a process called *nath-utarna*, which means the nose ring. When a girl reaches puberty, the age of 13 or 14, she has been sold to one of the brothels or some man for x amount of money.

Unfortunately, that's the culture and it has been predominantly so. A lot of girls have been pushed from Rajasthan to various parts of the country. When a girl child is born, they rejoice, they celebrate.

Mr. David Anderson: First of all, I'd like to ask about the U.N. Do you find them to be a help or a hindrance to you? There are lots

of places where they've had a poor reputation around issues of sexploitation. Are they of assistance to you? Do you have much to do with them, or are you working with other NGOs? What NGOs are you working with?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: We don't interact with the U.N. schemes or any such things. Unfortunately, we don't know how much impact that is having. I'm sure there is some. I don't want to contradict that.

We work with a lot of other non-profits near the Bay of Bengal in south India, and in north India.

We have three shelter homes across the country and across the state of Maharashtra. The fourth one is being set up in Delhi. One is in Mumbai; another is 150 kilometres from Mumbai. There is one in Pune, is about 250 kilometres from Mumbai. And one is being made in Delhi. Strategically, it's very important for us to have a shelter home in Delhi because a lot of repatriation and a lot of work happens with the Ministry of External Affairs. A lot of times, there are girls who are not from our country and have been trafficked here, so we have to deal with them. Hence, we have these four offices and shelter homes.

• (1320)

Mr. David Anderson: What are the challenges around corruption?

Maybe both of you can answer that. Do you face them, or are you able basically to avoid having to deal with those issues?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Our job is very vulnerable. We have over 150 spies. These spies are not saints. He could be a criminal, she could be a criminal, or she could be a trafficker. We take benefit of who [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. We will try to reach out to brothel owners and ask if they can give us information about the other brothel owners. Our job is so tough, and it cannot be done in the most saintly way.

When you talk about the police informers, or about any bigger agency informers, you have to get into the drain to clean the drain. It's not possible for you to remain clean. Unfortunately, we have to do this job for the larger good of the girls. At times, the trafficker will pay more money to the police and ask them to release a girl. We tell them that we'll give them more money than the trafficker if they give her to us. The only difference is that he will take her back to the brothel and we will take her to our shelter home and take care of her.

The challenges are massive. It's not easy to work with the kind of systems that are there, but we are very hopeful that things are changing. Thankfully, there is something called an anti-human trafficking cell in the state of Maharashtra that has been created. We work closely with them. I wish it were an ideal situation.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to MP Khalid, please.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen, for the great work you're doing in the grassroots communities in India in helping such a vulnerable population.

I want to talk a little about the business of sex trafficking. You're in a very good place to understand who the perpetrators are. Are we talking about very complex, very big corporation-like operations that are in the business of making money from a commodity, which, in this instance, is women and girls? Or are we talking about something like a small-to-medium-sized enterprise, a small business?

Can you tell us about the people who are taking the women and girls and making money from them?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Thank you.

It's definitely a huge nexus. It's not an easy thing. Recently, just last year, because of one of our raids, one of the biggest traffickers in Delhi was caught. That man was worth millions of rupees. He had fancy cars, and that man and his wife were using them to traffic more than 5,000 minor girls across the country.

This whole nexus works and, unfortunately, they get away because of the loopholes in the law. There is something called investigating. For example, if I rescue a girl in Mumbai and I know that I can catch the brothel owner, I can catch the local trafficker. The local trafficker is this one point of contact for three to four other traffickers, which are on the route.

For example, if a girl has been trafficked from West Bengal, she has been trafficked by one guy who brings her to Delhi. From Delhi they will bring her to Pune. From Pune they will bring her to Mumbai.

There are multiple people playing this role, and the most unfortunate part is that there is nothing called an interstate investigation. When an inquiry has been lodged in Mumbai, the police do not have the power to go and investigate the matter in West Bengal or in Delhi or any other state outside the state of Maharashtra.

It becomes very difficult for us to catch the real perpetrators; hence, the trafficking never stops. We are working towards that point. Also, we will soon be filing a petition in the court to hold governments and security agencies responsible for this job and say that they should be going to different states and they should be doing investigations.

