

# Learning from Children Exposed to Sexual Abuse and Sexual Exploitation: The Bamboo Project Study on Child Resilience



## Resilience in Child Domestic Workers, Nepal – Summary Report

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# Resilience in Child Domestic Workers

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## *A summary of the findings from participatory research in Nepal looking at the resilience of child domestic workers*

The research in Nepal is the last of three studies in the ‘Bamboo Project’, a learning initiative developed and co-ordinated by the child abuse programme of the Oak Foundation. The aim of the learning initiative and consequently the research question for the study, is to determine ‘what may be learned from the life experience of children, adults, families and communities and programme practice that contributes to an understanding of resilience in the prevention of and recovery from child sexual abuse and exploitation?’

**Resilience:** Although there is no recognised definition of resilience, in the main, it is understood as the capacity to withstand considerable hardships, to bounce back in the face of great adversity, and to go on to live a relatively normal life.<sup>1</sup>

**The sample group:** Life story interviews were held with 47 children and focus group discussions with 70 children, involving a total of 117 children as research participants. Children were aged between 10 and 20 years old, 60% were girls (71) and 40% boys (46). Three sample groups were used for the study based on children’s ‘access to services’ (child protection support such as counselling, legal advice or literacy services). Sixty children were ‘accessing services’, 45 children were ‘not accessing services’ and 12 children were ‘reintegrated’ (receiving services to support their reintegration).

All child participants were domestic workers, currently or previously working in households other than their own – carrying out tasks such as cleaning, cooking and caring for children. Child domestic workers were chosen as the sample group because of identified links between the seclusion and dependency on employers of domestic workers that makes these children particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation.

## Methods

In studying the resilience of children, two key methods were employed consisting of life story interviews and focus group discussions. Both methods are participatory in nature and allow children’s own experience to be central to the analysis. Life story interviews were informal but structured and used creative methods (drawing) to allow children to feel comfortable in telling their story. Interviews were held through a series of ‘day camps’ where up to six one-to-one interviews took place (simultaneously) interspersed with creative group activities. In addition, eight focus group discussions were held with a total of 70 children where children created a community map (one of the activities from life story interviews) to gain data from children’s collective experience.

Analysis of the voluminous data from these methods was made from transcriptions of all interviews and reports from focus group discussions. Data was refined through coding, categorisation and theme development. Following several rounds of review, refinement and validation, a master list of

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<sup>1</sup> Gilgun, J. (1996). Human Development and Adversity in Ecological Perspective. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 77. Silva, T. (1996). Nurturing Resiliency Among Street Children. *A paper presented at the 4th Asian Conference on Child Exploitation and Abuse*. Calcutta. Turner, e. a. (1993). *From Risk to Resilience, A Paradigm Shift: A Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography*. Vanistendael, S. 1995. *Humor, Spirituality and Resilience: The Smile of God*, Geneva: ICCB Series.

71 codes was produced with 25 sub-categories and 10 categories; and from these five themes were generated.

The study had five participatory elements. As well as the use of participatory methods, two of the researchers were young people who participated all levels of analysis. Additionally, a Children's Advisory Group was consulted throughout; children also validated initial findings from the research and produced their own film to explain key findings to other children.

## **Results**

Although the richest data came from life story interviews many of the key findings were supported by data from focus group discussions.

### **Background**

The vast majority of children came from families living in the rural areas around Kathmandu. Children spoke positively about the practical help they and their families received from their community but spoke negatively about the poverty of rural life, the lack of access to schooling and the prevalence of domestic violence which often pushed them into domestic work. The majority of children chose to enter domestic work voluntarily; attracted to the 'bright lights' of the city and the promise of better access to schooling.

### **Working conditions**

The vast majority of the children interviewed were living with their employers and had minimal contact with their origin families. Most children started working aged nine years old. On average, children's working day started at 5am and finished at 10pm with many children mentioning their only time for rest was when they were away from their employer's home (i.e. at school). Their main tasks were cleaning, washing, childcare and helping in the kitchen. Children also worked in the small businesses of their employers and a number of girls mentioned chores around childbirth.

### **School and the local community**

Teachers and friends were sources of support and protection for many children. Because many of the children were attending an NGO literacy programme rather than a government school, there was quite a strong connection between school and NGO services. From discussions on community, children explained how their mobility was restricted to an area close to their employer's house: to local shops, the temple, playgrounds, school, to friends' houses and to the relatives of their employers.

### **Emotional and verbal abuse**

The majority of children talked of being scolded by their employer when they made mistakes in their chores such consisting of derogatory remarks to children about their worthlessness or low status. Additionally, scolding regularly included a threat of physical violence. Children complained about unfair or humiliating treatment by their employer – not enough time to rest, not enough food and not allowed to study. They complained of being locked in the house and of having a heavy workload.

### **Physical abuse**

Many children reported physical abuse (being beaten) by their employer; this was nearly always as a punishment for getting a task or chore wrong. Children talked of being beaten as a way for their

employers to control them and create fear in them so that they won't complain, answer back or go against their employer.

