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Freed Domestic Slaves Fight Boredom and Penury in Nepal



Bimala, 16, does not remember much about her work as a domestic slave except that it began around the age of four. She is currently trying to track down her parents because she needs a birth certificate to attend High School. She has no idea where they live.

Bimala is one of thousands of former domestic workers, known as *kamlaris*, who have escaped servitude in Midwestern Nepal only to find themselves in limbo. About 200 of the girls, mostly

orphans, live at six hostels. Several told their story recently to AP and Backward Society Education (BASE), a grassroots movement that represents the local Tharu indigenous people and has partnered with AP since 2008.

The exploitation of *kamlaris* is one of several abusive labor practices that have been used against the Tharu. It arouses special outrage because many of the girls were trafficked and even sexually abused.

Under the system, young girls are given to powerful families headed by "landlords." In return, parents are allowed to cultivate the landlord's land. The main incentive for poor families is that many girls are sent to school when they are not working.



Five girls live in each dormitory at the Lamahi hostel.

BASE is one of several civil society advocates that have campaigned doggedly against the practice, visiting landlords, pointing out that child labor is illegal and even snatching girls from under their noses. Some landlords have brazenly complained to the police.

AP reported on the [remarkable story of two freed *kamlaris*, Sabita and Sima](#), in 2012 and confronted the embarrassed wife of a landlord in the town of Nepalgunj the same year.

The NGO campaign has been resoundingly successful. In 2013, the government made a commitment to eliminate the *kamlari* system and the numbers have fallen from 13,000 to almost zero. But those who live in hostels are still denied a normal life and the safety net of families.

Yam Kumari's widowed mother has remarried but cannot afford to support her daughter. Ambika, a Dalit, has lost both parents and takes odd jobs to support her younger brother. Sita, 19, worked for a landlord for a year before returning home but her parents were too poor to keep her and sent her to another household.



Urmila Chaudhary, left, led a nation-wide protest after the death of a *kamlari*. The protest was suppressed but the government passed a law outlawing the practice. Urmila met with [2013 Peace Fellow Emily McDonald](#).

The three girls are among 67 living at a hostel adjoining the Suryavinayak Secondary School in Lamahi town. The hostel population has fallen from a high of 135 girls to 67, but many of those who remain have lived at the hostel for almost ten years, sleeping in a cramped dormitory and sharing a single cupboard with several other girls. Not surprisingly their mood swings between anger and despair.

The government provides the school with 4,000 rupees (\$400) for each girl every month but only 500 rupees goes to the girls and is handed out every 4 months. Yam Kumari, who was rescued by BASE in 2010, said that her pocket money has to cover uniforms, clothes, transport and even sanitary pads. The money rarely lasts for longer than a month.

Asked to comment, Vishnu Prasad Paudel, the school headmaster, said that the government subsidy does not cover water, electricity and medical care at the hostel. This left his school with a deficit of 200,000 (\$2,000) at the end of 2018.

Mr Paudel complained that NGOs had lost interest in *kamlaris* after their high-profile rescue campaign. But his harshest words were reserved for the girls who, he said, "complain" incessantly and refuse to sympathize with his predicament.



**2012 Peace Fellow Chantal Uwizera
with Sima, freed from domestic slavery by BASE.**

This has led to some tense meetings but no solutions. Mr Paudel does not agree that the girls might cooperate if they were able to organize and take up a joint activity. This, he fears, would encourage them to remain at the hostel. "They cannot stay forever," he said.

The sense of drift alarms BASE and the Freed Kamlari Development Forum (FKDF), another group that played a leading role in the rescues and represents 7,000 former *kamlaris*. Both organizations would like to organize training for the girls and increase their pocket money.

This would require working closely with local municipalities, which have been given greater authority and resources under Nepal's new constitution. Most are unused to handling major social issues and would need support and advice from experienced NGOs - an exciting prospect.

AP Peace Fellow [Jade Johnson](#) from the University of Maryland will support BASE's work with freed *kamlaris* in June.

The girls featured in this article gave permission for their photos to be used. Their full names have been withheld.