•(1325)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: With respect to the new legislation that India has put in place trying to combat human trafficking, what do you think are the challenges that India faces in enforcing those laws?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: I think there are big challenges. One of the biggest challenges is manpower. I'm saying that it's the job of the police, but they are so understaffed. They are working in their own best way.

It gets very difficult to do that. Also, one of the biggest stigmas in this country, and we are working towards this, is that a lot of people are being misguided and misled by people saying they do it by choice.

Understand that there is this understanding in our country that red light areas and brothels are our need. If you go on the street to find out, they will tell you, yes, it's important because apparently it keeps the sexually frustrated men calm, so that they can go to the brothels

and satisfy themselves. That's the biggest myth because I don't know how that is helping to keep the sexual offences low in this country.

There is a massive sensitization program that has been needed to ask why you want to sacrifice someone's daughter for somebody else's sexual frustration. We feel really unfortunate and we find the biggest challenge in fighting this, because at every step, whether it's a donor or whether it's the police or whether it's government officials, it's just difficult to make them understand that it's not fair to let any girl get exploited.

I don't understand this choice, because there are girls who are nine years old and 10 years old who have been bought at brothels. I don't understand. At the age of 18 when she becomes an adult, she's not going to choose to become an air force pilot.

It is because she is living in those conditions that she will choose to be that. It's not a fair choice. As a society we have failed to create that choice for her.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

Mr. Jose, you spoke a little bit about the panchayat. I want to ask you—

The Chair: Ms. Khalid, I think we had lost Mr. Jose and then we got him back. I saw him briefly, but he appears to be gone again.

Oh, you're there?

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Are you there? Hello.

Mr. Jose, can you hear us?

Mr. Joshy Jose: I'm here.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Fantastic. You spoke a little bit about the panchayat and the enforcement of customary laws within villages. I wanted to ask you if panchayats work with local law enforcement in terms of education or raising awareness or working on social issues within a community, or is it more caste based and very conservative thinking that's implemented through the panchayat in small communities?

Mr. Joshy Jose: If you look at the panchayat, you'll see it has a dual role.

Can you hear me?

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Yes, we can hear you.

Mr. Joshy Jose: If you look at the panchayat, it has a dual role. On the one hand, it is [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] as for the Punjabi... Within the panchayat, the caste system plays a major role. The customary law is based on these norms, which are enforced within the panchayat. As my colleague from Mumbai was saying [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: Mr. Jose, we're having difficulty hearing you. Your signal is breaking in and out. I'm going to suggest that the technical adviser try to reconnect the line to see if we can get it better.

Go ahead, Ms. Khalid.

•(1330)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

I'll ask Mr. Tank a question.

What is the impact of the media and the entertainment industry, such as Bollywood, in establishing the status quo and how women and women's rights are perceived in India? How does that impact trafficking?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Unfortunately, what I'm thinking may not be totally right. There are movies where a very well-established actor has been abusing one of the prostitutes and the way he is treating her.... I don't know how great the contribution is from the Bollywood industry. I'm sure there are a lot of people who do not want minor girls and other girls to be forceably kept and exploited in brothels.

I wish this particular issue of human trafficking was as popular as...orphanages or other major issues, like cancer or any other thing. There is a lot of social stigma. Nobody wants to talk about prostitutes and their well-being. It is so tainted and misinterpreted that nobody wants to address it. As a kid, my father never spoke about prostitutes in my house, or about how they are living, or whether they want to live there or not. We still have a long way to go.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tank.

We're now going to move to MP Weir.

Mr. Erin Weir (Regina—Lewvan, NDP): Thank you for appearing before our committee and for the good work that you do.

