



**The man who sold Poonam was taken away. Nepal has a new law against trafficking, and he could be sentenced to 20 years in jail and made to pay the equivalent of five years' salary to Poonam.**

Traffickers often visited the village, trying to lure young girls away with false job offers. Their parents didn't always understand the danger. They thought the offers sounded like fantastic opportunities – and they meant one less mouth to feed and one more wage.

Since Poonam was an orphan, she travelled to the Indian city of Shimla at a very young age, to pick apples and mushrooms and work as a waitress. That was where she met the man, who was a few years older than her.

#### **Tricked and sold**

When Poonam was 14 and living back in her home village in Nepal, the love of her life suggested that they should run away together to the big city of Mumbai to get married and live together.

"But you have to run away the day after me, so that nobody suspects that we ran away together. Then we'll meet in India," the man said to Poonam.

After several days in different cars and buses, Poonam arrived at a house in a dark alleyway on the outskirts of the Indian city of Mumbai, home to fourteen million people. But something wasn't right. The room was full of girls. Some of them were even younger than her. The man she was meant to be meeting was nowhere to be seen.

One of the women in the house told Poonam to have a bath and change into a short skirt. Then someone put

# Poonam got trafficker jailed

**When Poonam Thapa from Nepal met an older man, he tricked her and sold her to a brothel in India. Today, Poonam is free and a member of the World's Children's Prize child jury. Recently she managed to get the man who sold her arrested and put in jail.**

"You tricked me into running away and promised we'd get married!" shouts Poonam to the older man being held down on a bench at the Maiti Nepal centre in the capital city of Kathmandu.

Poonam recognised the man when he visited Maiti Nepal a week ago to look for

his missing wife. She didn't dare say anything until he had left. But when Poonam explained that he was the man who had sold her, they tricked him into coming back.

"I have never seen this girl and never been to India," says the man. Poonam can't hold back any longer.

"I know your father's name, I know that he's blind in one

eye, so don't lie to me!"

The founder of Maiti Nepal, Anuradha Koirala, calls the police and asks Poonam, who is now 16, to tell the whole story from the start.

Poonam grew up in the village of Ichtko, in one of the poorest countries in the world – Nepal. The young people in the village used to dream of another life.



**"You tricked me!" shouts Poonam angrily at the man who sold her to a brothel.**



make-up on her. The men who turned up forced her to drink alcohol, and she heard the others talking about ‘customers’.

“What’s a customer?” she asked Mala, one of the older girls.

“You’ve been sold. This is a brothel,” replied Mala.

### Living hell

That evening, lots of men came to the brothel. Poonam refused to let them touch her. She cried, screamed, kicked and bit them. They held her down, whipped her with electrical cables and burned her with cigarettes until she gave in. Poonam was exploited by ten to fifteen men every day. When she tried to escape she was captured. After ten months, the Indian police stormed in. They had received a tip-off that there were children in the brothel, and they took Poonam with them.

That was how Poonam came to the organisation Maiti Nepal, which received



the 2002 World’s Children’s Prize for its work with girls who have been trafficked and exploited.

### Police on their way

The Chief Inspector’s walkie-talkie crackles as he stomps into the room at Maiti Nepal where Poonam and the man who sold her are waiting.

“Yes, okay, I sold Poonam for 40,000 Indian rupees (USD 1000), but it was the first and last time I’ve ever sold a girl!” confesses the man who Poonam reported.

The room falls silent. According to Nepal’s new

Human Trafficking Act, the man could be sentenced to 20 years in prison and have to pay Poonam the equivalent of five years’ salary.

“As long as there are people who are prepared to sell other people, it’s hard for us police to react fast enough,” says the police officer. He thinks Poonam is incredibly brave.

“If she hesitates even slightly, it makes it hard to get him convicted,” he says, leading the trafficker to the prison van.

Poonam slumps down in a seat, exhausted. Despite everything, the future looks

bright for her. At Maiti Nepal, she and other survivors receive support and training.

*On the World’s Children’s Prize jury, Poonam represents and fights for girls who have been subjected to trafficking and sold to brothels as slaves, as well as all girls who have been abused.*

**Poonam gives H.M. Queen Silvia of Sweden flowers during the World’s Children’s Prize ceremony at Gripsholm Castle in Mariefred, Sweden.**

## More slaves today

200,000 girls and women from Nepal are slaves at brothels in India. Every year, 12,000 new girls arrive, many of them under 16. There are thought to be 1.2 million sex slaves in the world. The turnover of the global sex trafficking industry is estimated to be at least USD 9.5 billion, and up to USD 32 billion.

There are at least 12.3 million slaves in the world today, roughly the same amount as the total number of slaves sent to Europe and America from the 15th century to the 19th century. Others estimate that there are 27 million slaves in the world today.