## Sexual abuse

Many children reported sexual harassment – sexually explicit language being used or sexual jokes and offensive, derogatory stories being told to them that have sexual overtones. Children also said they were groomed by being shown pornography or taken on special outings by their abusers. Children mentioned abusers fondling them, touching their private parts and being asked to massage them; and of abusers using threats and fear to stop them from resisting abuse.

## Sources of support

Key sources of practical and emotional support were **friends** who were also child domestic workers. Children mentioned **mothers** and **siblings** as people who cared, supported and protected them; and to lesser extent grandmothers, aunts and uncles. Members of the employing family were often cited as supportive, in particular the employer's children and the female employer – who protected them from being scolded or beaten by their employer. Children appeared to feel better supported by their employers when they were treated as one of the family instead of as a 'worker'. **Neighbours** were quite often as a place of refuge where children ran to when they argued with their employer. As domestic workers, children had regular contact with **shopkeepers** (grocers) in the community who were often also seen as a 'friendly face'. Many children mentioned **NGO staff** or counsellors as important people in their lives as well as female **teachers** who made them feel safe.

## Safety and protection strategies

In talking about sexual abuse children mentioned four key protection strategies. The first was going to a safe place – which they identified as either an open space or a place where there were a lot of people. The second strategy was to shout out when abuse was attempted, so that other people would hear and come to help. The third and most obvious strategy for children with a limited support network and restricted freedom of movement was to avoid the abuser.

The fourth strategy was to share their problems with someone who would keep them confidential. Children most often chose a friend to confide in, particularly when sexual abuse had been attempted. However, children preferred to confide in adults (rather than a child) when abuse had already taken place, particularly if it was a sudden and violent sexual attack. Furthermore, children spoke of the stigma associated with sexual abuse as the biggest barrier preventing them from sharing their problems openly with others.

## Coping strategies

The most common reaction by children to abuse was anger. Children had two key coping strategies for anger. Firstly and most commonly, children kept quiet. This helped them to avoid further punishment or abuse. The second coping strategy was for children to go to the temple and pray to God for help. Children often referred to the concept of 'karma' and 'destiny' to express their feelings that many things were beyond their control. Although, children believed that God would help them and this gave them hope: they could accept their current difficulties because of their belief that the situation would improve in the future.

Hindu festivals, which take place frequently in Nepal, were mentioned as either a time of fun or of difficulty. Children spoke positively about festivals when employers allowed them to participate and

they were treated like a 'real' family member. However festivals could also be a time, if they did not participate, when they missed their families (back home) and had a particularly heavy workload.

## Internal factors

Many children, despite their difficulties, had positive attitudes. This mindset seemed to come from recognising their skills, strengths and good behaviour – often associated with their domestic chores. Some children's positive thinking enabled them to see their problems as challenges.

Many children mentioned their goals or aspirations for their future as 'getting a better job'. They identified jobs such as 'teacher', 'police' or 'driver' that were based on people they had met in their day-to-day life. These children had strategies to achieve their goal, which tended to focus on studying hard and gaining the support of their family of origin.

## Resilience

In the results, 'reintegrated' children showed highest levels of resilience and children who were 'not accessing services' showed the lowest levels. However, this may well be because of restrictions in the research study as reintegrated children were found to be more talkative and better able to reflect on their lives than the other groups of children.

## Wellbeing

From an analysis of the wellbeing of children interviewed in this research it was concluded that, despite the vast majority of children experiencing some form of abuse in their lives, a large majority of respondents had positive outcomes and were *doing well*. Assessments highlighted two key indicators of wellbeing: firstly children's ability to reduce their feelings of fear, anxiety and anger and, secondly, children's progress in their studies (or in some cases simply regular attendance at school).

## Themes

In the development of the five following themes, the research team consciously looked for resiliency in children's responses to situations of sexual abuse and exploitation.

### Theme one: someone to confide in

*"Along with the grandmother I told those things [incidences of abuse] to my friend and she said that 'yes the man is like that, even he tried to touch my body before.'"*

Karishma, a 16 year old girl

Children in this study showed a strong urge to share their problems with a 'confidante' to offload their pain, to gain support and to help them develop a strategy to protect themselves from further harm. Seeking the emotional support of and disclosure towards a third person is a known resilience strategy. Children were particularly conscious of the need to confide in someone when it came to sexual abuse, and recognised grooming behaviour in their abuser. Subsequently they made careful assessment of potential confidantes and the consequences of sharing a problem that could have a serious negative impact on their lives. In so doing they demonstrated an ability to project past a present situation and make an active assessment of their risk in the future and showed great skill in identifying and analysing key criteria for suitable candidates.

## **Theme two: Dawn after Dusk: hope enables children to endure hardship**

*"I feel bad when my employers remind me I am a domestic worker and prevent me from meeting my family. Still, I persevere because I know that there is 'Dawn after Dusk' (Dukha Pachhi Sukha Aachha)." Gita, 16 year old girl*

Child domestic workers were found enduring hardship at their workplace in the hope of a better future, both for themselves and for their family. Children demonstrated a key coping strategy of the resilient child, that of cognitive re-framing. Through goal setting children were motivated to endure their current hardships and work towards a realistic personal goal, re-framing their employers as gate-keepers to a good education: the single most important element they identified in achieving their goal. Children borrowed optimistic cultural concepts connected to 'hope' to justify this re-structuring, displacing feelings of anger and despair at their situation with hope – God will bring justice to those who have done wrong to them. Finally, a re-framing of a traditional cultural practice placing obligations on eldest children to be 'providers' for their family enabled children to improve their social standing in their family of origin and take pride in their ability, as workers, to contribute to their family's income.