Ms. Khalid asked about challenges in applying and enforcing India's new anti-trafficking law. I'd like to take a step back from that to ask you to comment on the legislation itself. What are its strengths and weaknesses? Do you think it will make a positive difference?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: There is a new amendment pending, as we've been reading in the newspaper. There is victim compensation. There are inter-state investigations and a lot of suggestions that will be taken from across the country from various other organizations. However, as I said, laws will only get enforced if people, governments, authorities, and police change their mindset. It is important that they start taking this issue very seriously. In our country, the majority of the time when you go to a police station saying that there's a girl who's been pushed into prostitution and she doesn't want to stay there, unfortunately, their response is not what it should be, since they have so many other offences to take care of, like molestation, murder, or any number of things. Their response is very weak. We have to find our way by going to authorities or their superiors to ask them, please, can you help us? Give us at least one or two policeman, and we'll have our staff and more staff....

It is difficult. These laws will get implemented and strictly enforced, if people change their mindset or if the government decides to do it at any cost.

Mr. Erin Weir: Okay.

Now you've spoken to us about trafficking between different states in India. I'm wondering if you could speak at all about trafficking between India and other countries.

Mr. Dipesh Tank: It's the same format.

There are bigger traffickers in Bangladesh and Nepal, and because the border is porous, anybody can enter and anybody can get out. Nepal especially is like our little brother. There are a lot of people from Nepal working in this country.

It's difficult to catch these traffickers because they are not from our country, but one main trafficker will go to Nepal and bring that girl to some part of our country. In the case of Bangladesh, that guy helps to bring the girl through the borders, and they bring her to Kolkata in West Bengal. From there, there's another trafficker who brings her to Delhi or Pune or Mumbai. It is the same nexus.

Unfortunately, because we have our own limitations, we cannot go to another country and prosecute these people. Doing it the right way is a very long procedure.

• (1335)

Mr. Erin Weir: Okay.

I think you're talking about people being trafficked into India. Is there also an issue you could discuss of people from India being trafficked to other countries or other parts of the world?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: I personally have not come across that situation. I'm assuming that Nepal has fewer economic or job opportunities, and that more money is given in India. Hence, the trafficking happens in India rather than there.

There is one positive hope that has been happening. From the girls that the Rescue Foundation has been rescuing, we've been finding a massive decline in the number of girls from Nepal.

It's not easy to find girls from Nepal in Mumbai or Pune, or in any other place. Unlike five to 10 years back, there were a lot of girls, and especially minor girls who had been trafficked from Nepal and brought to India.

I also want to quickly point out that natural calamities or riots are the best places for traffickers, because they take advantage of kids who are vulnerable. They've lost their parents or misplaced them. If they're missing, then they will take them and bring them to India immediately.

Mr. Erin Weir: You described this decline in trafficking from Nepal.

Do you know what has caused that? Has there been some successful policy or legislation in Nepal recently?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: I think it is because of the way people from Nepal look. It's not easy. If anybody from Nepal is in India, you know by the way he or she talks that the person is from Nepal. They know it very easily, and hence the trafficker.... I mean, one of the investigators told me that it is not easy because they feel it is a lot of risk—a massive risk.

That is unlike somebody from Bangladesh, who looks very much like an Indian. Every Bangladeshi girl who comes to India has a fake bank card, an identification card with a false name. It's very easy to work with them.

With a girl from Nepal, then you have to justify where she is from. She doesn't speak a northeast language or any other languages in India. It's a risky job for them to take care and manage the police and authorities. I think that's the reason.

I'm sure there must be a lot of other reasons, but this is what we feel it is.

Mr. Erin Weir: How are we doing on time?

The Chair: You have another minute and a half.

Mr. Erin Weir: Okay, thank you.

We've discussed a great deal on trafficking of girls and women. I'm wondering if this is also an issue with boys and young men.

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Sorry, I didn't get your question. Can you repeat it, please?

Mr. Erin Weir: Would boys or men ever be the victims of sex trafficking, in your experience?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Every time I go to colleges and to corporations, I see that we are unfortunately a very male-dominated country and we don't see brothels where there are males and boys being exploited.

I want to put my point across by saying that human trafficking is 80% for commercial sex, and 20% is for begging and child labour. You will find kids working in smaller hotels as a waiter or as a steward, but we've never come across a red light area where there are children being trafficked. I'm sure there are instances where kids are being sexually exploited, for sure, but it's not like how it happens openly with minor girls or women in this country.

