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A Home Called Maiti: Anuradha Koirala's Fight Against Trafficking

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The word *maiti* carries a particular emotional weight in Nepal. It means the home a woman comes from—the parental home she can return to, a place associated with belonging before marriage and often with refuge afterward.

When Anuradha Koirala founded Maiti Nepal in 1993, the name was deliberate. The organisation was built around a simple but radical promise: women and girls who had been trafficked, exploited or abandoned should have somewhere to return to even when their own families or communities could not receive them.

What began as a small shelter grew into one of Nepal's best-known organisations working against human trafficking. At the centre of that growth was a former teacher who gradually turned private concern into a public institution.

From classroom to shelter

Koirala was a teacher by profession. Education gave her a close view of how poverty, gender inequality and lack of opportunity shaped the lives of girls and young women.

By the early 1990s, trafficking between Nepal and India was increasingly visible as a social crisis. Girls were being deceived with promises of work or marriage, transported across the open border and sold into exploitative conditions. Families often did not know where they had gone. Survivors who returned could face stigma instead of welcome.

Koirala decided to act.

Maiti Nepal began in 1993 with a small shelter. The earliest work was immediate and practical: provide food, safety and care for women who had nowhere else to go.

But shelter alone could not address the system that produced the crisis.

Why trafficking is difficult to stop

Human trafficking thrives in the spaces between institutions.

A recruiter can appear to be a relative, neighbour or employment agent. A young person may leave home willingly because the offer sounds better than the alternatives. The movement may cross districts before it crosses a border. Documentation may be absent or false. Families may report someone missing only after days or weeks.

For survivors, returning home can create another crisis. Social stigma, fear, trauma and economic dependence can make recovery difficult even after physical rescue.

Maiti Nepal therefore developed several kinds of intervention: prevention, interception, rescue, shelter, rehabilitation, education and reintegration.

The work placed Koirala and her colleagues at border crossings, in communities and inside long recovery processes that rarely produce simple endings.

Building trust at the border

Nepal's open border with India is essential to family, trade and everyday movement. The same openness can also be exploited by traffickers.

Maiti Nepal became known for operating transit and monitoring programmes in border areas, working to identify suspicious movement and inform vulnerable travellers about trafficking risks.

This work requires judgement. Not every young woman crossing a border is being trafficked, and protection can become paternalistic if it treats women as incapable of making decisions for themselves.

The challenge is to recognise coercion without criminalising mobility.

That tension makes anti-trafficking work more complex than the popular image of a dramatic rescue. Prevention often looks like conversation, verification and patience.

What happens after rescue

Rescue is often the most visible moment in anti-trafficking stories. Recovery is longer.

Survivors may need medical care, counselling, legal support, education, vocational training and help reconnecting with family. Some cannot or do not want to return to their previous homes.

Maiti Nepal's model grew around the idea that protection must include a path toward independence.

This is where the meaning of *maiti* becomes important again. A home is not only a building where someone is temporarily safe. It

is also a place from which a person can begin again.

Recognition changes the scale

Over time, Koirala became internationally recognised for her work. In 2010 she was named CNN Hero of the Year, bringing global attention to Maiti Nepal and to trafficking in Nepal.

Awards can sometimes simplify social work by turning a complicated institution into one heroic face. Koirala herself became a symbol because symbols are easier to communicate than systems.

Yet the attention mattered. It brought funding, legitimacy and international awareness to work that depends on sustained resources.

The challenge after recognition was the same one faced by many successful non-profit founders: how to make the organisation larger than the founder's personality.

The idea of dignity

Anti-trafficking language has changed over the years. Survivors were once routinely described only as victims, a label that could unintentionally freeze people inside the worst event of their lives.

The more useful approach focuses on agency and dignity.

A woman who has been trafficked may also be a student, worker, parent, entrepreneur or advocate. Recovery should not require her to perform permanent victimhood in order to receive sympathy.

Maiti Nepal's long history reflects this broader shift. The goal is not simply to save someone from one dangerous situation. It is to help create conditions in which she can make decisions about the rest of her life.

A problem that keeps changing

Trafficking has not disappeared. Its methods have evolved.

Migration routes change. Recruitment moves online. Fraudulent employment schemes cross more borders. Social media can be used both to warn people and to target them.

This means organisations founded in the 1990s cannot rely only on the methods that worked then. Prevention has to follow the technology, labour markets and migration patterns of the present.

Koirala's legacy therefore cannot be measured only by how many people one institution has assisted. It must also be measured by whether the country continues building stronger systems around prevention, policing, migration safety and survivor support.

The meaning of a safe return

Anuradha Koirala's public image is often maternal. That description fits the name Maiti Nepal and the shelter-based origins of the organisation, but it can also make the work sound softer than it is.

Anti-trafficking work means confronting criminal networks, social stigma and economic vulnerability. It involves legal systems, border management, education and long-term care.

The tenderness of the word *maiti* sits beside that harder institutional reality.

More than three decades after Maiti Nepal was founded, the idea remains powerful: no person should lose the right to return somewhere safe because somebody else exploited them.

Koirala began with a shelter. The enduring achievement was turning that shelter into an argument about what society owes people when their own idea of home has been broken.

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