



RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE PAPER 17

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A WORKING CHILD IN KATHMANDU, NEPAL: A SYNTHESIS OF 20 STORIES ABOUT CHILDREN'S DAYS

Jody Aked, Danny Burns, Kriti Bhattarai, Durlav Rayamajhi and Amit Timilsina

June 2024

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE PAPER

This synthesis paper summarises patterns in the lived experience of 20 children in Kathmandu who went about a typical day in their lives. Combining use of Global Positioning System (GPS) technology, a survey children completed via a mobile phone app, and ethnographic observations, children and adult researchers recorded locations, times of day, activities, and feelings.

This paper brings into view the challenges that children in worst forms of child labour navigate before, after, and between work. The findings illustrate how children struggle to combine work and school. It surfaces the fears that the children have getting to and from work. The paper shows how they navigate both stigma and harassment. The children work long hours into the night in unsafe locations, for low wages, which makes it difficult to survive. They work through sickness, and their work makes them sick. They have to work with men who are drunk and, in some venues, are required to drink alcohol themselves. On commission-based earning structures, the children's survival depends on it. Aside from the immediate and long-term effects of alcohol consumption, children struggle to navigate the dangers at work and in their neighbourhoods under its influence. Some of the actions that government actors, non-governmental organisations, businesses, and the children themselves could take to improve safety and wellbeing in workplaces and on journeys to and from work are discussed.

Eighteen of the 20 stories that inform this paper are published in English and Nepali with photographs and maps on the **Hard Labour website**.

This paper contains material of a highly sensitive nature, including accounts of sexual, physical and mental abuse, and other forms of violence, as well as accounts of exploitative and hazardous working conditions, which may be triggering.

Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA) is a consortium of organisations committed to building a participatory evidence base and generating innovative solutions to the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh and Nepal.

Authors

Jody Aked (Independent Consultant)
Danny Burns (Institute of Development Studies)
Kriti Bhattarai (Voice of Children – Nepal)
Durlav Rayamajhi (Voice of Children – Nepal)
Amit Timilsina (Voice of Children – Nepal)

Reviewers

Sendrine Constant (Every Child Protected Against Trafficking)
Jo Howard (Institute of Development Studies)

Suggested citation

Aked, J.; Burns, D.; Bhattarai, K.; Rayamajhi, D. and Timilsina, A. (2024) *A Day in the Life of a Working Child in Kathmandu, Nepal: A Synthesis of 20 Stories about Children's Days*, CLARISSA Research and Evidence Paper 17, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/CLARISSA.2024.011](https://doi.org/10.19088/CLARISSA.2024.011)

Photographs

Source (all photographs): CLARISSA.

Copyright

© Institute of Development Studies 2024
ISBN: 978-1-80470-202-4
DOI: [10.19088/CLARISSA.2024.011](https://doi.org/10.19088/CLARISSA.2024.011)

This paper has been funded with UK aid from the UK government (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, formerly the Department for International Development). The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or the UK government.



This is an Open Access paper distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original authors and source are credited and any modifications or adaptations are indicated.

CONTENTS

Acronyms and abbreviations	5
Acknowledgements	5
Glossary of terms	5
Assessing the quality of CLARISSA's evidence in this paper	6
1 Introduction	8
2 Methodology	10
2.1 A mixed-methods design	11
2.2 Who are the children and why are they working?	12
2.3 Ethics	14
3 Findings	16
3.1 Home life	17
3.1.1 Living far from work	17
3.1.2 Living close to work	17
3.1.3 Spending little time at home	17
3.2 The neighbourhood, and the journey to and from work	18
3.2.1 Covering large distances	18
3.2.2 Returning home late	19
3.3 Work	19
3.3.1 Working long hours, often through the night	19
3.3.2 The prevalence of alcohol	20
3.3.3 Working while sick	22
3.3.4 Tolerating sexual and verbal abuse	23
3.3.5 Using technology to attract customers	24
3.3.6 Not earning enough to survive	24
3.4 School	25
3.5 The length of children's days	26
4 Discussion	28
4.1 Minimising the impact of worst forms of child labour	29
4.2 Creating peer-to-peer support networks	30
4.3 Getting home safely	30
4.4 Minimising exhaustion and health impacts	30
4.5 Respect for children at work	30
5 Conclusion	32
References	34
Tables	
Table 1: Quality of evidence in this paper	6
Table 2: Basic biographical information about the 20 children who took part in the CLARISSA study to record a single day in their lives	13

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AES adult entertainment sector

CLARISSA Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia

GPS Global Positioning System

IDS Institute of Development Studies

NGO non-governmental organisation

NPR Nepalese Rupees

US\$ US dollar

WFCL worst forms of child labour

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are immensely grateful to the children in Kathmandu who generously invited us into their daily lives to help generate insights into the detail of their experience. The children are not named as authors to protect their anonymity. We would like to extend thanks to Kathmandu Living Labs who built the base maps of the urban neighbourhoods that the children wanted to focus on and created the tooling that allowed the children to document their daily lives with ease.

Particular thanks go to staff from Voices of Children who supported this process.

Thanks also to Children-Women in Social Service and Human Rights (CWISH) and ChildHope UK for their critical inputs.