Mr. Erin Weir: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now move to MP Tabbara.

MP Tabbara, please go ahead.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be sharing my time with MP Fragiskatos.

Thank you for your testimony. Early on, you mentioned that the number one reason was poverty and lack of opportunities. In some of the reading I've been doing beforehand, I've read is that some of the girls have been pulled out of school prematurely because of the belief that education reduces their marriage prospects. Leaving school in turn decreases their potential economic independence and hinders their advancement.

Can you elaborate on this? You mentioned that the number one reason was poverty. How does lack of education combine with that?

• (1340)

Mr. Dipesh Tank: There could be instances, but in my opinion education has been pursued seriously, at least in the last two, three, or five years, especially from the time that the Right to Education Act was implemented. There are times when governments in Maharashtra and other parts of the country have gone to homes in which they found that there was a child who had not been put into the school, and they've gone ahead and made sure that they have sent that kid to school.

Education per se is definitely one of the topmost priorities, and we know that parents are inclined towards it, at least in my knowledge. You can, though, question the quality of education and the opportunities post-education. For example, if a child is studying until 10th grade, then we don't know; there is a massive drop-out after the 10th standard of the school. We know that they are doing a basic-level education, but we don't know how much it's helping. I'm not sure; I have not heard about girls not going to school and getting into anything else.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you. I agree that education is a very big factor in this, and to really combat human trafficking, we can alleviate it initially starting with education.

For my next question, answer briefly, because I want to save some time for my colleague. It is on rescue and rehabilitation for women who have, during the sex trafficking, caught HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases. What are some of the things your organization is doing to help young women and girls?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Every girl we rescue goes through a series of check-ups. Many times we find out that the girl is HIV-positive. In such cases, there is a special care plan that has been made for them to ensure that special care is given to them. That is one way.

Unfortunately, in the majority of the cases the families don't want the girls to come back home, or they are in total denial. In such cases, the girl stays in our shelter home until the time she is hale, hearty, and she will live there as long as she wants. We take care of these girls. There are a lot of girls in our Boisar shelter home, where the girls are HIV-positive, and we take good care of them.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you for your testimony today.

I want to shift the focus away from India for a moment, but I want to note that the U.S. State Department has said that although there are problems with the way the government has addressed the problem of trafficking, it is making significant efforts to do so. We've heard a great deal of testimony on what's happening within the country. We've also heard a great deal of testimony that would suggest looking, and has in fact pushed us a committee to look, beyond India and examine this as a regional issue in South Asia.

I want to ask a question from the perspective of Canada, as a Canadian member of Parliament, someone who is very interested in development policy in particular. What can a middle power such as Canada do to help in the rural areas? I know that in the rural areas, the problem of trafficking is particularly acute because of the very significant levels of poverty that exist there.

Could you speak about programs that could help? I'm thinking about small loans to farmers to help them grow businesses and develop commerce and things along those lines. Micro-finance stands out as one potential example. Could you speak about that focus in general, the rural areas and what can be done?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: In my personal opinion, I don't know how many farmers' daughters or sons are choosing the particular business or profession of farming, for various reasons, so I don't know how much farming will do the right job. However, I don't want to rule out that opportunity. I feel that a lot of young students, young men and women in this country, are approaching metropolitan cities. Learning new things is one of the biggest turn-ons for them, to go to cities and learn new things.

In our shelter home, we give them basic training, for example, beauty parlour courses, hair-cutting courses. We teach them how to do screen printing, how to design small artwork and make it into a digital print, and to sell it the way they want. We try to give them those opportunities so that they know they can go back and do this job. She can go to a city and print a mug she has designed, and she can sell it to a local market, flea market, or anywhere else. These are the kinds of opportunities we have to generate.

Along with that, it is important that there be a massive sensitization program, not only from the state, from the Government of India, but also from the people and the local authorities, to ensure that fair opportunities are given to the girls and they are not being pushed into this.

● (1345)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thanks very much.

I have one quick question to follow up. I guess there is some time.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Jose, are you on the line as well?

