

Background Brief: The History of Kamlari in Nepal

In 2000, *Nepal Youth Foundation* (NYF) launched a campaign to end the practice of *Kamlari*, a system of indentured servitude in which girls from desperately poor families are sold into domestic slavery. Since then we've rescued over 12,000 girls and returned them to their home communities, and the government of Nepal officially abolished the Kamlari system in 2013.

The Kamlari System

The practice of Kamlari originated in Western Nepal, home to the Tharu people. Naturally resistant to malaria, the Tharu lived undisturbed for generations in the swampy marshlands of Western Nepal. That changed in the 1950s when the mosquito-borne disease was controlled through the use of DDT. Hill tribes then moved into the fertile valleys and displaced the Tharu, taking their land and indenturing the families as farm laborers in a practice called Kamaiya, which was subsequently banned.

These new landlords also indentured the Tharu's female children to work as Kamlari and sent the girls to other parts of the country, primarily Kathmandu. It became a tradition for Tharu families to send girls as young as five years old to work as Kamlaris for a meager annual sum of about \$50 and promises of an education, and in some families several generations of women had spent their childhoods as Kamlaris.

Extreme poverty was the root cause of the Kamlari system. In Nepal, the average income is \$210 per year for an entire family, so the average of \$50 that a daughter's labor brought each year was important, especially when families had more children than they could afford to feed.

For decades, Kamlari brokers came to Western Nepal during the Maghe Sankranti festival in January to buy girls to be sent away to work. The girls were supposed to be returned after a year, but few were ever voluntarily released by their landlords. According to a survey NYF conducted, in about 16% of the cases of Kamlari, neither the parent nor the child received any money at all. The child worked for room and board — usually a spot on the floor and leftovers. And contrary to the promises, Kamlaris were rarely allowed to attend school. The only advantage to the family was that it relieved them of the burden of support.

Though the system of Kamlari operated in plain sight in the villages of Western Nepal, it remained largely hidden away and most Nepalis were unaware of the practice until recent years.

NYF's Anti-Kamlari Campaign

In 2000, Nepal Youth Foundation became aware of the Kamlari practice and launched a campaign to eradicate it, the *Indentured Daughter's Program*. NYF staff worked with members of the Tharu community, particularly the mothers, to plan a strategy to provide a viable alternative to the long-held cultural practice: In exchange for keeping their daughter at home and sending her to school, NYF would provide each family with a piglet that they could raise for a year and sell for about \$50. NYF also provided the families with food, school uniforms, one lantern and three liters of kerosene.

NYF rescued 37 girls during that first year and created an intensive tutorial program to ready them for formal education. After nine months, 32 of the 37 girls were attending regular school. Other families took note, and asked NYF to return their daughters to their homes. NYF rescued 150 more girls and by 2001 its anti-Kamlari program had become a small movement. During the next 12 years,

NYF continued to rescue girls from Kamlari and developed special educational programs to help the newly returning girls make up the school they had missed.

Almost as important as the rescue of the girls was NYF's vigorous awareness campaign that turned the community against the practice. From the beginning, NYF enlisted the freed Kamlari girls themselves to become leaders of the campaign. The freed Kamlaris organized themselves into clubs that actively discouraged parents from selling their daughters. They wrote and performed street plays that described their suffering while they were bonded laborers. They sent out their message in a weekly local radio program sponsored by NYF in which the freed Kamlaris talk about their experiences working far from home. This work continued to evolve, and eventually led to the creation in 2010 of the [Freed Kamlari Development Forum](#).

Throughout the campaign, NYF also kept up pressure on the government to enforce the laws against Kamlari, even as we worked to develop effective alliances with sympathetic government officials and elected representatives. In 2006, we won a Supreme Court decision that affirmed the ban on Kamlari slavery. In 2009, NYF's efforts helped prompt the government to allocate scholarship funds to educate former Kamlari girls.



Freed Kamlari Development Forum members protest the slow pace of government action in Kathmandu in March 2013.

For the next four years, the government was slow to enforce the anti-Kamlari laws and provide compensation for the victims of Kamlari. In March of 2013, hundreds of freed girls took the streets of Kathmandu in a show of protest. The demonstrations successfully stirred public opinion and motivated sympathetic allies among government officials, which led to the government declaration in June 2013 of an end to the Kamlari system once and for all.

But rescuing the girls from Kamlari isn't enough. Every one of them has suffered traumatic loss and abuse during their childhood and they've been deprived of an education. They will need support well into their young adulthood in order to thrive and successfully make their place in the world. NYF's [Empowering Freed Kamlaris](#) program (EFK) will reach 8,000 former Kamlari girls each year, helping them become healthy, happy and independent young women. The program is also stimulating the cultural and economic development necessary to ensure that no child will ever become a victim of Kamlari again.