This paper has been funded with UK aid from the UK government (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, formerly the Department for International Development). The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or the UK government.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AES In Nepal, the term 'adult entertainment sector' (AES) is used to describe a diverse range of businesses that include dance bars, massage and spa parlours, and folk-dance bars (known as *dohoris*). The term has been further expanded to include establishments from the wider hospitality industry (including the food and beverage sector), such as *khaja ghars* (snack shops). Within some venues associated with the AES, the commercial sale of sex and the sexual exploitation of children is known to take place. However, our research with business owners and child workers has helped us appreciate the varied nature of the work that is undertaken in venues associated with this sector. It is important to note that not all establishments typically associated with the AES are involved in the commercial sale of sex, sexual activity, or the commercial sexual exploitation of children (considered one of the WFCL).

While we understand that AES is not necessarily a term used by child workers (or local businesses) to refer to the sector they work in, the term is commonly used by practitioners and researchers at the local level. In practice, when referring to the AES, this paper refers to

cabin/hostess restaurants, dance bars, massage and spa parlours, *dohoris*, and *khaja ghars*.

Cabin/hostess restaurant or bar A small restaurant or bar with partitions that create small private 'cabins' for customers to be entertained in private by waiting staff. Food and drinks are usually sold at inflated prices – waiting staff or hostesses may sit with customers and increase the table bill by ordering drinks. Staff often earn commission from the beverages sold at the table they are serving. There may be indirect sexual activity (e.g. flirting, touching, and kissing) or direct sexual activity.

Dance bar Customers are entertained by dancers who perform to music and sit with customers to increase the amount of the drinks bill. Staff often earn commission from the beverages sold at the table they are serving. There may be indirect sexual activity (e.g. flirting, touching, and kissing). Customers may arrange to 'go out' (outside the venue) with dance bar employees for more direct sexual activity. Dance bars are generally more expensive than cabin restaurants and attract a more affluent clientele.

Dohori A venue that offers traditional folk music and dancing. Most *dohoris* serve alcohol and food. Staff often earn commission from the beverages sold at the table they are serving. There is variation between *dohoris* – some offer a family environment, whereas others may have a sexually charged atmosphere. Although sexual services are not usually provided on the premises, arrangements may be made with waiting staff to 'go out' for more direct sexual activity after work hours.

Guest Customers are often described as 'guests' by employees working in AES venues.

Khaja ghar/hotel The terms '*khaja ghar*' (snack shop) and 'hotel' are used interchangeably. Both describe a

small-scale eatery where food and alcohol are available at affordable prices. *Khaja ghars* are ubiquitous in Kathmandu in AES areas. They may have employees who provide sexual services or be places where this can be arranged.

Massage and spa parlour In AES locations, massage parlours may have employees who provide sexual services in addition to massage therapy in small private rooms.

Party palace Usually, a large venue that caters for events such as weddings and ceremonies. Party palaces hire catering and waiting staff on a 'per event' basis by liaising with a 'team leader' (usually a more senior member of the catering/waiting staff team) who procures a team of staff.

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF CLARISSA'S EVIDENCE IN THIS PAPER

The CLARISSA programme is committed to producing high-quality research, and to explaining the robustness and credibility of the methods that underpin the production of evidence. CLARISSA has developed criteria to assess the quality of its evidence along four dimensions: representativeness, triangulation, transparency, and new knowledge. A summary of these dimensions is included in Table 1. A separate paper (CLARISSA 2023) describes

the difference in a 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 assessment for each dimension.

Three researchers from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) gathered to discuss the quality of evidence in this paper in relation to the research design, process, insights, and analysis. Table 1 documents the assessments and the reasoning behind the assessment.

Table 1: Quality of evidence in this paper

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	Reasoning behind the assessment
<p>Representativeness</p> <p>Representativeness refers to the extent to which the voices of those affected by the issue are central in the evidence that is presented. This includes how critical actors have participated in the different parts of the process that has generated the evidence (design, data gathering, analysis, presenting) and how the nuance of their experiences and perspectives is expressed in the evidence claims.</p>				●		<p>CLARISSA researchers have assessed this paper as 4 for representativeness. The voice of children in worst forms of child labour (WFCL) is present in the findings and the children played an active role in the design, data gathering, and analysis. There is some researcher reflection and analysis, but the children lead the researcher through their day and were part of the practical decision-making about the design, the ethics, and safeguarding. They were also involved in analysis of their days.</p> <p>To score a 5 for representativeness, all the children would have been directly involved in the design conversation with technical experts about data visualisations, beyond technical orientations and feedback.</p>

Table 1: Quality of evidence in this paper (cont.)