## **Theme three: positive attitude and self confidence**

*"It all depends on oneself to accept and see them [problems] as challenges, we should be able to prove ourselves and find ways out of difficulties." Prasansa, 16 year old girl*

Many children in this research displayed positive attitudes to themselves, to domestic work in general, and to the particular difficulties they faced. Children's ability to recognise their behavioural strengths and skills gave them a view of themselves as effective – able to achieve a given objective. It gave them feelings of self-worth and dignity that came from an internal locus of control (within themselves) and was often in direct contradiction to their abusive environment. Children's desire for self improvement combined with their ability to re-frame problems as challenges gave them further optimism and confidence in their own abilities to overcome or address their problems. Furthermore this powered their agency to take up opportunities such as services and support that would, in all likelihood, result in an improvement of their situation. This positive outlook gave children confidence that they could influence or change the situations in which they found themselves.

## **Theme four: ability to assess risk and develop a protection strategy**

*"Firstly I used to think a lot about what the person [abuser] is doing to me, I used to get angry with him and even pushed him sometimes...and then I used to open the curtains, doors and windows and went outside to the terrace. If I stayed outside I got scolded by the Aunt [employer] and if I went inside to work I found the Uncle [employer/abuser] so I chose to be outside and to get scolded by the Aunt." Mahima, 19 year old girl*

Children demonstrated resiliency in their cognitive aptitude for understanding and analysing situations of risk. The power relations between employer and worker in a private domain compound child domestic workers' risk to sexual abuse. Children displayed a remarkable capacity to analyse all these factors, in some cases identifying grooming behaviour, in others submitting to the wrath of their employer in order to protect themselves from their abuser. Although children's isolation and dependency on their employers resulted in rather simple strategies (locking doors and moving onto rooftops), the act of strategising in itself demonstrates resilience in its attention to detail and commitment to action, however small a step this may be.

## Theme five: participation in festivals enables reconciliation

*“In the festival of Teej she [employer] gives me money to buy bangles when she was also buying bangles for others and I think she loves me although she scolds me a lot.” Swasti, 15 year old girl*

Children in this study who were allowed to participate in festivals by their employers used this opportunity to re-create the warm emotional climate of family life that many of them craved. As a result, some children grasped this opportunity and changed their thinking for a moment, reconciling their difficulties with their employer or seeing their employer in a new light. This micro shift in thinking is facilitated by the more macro event of the festival, which enables children who participate, at the very least, respite from the drudgery of domestic duties. At best, children’s involvement in festivals gives them a tangible sense of belonging and can improve their social capital. Festivals’ inherent promise, that all who participate will be blessed, is a collective narrative that inspires hope and motivates children to reach for their goals. This theme appears to have the closest links to Gilligan’s idea of ‘turning points’ used in the analysis of resilience as festivals appear to have the potential to be a pivotal moment when children can re-frame their experience as a domestic worker and build their support in the community.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusions

From the five themes three conclusions have been drawn from this study.

The first is that the five themes are interlinked as evidenced by the fact that many of the same resilience factors were present in a number of themes. Key personality, cognitive and societal factors that have strong correlations with resilience were identified in two or more themes. For example, a key personality factor ‘extraversion’ (seeking the company of others) was evident in children’s desire to find a confidante in theme one and could also be linked to their enjoyment of festivals and recreational activities in theme five. Additionally, it was apparent in theme two where resilient children were more likely (through their own agency) to take-up opportunities or support services.

Three case studies highlight the interdependence of resilience factors demonstrated by children in this study and, in some cases, the evolving or changing nature of resilience. The first is Samjhana who demonstrates a ten year story of endurance and tenacity. Mahima’s story reveals the power imbalance between victim and perpetrator that is compounded by being a girl, a child and a domestic servant. And finally, Rita’s case shows how, with the support of a number of people, she was able to escape a very exploitative environment and start to rebuild her life.

The second conclusion is that despite an experience characterised by isolation, child domestic workers found support both externally from the limited number of people they were in touch with, and internally through their own resourcefulness. The dominance of internal resilience factors – the inner world where children have more freedom than their outer world of servitude – reflected this isolation.

The third conclusion is that resilience factors were found to have a cause and effect relationship with each other, the existence of one resilience factor causing other factors to develop. In the

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<sup>2</sup> Gilligan, R. (2003). Promoting Children’s Resilience: Some Reflections. Paper presented at the Launch Event for the Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society. Glasgow.

development of themes it was clear that a number of children's stories were relevant to three or more themes. Additionally, in 39 of 47 interviews children displayed multiple resilience factors. In the conclusions a flow chart is used to outline the relationships between resilience factors and the themes from this study.

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