Mr. Joshy Jose: Yes, I'm on.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'll ask the question, and I hope Mr. Jose can answer it. If we have a technical difficulty again, I'll just pose it to the other witness.

On legal aid clinics, we as a country have focused on helping to fund, not completely but have directed significant amounts of funds toward, clinics that can then be put to use in the efforts to pursue advocacy and justice. Do you think this is something that could help address the situation that exists in India and, frankly, in South Asia, when it comes to the problem of trafficking, and child trafficking, to be specific?

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

The Chair: I think the line is still not in great shape.

Mr. Tank, do you want to give a quick 30-second answer to that question? Then we'll move to the next question.

Mr. Dipesh Tank: I'm sorry, can you quickly repeat that? My apologies.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Sure, it's regarding legal aid clinics, their importance, and whether you work with them or not.

I asked the question because the Canadian government has helped to provide funding to legal aid clinics throughout the world, and that has gone a long way towards advocacy efforts and the effort to pursue justice.

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Legal aid is important, yes.

A huge amount of money goes into fighting in Indian courts and in the Indian judiciary, because that is another challenge. For example, we are currently fighting this case in one of the Bombay high courts, where there was a release order given for 68 girls we rescued earlier this year. We rescued them from one of the very rural parts of the state. Unfortunately, it became difficult for us, because the majority of the money that we raise is for girls and their rehabilitation. In India, everybody wants to give money for food,

education, and health, but for legal aid or better salaries, it's so difficult.

Thankfully, we have lawyers who are helping us pro bono, but still there is a massive cost to fighting this legal battle in the courts. Unfortunately, that is the only place where people feel they can get justice, and they can, but the period is so long that people get tired. A non-profit like us also feels a burden on that front.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tank.

MP Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Tank, for all of your testimony and your good work.

I want to ask you more specifics around your good work. But to continue on with where you were, are you seeing a change in attitude? You mentioned to my colleague that it was riskier to bring in Nepalese girls, because it sounded like there was a higher threat of arrest.

Are you seeing a change in the mentality of the law enforcement, that arrests are being made and convictions are being pursued more avidly now?

● (1350)

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Yes, I want to clarify one point while I am also raising a lot of issues within my country.

I want to quickly say that I know this is the problem in our country and we are committed to solving it, and yes, there is definitely a massive change from what I hear. I have given my full-time career in advertising and radio, and I have joined this non-profit for the last six months now. I have known about the Rescue Foundation for the last six years, but my colleagues who have been working for the last 10 or 15 years tell me that the kinds of challenges they were facing then have definitely changed. People are changing their mindset towards this. Police authorities are getting more sensitized toward this. There are many workshops for the army and the police guarding the borders on how to identify a trafficked girl or how to identify a trafficker.

There is definitely a massive change that has been happening since what it was then, two years or five years ago, especially when I can say that there is a special team being set up in the state of Maharashtra. In the anti-human trafficking cell there are x number of men and women located to do only rescue of trafficked girls from brothels and other places where girls are trafficked.

Yes, we do see a change.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

The other answer that you gave my colleague also interested me. You mentioned the money you raise. Are you supported entirely by donations from people from within India?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Yes, we have been supported by some foreign donors who help us out. They see our work and they support us, but the challenge is massive. At times we can't do certain raids because we know we don't have that kind of money to take care of the girls.

We feel very helpless, and we feel unfortunate. It is so difficult to raise money for a cause like human trafficking. As I said, it is not a cute charity, unlike when you go to an orphanage, or an old age home, or a cancer hospital where you feel really sympathetic and emotional about girls or boys who have been suffering. I feel we are the victims of convenience charity, because people want to go and do it, and they want to click photographs and put them up on social media and feel awesome about it.

In our shelter room we cannot let them click photos and put them up on Facebook, for the simple reason that we have to protect the girls' identity.

Mr. David Sweet: Is there any chance that you've had any opportunity to partner with international justice ministries in these law enforcement cases?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: No. As an organization, we are very strong, very good at rescue and rehabilitation, but unfortunately we are not good at marketing and talking much about it. I think I am the second guy who can speak English in my organization.