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	Reasoning behind the assessment
<p>Triangulation Triangulation helps ensure a degree of consistency and bias control. Given that all sources of evidence have some degree of bias, it is important that researchers have sought multiple perspectives from different stakeholders, corroboration across multiple data sources and/or triangulation across different studies, and tools to check for consistency of findings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Multiple data sources' refers to the person(s) who provided the evidence. • 'Multiple lines of evidence' refers to different methods by which data is generated. 			●			<p>CLARISSA researchers assessed this paper as 3 for triangulation. The children's experiences were triangulated with adult researcher observations and the adult's direct embodied experience of the neighbourhood environment and the nature of the work. The adult researchers were able to experience what it is like to navigate public transport over long distances and to be in hot, loud, and smoky venues. In this sense, the findings were examined from two sources of data, i.e. the child and the adult researcher. The evidence claims were not triangulated with data derived from other methods in this paper.</p>
<p>Transparency Transparency entails that we know as much as possible about where the evidence comes from, who collected it, and how it was collected. For this, some details should be provided on what the sources of data are, the methods used, results achieved, and any key limitations in the data or conclusions.</p>					●	<p>CLARISSA researchers assessed this paper as 5 for transparency. The paper is based on the stories of children's days, most of which are published on the Hard Labour website. All the stories are recoverable, along with the photographs and the GPS traces of the journeys.</p>
<p>New knowledge The methods that we use in CLARISSA aim to uncover new insights and underlying patterns in the system. We aim to gather evidence on patterns that we, or other stakeholders, are aware of, but for which there is less evidence or which does not currently exist as 'common' knowledge in 'the field'.</p>			●			<p>CLARISSA researchers assessed this paper as 3.5 for new knowledge. This paper plugs a specific knowledge gap on spatial and temporal understandings of children's experiences in WFCL. Often research looks at children's experiences while at work, but this research looked at children's days end-to-end, and how the children navigate urban landscapes around work, revealing the cumulative nature of the stressors and challenges that the children face.</p> <p>The evidence supports conceptualisations of WFCL that are holistic and multidimensional, situating an understanding of hazardous work in the context of the rest of a child's life. The paper also generated a lot of experiential knowledge which provides extra depth in understanding issues including poor health, poor treatment at work, sexual harassment in the neighbourhood, etc.</p>

Source: Authors' own.

Section 1:

INTRODUCTION

1 INTRODUCTION

The CLARISSA (Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia) research programme set out to understand how children working in the adult entertainment sector (AES) in Kathmandu experience the city in which they live. There are growing concerns about child welfare in urbanised areas (Zaman 2023; UNICEF 2012) and welfare is a particular concern for children who have been integrated into adult worlds and night-time economies, through routine exposure to sexualised environments, sexual exploitation, and sexual violence (Dank *et al.* 2019; Cecchetti *et al.* 2012).

The influence of urban poverty on child outcomes is of interest to international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Cecchetti *et al.* 2012) in recognition that the demands of urban living (e.g. reliance on cash, disconnection from 'traditional' norms, loss of status) shape parental and family behaviour (e.g. addiction, violence, parenting, decisions to work). Earlier in the programme, CLARISSA researchers collected 400 'life stories', focusing on the whole life of each child, including how they had transitioned into working in hazardous jobs in Kathmandu (Bhattarai *et al.* 2024).

However, the details of how the urban environment intersects with worst forms of child labour (WFCL)¹ on a daily basis remained little explored. Although it is understood by the research community that children interpret their environments in different ways to adults (Wilson *et al.* 2018), and that human action can be closely

tied to the physical spaces in which it unfolds (Kyttä *et al.* 2018), little is known about how working children navigate the streets, transport systems, and adult entertainment venues of Kathmandu. With a view to identifying points of intervention that could reduce wider harms faced by children in WFCL, CLARISSA researchers were keen to examine interrelationships between where children are, what they do, and how they feel, paying particular attention to how children interact with the city at different times of the day.

The stories of children's days accompanying this paper record a single day in the lives of 20 children. The research process encouraged children to share daily experiences and challenges, so that researchers and policymakers can be more connected to the detail of what a day looks like for working children. Eighteen of the most comprehensive accounts of children's working days have been published on the Hard Labour website,² but all 20 stories from children's recorded days informed this paper. (All the children's names have been changed.)

The aim of this paper is to draw together some of the common experiences in the stories, while paying attention to the particularities of the social and physical work environments that children at different types of AES venue encounter. In the details of children's experiences of self and city, opportunities emerge to identify new points of intervention to reduce some of the harms associated with working in the AES.

1 The ILO convention No. 182 definition of worst forms of child labour includes slavery, debt bondage, compulsory labour, armed conflict, child prostitution, hazardous labour, illicit activities, and any other work likely to damage the health, safety, and morals of children. Child labour can automatically become the worst form according to the sector – for example, the sex industry and other industries categorised as hazardous, including the leather industry. It is also possible for employment in any industry to become a worst form of child labour by virtue of the precarious nature of the work activity (e.g. use of dangerous chemicals, equipment), the conditions of work (e.g. long hours, exposure to abuse), and the impact of the work, including damage to physical and psychological health.

2 See [Hard Labour website](#).

Section 2:

METHODOLOGY

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 A MIXED-METHODS DESIGN

To record a single day in the lives of 20 children, the CLARISSA programme used 'journey mapping', an adaptation of previous mixed-method studies of children's everyday mobility in a city (Christensen *et al.* 2011). Working in a participatory way with children, the programme combined Global Positioning System (GPS) technology, a survey children completed via mobile phone, and ethnographic observations to spatially and temporally construct the movements and experiences of children.

Most of the stories about children's days³ comprise time at home, time on the way to and from work, and time at the workplace. In some of the stories, children also spend time at school, in medical centres seeking treatment and, in one story, a place of natural beauty to meditate. In most cases, the child's day is typical of their everyday routines, and where it is different from a normal day the child pointed out those differences in reflection and analysis sessions (described below), when making sense of their experiences.

A detailed account of the methodology is presented in a process learning note (Bhattarai *et al.* 2024, forthcoming). In summary, the research team worked with a technology partner, Kathmandu Living Labs,⁴ to create base maps of our study area, design data entry forms in a mobile app, complete data quality checks, and design visualisation

layers and filters to spatially and temporally analyse children's activities and experiences alongside adult observations. The journey mapping took place over two days – the first accompanied by an adult researcher and the second by themselves. Following a pilot phase, children working in night-time venues reflected on how the process was easier for them when not accompanied by an adult researcher. In the AES, discretion is a valued attribute, and many of the children lead quite private lives to lessen the impact of stigmatisation. When on their own, they worried less that a supervisor, colleague, friend, acquaintance, or family member would become suspicious, and they appreciated the autonomy to answer survey questions when they wished, without feeling observed.

The first day with the researcher remained important for ensuring the children were comfortable using the technology and had the opportunity to put what they had learned about the mobile apps and safeguarding into practice. While the central source of data of this research was the child's day, their journey and their feelings, the lived experience of children was complemented by adult observations, which were also spatially plotted onto the digital maps. It was easier to accompany the children in some types of venues, such as small snack bars, than it was to spend long periods of time in massage and spa parlours, where a researcher's presence could alter customer behaviour, as is documented in a CLARISSA

3 See [Hard Labour website](#).

4 See [Kathmandu Living Labs website](#).



A khaja ghar

story about a massage business.⁵ In one case, CLARISSA researchers went to a dance bar posing as customers to observe the child while at work. As outsiders to the child's lived experience, adult researchers were able to take note of things that may have become normalised by the child. Perhaps more importantly, as it turned out, the researchers were able to experience the child's life in an embodied way, making note of how the journeys and workplaces made them feel.

Children co-developed safeguarding plans and were involved in the spatial analysis of their data, which entailed looking at traces of their journey on a digital map, with all the activities and experiences they recorded over the course of the research days. The purpose of the analysis sessions was to understand the meanings children gave their individual and collective mobility patterns and experiences. This work provided the underpinning for two of 13 Action Research Groups which were initiatives within the CLARISSA programme (Burns and Apgar 2024, forthcoming). The child-led Action Research Groups focused on journeys to work and home (Nepal group nine) and mental health and wellbeing (Nepal group five).

2.2 WHO ARE THE CHILDREN AND WHY ARE THEY WORKING?

The CLARISSA children's research group in Nepal was involved in randomly selecting children through purposive sampling. The sampling was purposive

because the children were selected based on the relationship they had with the programme and their work in the AES. Sometimes the research team worked with community-based organisations to identify potential children before approaching the children themselves to invite them into the research. The team was purposive about sampling boys as well as girls, but we only worked with four boys out of 20 children.

CLARISSA analysis of 400 life stories of children in Kathmandu provides a detailed and nuanced account of all the reasons children work (Bhattarai *et al.* 2024). To contextualise what we learned about children's days for this paper, we collected some biographical information about the 20 children, including their age, gender, type of work, and the age they started working (Table 2). The table includes the pseudonyms used in this paper, so the reader can look up biographical information to contextualise the quotes used here to illustrate common experiences.

Most of the stories about children's days relate to children aged 14–17 working in the AES. Of the 20 children who took part, four were male and 16 were female.⁶ Three children work in *dohoris* (folk-dance bars), five in dance bars, and three in party palaces (events catering for weddings, birthdays, and work celebrations), which all form part of the night-time economy in Kathmandu. Four children work in *khaja ghars* (small snack restaurants) and five work in massage and spa venues. These venues tend to stay open late, but they also open early in the day. Any of these venues can be sites for adult sex work and

5 See 'The Business Behind the Curtain' on the [Hard Labour website](#).

6 This gender difference in the data reflects the gender divide in the AES, where venues employ a higher number of girls – approximately 90 per cent female to 10 per cent male (Dank *et al.* 2019).



A massage and spa parlour



A party palace

child sexual exploitation.⁷ Many are working long hours in highly sexualised work environments where they are exposed to or at direct risk of child sexual exploitation.

While the focus of this work has been on a typical day, the accounts do provide more extensive biographical detail

about the child's life. Given the nature of the methodology, and the relationships between adult researcher and child that were built over the course of the research, the children were often more candid than if, for example, they were giving an interview. For instance, we learned

Table 2: Basic biographical information about the 20 children who took part in the CLARISSA study to record a single day in their lives⁷

Name**	Age	Sex	Workplace	Role	Age started working
Preeti	14	Girl	<i>Dohori</i>	Singer	13
Rekha	17	Girl	Dance bar	Waitress	15
Tisha	17	Girl	<i>Khaja ghar</i>	Waitress and cook	13
Batsa	16	Boy	<i>Dohori</i>	Kitchen worker	12
Megha	16	Girl	<i>Dohori</i>	Singer	Not known
Samita	14	Girl	Massage and spa	Masseuse	Not known
Bidisha	17	Girl	<i>Khaja ghar</i>	Waitress and cook	16
Simi	17	Girl	Massage and spa	Masseuse	8
Mona	17	Girl	Dance bar	Dancer	12
Rinku	15	Girl	Dance bar	Dancer	12
Nisha	16	Girl	<i>Khaja ghar</i>	Waitress and cook	13
Sushma	17	Girl	Massage and spa	Masseuse	14
Arpita	16	Girl	Massage and spa	Masseuse	8
Khem	17	Boy	<i>Khaja ghar</i>	Waiter and chef	10
Pema	15	Girl	Party palace	Waitress	Not known
Supriya	16	Girl	Party palace	Dish collector	10
Ganesh	17	Boy	Dance bar	Kitchen worker	Not known
Dawa	17	Boy	Party palace	Kitchen worker and waiter	10
Rama	17	Girl	Dance bar	Dancer	Not known
Yakthumma	17	Girl	Massage and spa	Masseuse	15

Notes: * The stories of an additional five children's days were excluded from analysis because they had turned 18 years of age during the research process and before they mapped their journey. ** The children's real names have not been used. *Dohori* – folk-dance bar; *Khaja ghar* – snack shop.
Source: Authors' own.