I don't see it as a problem, but this is an issue because there is no bright talent on board and bright talent comes with a lot of money.

Mr. David Sweet: You've talked about raising a lot of money. You've talked about a lot of stories, too, and particularly on long-term care for some of the girls who have acquired HIV, which is tragic, but you're willing to look after them, and that's even more heartwarming.

What is your capacity? You've mentioned that you have three facilities, I believe. It sounds as if your capacity is huge for the number of girls you're rescuing, you're caring for, you're educating, and I assume you're trying to then provide employment, because a lot of them, as you said, won't be accepted back by their families. Give us an idea about the capacity you're running at right now.

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Every year we rescue about 250 girls and we take care of about 500 girls. Now our shelter home is under the Juvenile Justice Act of India, so we take care of not only those girls whom we rescue, but if there is a girl or a child in society who is subject to any kind of sexual or physical violation, then the court will send her to our care and protection, and it's our job and duty to take care of her also.

The youngest girl in our shelter room is four years old and she was sexually abused by her father, and now she is going to start school in one week.

Mr. David Sweet: Do you get any government financial assistance, then?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Yes, but it is not to the level where we can survive. If I'm not wrong, it's about 500-some rupees per girl for one month. We do apply for other grants, yes, so we do try, but we are 90% funded by individual donors whom we have to seek out.

We have three facilities and, as I said, every facility has capacity for about 100 girls. We can take care of them.

•(1355)

Mr. David Sweet: I just want to ask you one more question. You said you had 150 spies. It sounds like, how would I say it, they are an interesting cavalcade of people. Do some of your staff and

interested bystanders want to help you sometimes for their own gain? Is that what I'm hearing?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: Of course. If I have to explain this, the time is too short, but as I said these spies are not saintly people. He could be a drug addict, he could be a trafficker, she could be a trafficker. It could be anybody you can imagine. It could be a rapist also. We don't know that. What we know is that we get information from them. Dipesh Tank cannot go to red-light areas and get information from brothels. Somebody has to go there. Somebody has to ensure that the girl is there. We get phone calls saying, the package has arrived. We ask them, is it a smaller package? How many packages? He tells us, like...and we send our investigator to the brothel to investigate and find out whether the information is valid.

So many times it's a trap for us. My president's husband was killed in this job while on a rescue mission, so we know that it's not an easy job. Just a month back I was on a raid in one of the interior parts of Maharashtra, and I was surrounded by traffickers and brothel owners to take the case back because we rescued one 13-year-old girl, and one who was 14, and two 18-year-old girls. It's not an easy job. At times it's life threatening, but we feel that we have to do this. Without this, we cannot do investigations. If we are rescuing 200 girls every year, this cannot happen by just calling a brothel and saying, "You know what, can we come on a rescue mission?" So, yes, it cannot happen without that.

Mr. David Sweet: You are to be commended.

The Chair: Yes, absolutely.

Thank you, Mr. Tank.

There's time for one last question from MP Weir.

Mr. Erin Weir: Thanks again.

What can Canada do to help in the assistance that we provide to India? Do you have any suggestions for us?

Mr. Dipesh Tank: What happens at times, especially in non-profits like us, is that there's a massive struggle to get the right amount of money to take care of and protect the girls, and to get the right talent on board. For example, we are in desperate need of counsellors and child counsellors, but that comes with a massive cost. We are struggling so much on that level, and it becomes very difficult for us to get the right care and protection.

While I'm saying this, I feel that we can definitely improve our care and protection for our girls. Yes, it's important that somebody can come to help us out in getting more processes and systems, because right now it's sometimes very difficult to work in the current scenarios and the budgets, and everything in that regard. We need experts who can come to help train us to better tackle this issue.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Tank. I want to thank you and Mr. Jose—although I believe he's no longer on the phone.

Members, we will contact Mr. Jose and maybe get him to write up, or give us a brief of, his testimony today.

Mr. Tank, you certainly provided some incredible insight for us here at a really local, on-the-ground level that is so important for us to understand. Thank you very much for testifying before us.

With that, I will adjourn this committee.

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