⁷ We have followed ECPAT guidelines on language by using the phrase 'child sexual exploitation' to describe child sexual activities in these workplaces (ECPAT Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children 2016).

just how young many of these children were when they started work, often in party palaces, as domestic workers, on construction sites, or as conductors on the micro buses. Simi says that she worked in a hotel from the age of eight. Batsa says he has been working since the age of 12. Mona has been working in a dance bar since she was 12 years old. The same goes for Rinku, who has used dance bar earnings since the age of 12 to be the breadwinner of her family. Rinku has an ID card saying that she is 19. Fake ID cards are common amongst this cohort of children. Supriya started working before she was ten years old. She has worked on a construction site and as a domestic worker.

Children commonly begin work because of a financial crisis in the family. Some children like Dawa, who began work as a labourer at age ten, came to Kathmandu alone. Ganesh came without family to complete his studies but instead he works in a dance bar until 3am. All four children working in *khaja ghars* are working for a relative in exchange for education, food, or somewhere to live. Some children are working to pay for their siblings' education (Preeti, Rinku) and the health bills of parents (Mona). Simi (age 17) is responsible for her three-year-old daughter and also her younger brother who lives with them.

Some of the children are 'new' to work in the AES, while others have become professionally networked with their own client and customer base. Even *khaja ghars* are

reliant on returning customers. Sexual exploitation from clients is a particular feature of massage, *dohori*, and dance bar work. As a researcher recounts, Arpita 'even said that if we wanted any girl below 17, we can contact her and she will support us in finding them'. The stories reveal how some children are disturbed by the realities and stigma of work in the AES (Rama, Yakthumma, Batsa), struggling with peer pressure (Samita), and eager to think of work as a short-term fix. Other children, who have been working for longer, including dance bar workers Mona and Rinku, are drinking heavily and are in debt. They are more honest about how constrained they feel. Many of the children are determined to develop careers in graphic design, beauty parlours, computing, or music, and others dream of higher education and jobs abroad; but they are struggling to sustain their education (Ganesh) and save earnings to create a new reality for themselves (Khem).

2.3 ETHICS

The study was conducted in compliance with all human rights and ethical standards developed by the CLARISSA programme as per the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) ethical protocol. Risk mitigation planning work was supported by a CLARISSA safeguarding expert in partnership with children and local connectors. A series of conversations and planning documents informed



A dohori



A dance bar

the research design, piloting, data collection, analysis, and writing phases. The process is discussed in detail in a CLARISSA learning note (Bhattarai *et al.* 2024, forthcoming) but the main innovation was to make ethics and safeguarding a participatory exercise.

For example, at the design stage children were involved in thinking through potential risks and coming up with solutions. Through exploring the different technological solutions with children, we chose to use mobile phones as opposed to tablets as the phones would invite less curiosity as most people in Kathmandu have a mobile phone. We became mobile phone-led in the apps we chose to support data collection. We worked with our technical experts to make the devices safe for children and trained the children in online safety and digital literacy, including how to take photos that captured the essence of what they wanted to show without revealing people and locations. We took the decision to differentiate the GPS tracker (which collected information about the child's location) from the data entry form (which collected information about child's activities and feelings), so these data flows could not be put together by anyone who erroneously obtained the phone.

By openly discussing risks, the children were encouraged to make their own choices about what aspects of their day they captured. For example, if they felt it was unsafe to record their experiences while their employer was around, or while on a street at night, they did not do so. Based on the feedback of the children who carried out piloting, we created a feature on the mobile app where children and adult researchers could use data entry forms retrospectively to add a safety rating, a feeling, an observation, a voice note, or photograph, once they had reached their safe place. The decision to trade real-time data with a lower risk profile proved important, as most children made some use of the retrospective data entry feature.

We worked with each individual child to identify the day and the 12-hour period within their 24-hour day when it would be best for an adult researcher to accompany them. Safe spaces were identified around risky locations on a child's projected route. Adults and children had a list of emergency contacts they trusted, and members of the wider research team were in the locality to be on hand in case of an issue.

Data was visually represented on maps by our technical partner, Kathmandu Living Labs, on private servers. Codes were used in the data collection and analysis phases, and pseudonyms utilised in place of the children's real names in report writing. We edited out specific place names and workplace names, and worked with an illustrator to capture each child's portrait and biography. The children answered some questions about their journey to analyse their own data, and this provided them with space to correct, deepen, or redact information they had added to the map during the data collection period. The children also worked in pairs to explore similarities and differences in their journeys, their experiences, and their feelings, before discussing in plenary the main learnings from collective data points presented on a map of their neighbourhood. Researchers used the children's reflections on the maps and in the analysis workshops to co-author their contributions to the stories.

In the biggest departure from our initial conceptualisation, we primarily represented children's days temporally, not spatially, in the individual accounts on the Hard Labour website. The GPS tracking was too location-specific to ensure anonymisation, so we presented an illustrative journey on an illustrated map. The written account was constructed around the sequencing of activities and experiences children recorded, from when they woke up to when they went to bed.⁸

8 See [Hard Labour website](#).

Section 3:

FINDINGS

3 FINDINGS

Each child's story reveals something about their home life, the way they navigate the city, and their work. Even though the children provided personal details about how they were feeling, and why, at specific moments and locations in time, some clear patterns emerged across the story collection. This section explores the most reported experiences that boys and girls documented in the mobile app as they went about their days, as well as some of the more pertinent researcher observations.

3.1 HOME LIFE

3.1.1 Living far from work

Children working in dance bars, *dohoris*, and massage and spa venues are not typically living in the same neighbourhoods that they work in. In lots of the stories of children's days, the children talk about not wanting to bring the researcher to their home. Work in the AES is stigmatised, so friends and acquaintances do not know what work the children are doing. The researcher accompanying Yakthumma explains: 'She [the child] was fearful that by accompanying her, her work would be disclosed among her family and community, so we kept our distance.'

The children may share a room with a sibling or a co-worker, or they may rent a room by themselves. They are often disconnected geographically and emotionally from their parents. The children do not want their family or neighbours to know what work they are doing. All this means that they move around the city independently.

3.1.2 Living close to work

In contrast, children working in *khaja ghar* venues tend to live with their families, close by, because they work for relatives. It is often the children's job to open the *khaja ghar* or close it at the end of the day. There is little separation between work life and home life. Khem (age 17) sleeps where he works, and his living conditions are not considered untypical:

We meet Khem at his *khaja ghar*. He shows us the room where he sleeps. His room is actually meant for storage. Khem has one storage space while another two similar rooms are rented out to customers. The room is cramped and is very

minimalist with no furniture other than three beds. (Researcher accompanying Khem)

Sometimes customers also sleep along with me as there are two more beds in the room. I don't mind sharing the room, but I really don't like to share my own bed with others, thankfully I haven't had to do that yet.

(Khem, boy, 17)

Bidisha lives with her brother and his family in one small room. Many children working in *khaja ghars* look after young child relatives around their work responsibilities, taking younger siblings, nieces, or nephews to and from childcare settings. Family illness places extra responsibilities on these children, often to the point of overwhelming them.

Sometimes when my aunt goes to the hospital, that time I feel uncomfortable because I have to do multiple tasks at the same time. I have to go for shopping and have to cook food items and serve customers simultaneously.

(Tisha, girl, 17)

Bidisha runs the family *khaja ghar* while her sister-in-law attends a training course. Most of the 2–3km travelled each day by children working in *khaja ghars* is to attend school and run errands that include going to the market to collect food or delivering food on takeaway orders. Children working in party palaces also tend to work close to where they live.

Other children live with acquaintances and work colleagues, often disconnected from parents and family. Dawa (age 17) has four room-mates and they live in an unsafe part of the city, in a tin roof structure close to lots of butchers.

3.1.3 Spending little time at home

Most of the children spend little time at home. Many of the activities one associates with home – getting ready, eating, relaxing – take place in the workplace, when preparing for a shift to begin or when the footfall of customers is low.

Many of the children say that they do not eat at home, including Mona and Ganesh. While preparing to sing for a video shoot (before she begins work in the evening at a *dohori*), Megha says:

I ask my brother to bring me some breakfast, as there will be no time for lunch, but it is early in the morning and no restaurants are open. I just drink some water before leaving for work.

(Megha, girl, 16)

Samita also says that she has 'hardly any food at home'. She rarely has dinner, and instead relies on whatever she eats as snacks in the massage and spa parlour, which is sometimes provided by customers. In the dance bars and *dohoris*, it is common for children to have a meal prepared by the cook late in the evening. In section 3.3, we learn that it is part of the venue's business model for girls to eat and drink with customers, because it increases what they spend.

When at home, children are often running a household, shopping for groceries, and cleaning. Any downtime at the end of the day – typically after they have completed their studies – is spent on social media.

Social media, including TikTok and Facebook, are a big part of these children's lives. They spend the little free time they have on social media for entertainment,



Sixteen-year-old Megha puts on her make-up at the *dohori*, after she has spent the day at a video shoot without having had breakfast

and even to facilitate their education through chat groups. Yakthumma reported that she got to know the intermediary who found her work in the AES through TikTok. Samita (age 14) does not have friends and pretty much lives in a TikTok world outside of her work.

3.2 THE NEIGHBOURHOOD, AND THE JOURNEY TO AND FROM WORK

3.2.1 Covering large distances

The children who live far from where they work cover large distances each day, especially when they go to school and run errands. A quarter of the children travelled over 15km on the day of the journey mapping: they work in dance bars and massage and spa venues. They travel independently either by *pathao* (ride-sharing) motorbikes ordered through a ride-sharing app or by public bus. The time they have between school and work is short and often the motorbikes and buses arrive late. Traffic can also make the children late for work and they worry about how their supervisors will react.

It is cheaper to go by public bus (Preeti), but the bus rarely drops children at their home or venue, so they have to walk, often in the dark. This is problematic because the children do not always live in safe neighbourhoods.

I feel uncomfortable during the night-time while going to my room, sometimes I get teased by unknown people. That time I felt insecure. But now I feel insecure when I see drunk people and when I have to pass through the back street lane and there is no electricity line.

(Tisha, girl, 17)

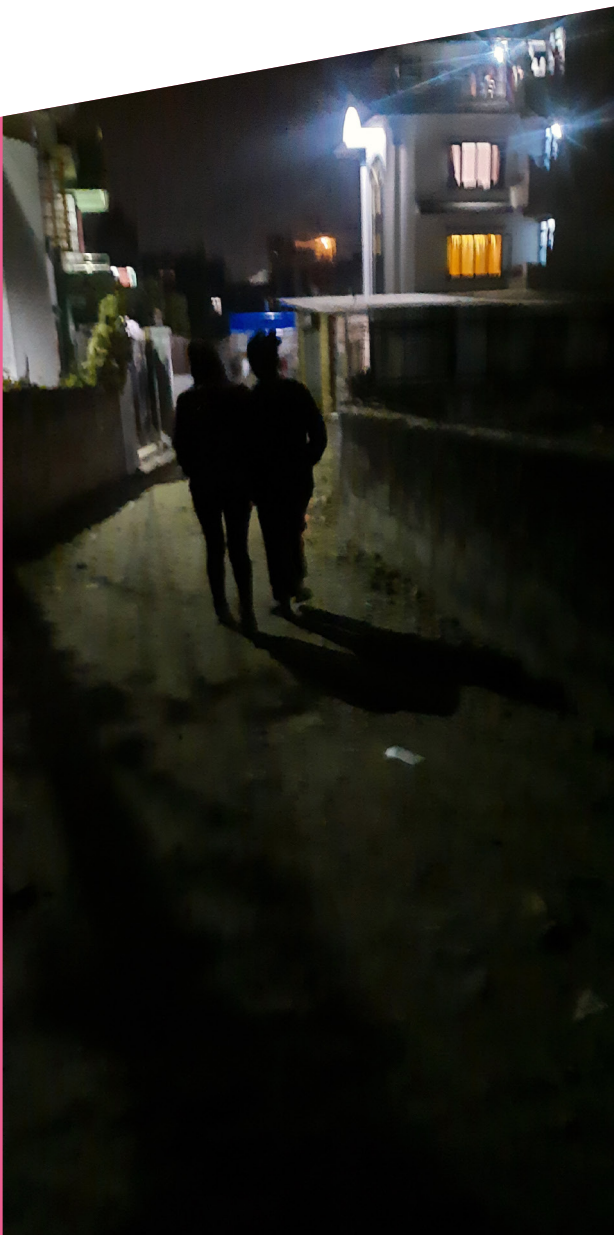
The children also find the public bus exhausting as even short distances of a few kilometres can take 45 minutes, and they often cannot get a seat. Simi says: 'I am more tired when I have travelled in a crowded bus. I feel very sluggish by the time I reach work.' Although Mona prefers the 30-minute walk home after a shift to save money, if she receives 'good tips' she will split the cost of a taxi home with a friend.

Yakthumma says that she stopped walking to work because she was sexually harassed. Yet public transport is not comfortable and is also a source of sexual harassment: 'When Bidisha was travelling in a crowded micro bus, we could see how another passenger was pushing her intentionally', says one of the researchers.

I feel very uncomfortable while travelling in public vehicle because I get touched inappropriately when there is a lot of crowds. And the bus is crowded most of the time.

(Preeti, girl, 14)

Preeti feels safer when her supervisor allows a male colleague to accompany her home. Some of the children feel afraid on narrow paths. Others, like Ganesh, are afraid of street dogs: 'When there are lots of street dogs, I feel scared.'



Bidisha walks along a dark alleyway, accompanied by an adult researcher. There are no people around aside from some boys who are smoking marijuana.

3.2.2 Returning home late

For the children who work in the dance bars and *dohoris*, one of the biggest issues is coming home late at night. Many of them work until 2am or 3am. There is little protection for these children on their journeys. A few are given lifts by their employers, and some are able to get taxis or *pathao* motorbikes, but even then, they struggle to get from the vehicle to their room safely. The children report that they are scared on their journey:

I am walking alone and there are lots of dogs on the street that is making me really scared. At times, there are boys who come to smoke marijuana in this place and they tease girls like me. I feel very uncomfortable and unsafe walking through this lane.

(Bidisha, girl, 17)

Some of the children's journeys home are seen as dangerous:

When we reached the Dallu riverside area we ran for around 500 metre stretch like our life depended on it. It is very dangerous because of the presence of bushes and trees along the riverside. Crime is also high around this area from a way back. Just a month ago, a mother and her daughter were killed on their way back home at around 7pm or 8pm Dallu riverside.

(Supriya, girl, 16)

Boys are also affected:

I am quite afraid while walking back. Today, as I return back quite early, I am less afraid, but when it is late at night I either find a friend to get back to or run while I am crossing a short stretch by the Bisnumati river. I have heard most of the crimes happen here. Many cases of robberies have also happened there in the past; fortunately, I haven't been robbed yet. Just recently, there was a rape near Bisnumati river where I walk while travelling to home. I have heard cases of murders have happened here.

(Dawa, boy, 17)

3.3 WORK

3.3.1 Working long hours, often through the night

There is a clear pattern of very long workdays. Pema starts her day at 5.45am when she goes to school, then works from 2–8pm at a party palace, after which she

comes home and does housework. Similarly, Nisha goes to school at 6am, her work in the *khaja ghar* ends at 9.30pm, and then she does housework. Bidisha gets up at 4.30am to go to school and does not return home until 9pm. Ganesh returns home at 3.30am.

Long working hours are also a reality for children who do not go to school. Rama works from 10am to 1.30am: she gets up at 9am, which means she is pretty much working every waking hour. Long hours can also be a result of early marriage and resulting childcare responsibilities. Simi, who is 17 years old with a three-year-old daughter, works in a massage and spa venue: she wakes at 7am, returns from work at 8pm, and then cooks dinner and does housework. Batsa says, 'When I don't have work, I sleep,' and, as a result, he often misses out on seeing friends.

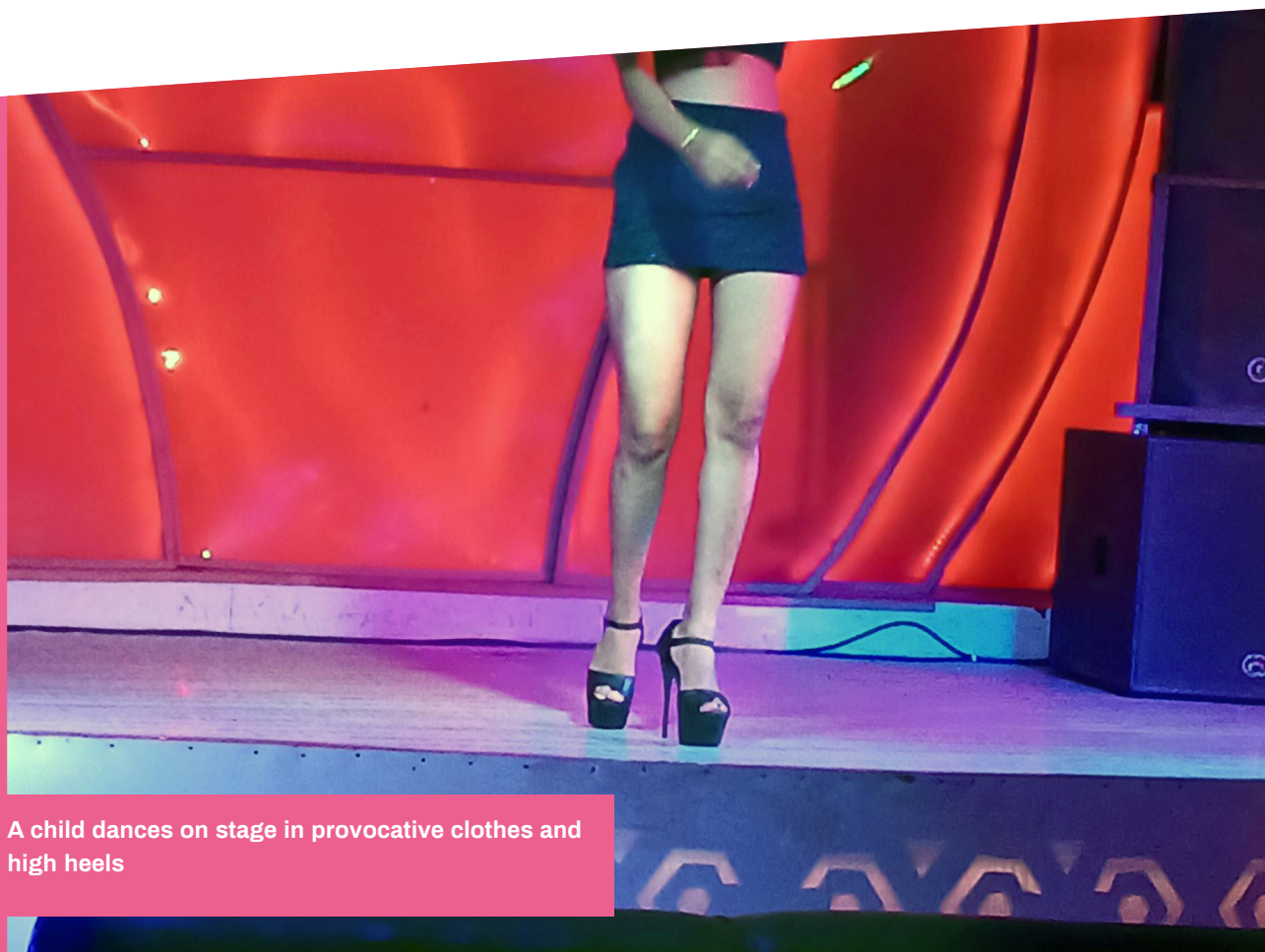
3.3.2 The prevalence of alcohol

The prevalence of alcohol consumption is a big issue for children working in the AES. Some of the children

are working because of alcoholism in their family, and most have to deal with the drunken behaviour of customers. It becomes a serious issue for the children when they experience pressure to drink, or when alcohol consumption makes customers more forthright in their sexual advances. Rama, who works in her own beauty parlour during the day and then in a dance bar at night, describes the problem:

I don't like the fact that drinking here is considered natural and it is expected of us. I get annoyed when a guest offers drink and cigarette to me. Most of my colleagues at the dance bar negotiate with the guests and go to spend night with them after the duty hour and it is also expected of me too. Some of the guests come and ask me if I will go out with them. Some drunken guests are more forceful in their approach – once a guest even held my hand and pulled me. I really don't like such behaviour from the guests; however, I feel helpless as I don't have anyone to support me.

(Rama, girl, 17)



A child dances on stage in provocative clothes and high heels

Rama does not have any action she can take when touch becomes coercive or forceful. She is left to manage the situation herself. Similarly, Sushma shares that even on a day when she has a good set of customers, she has to deal with customers of the 'hotel' (a *khaja ghar* where guests sometimes sleep) below the massage and spa venue where she works:

There is a hotel below the massage and spa venue, down on first floor. It is problematic because of the smoke and hearing the hotel customers swearing, and sometimes they come up here after drinking and cause fights.

(Sushma, girl, 17)

Supriya does not like getting hassled by guests when clearing tables. They say to her 'Tighra kasto goro' ('How white [referring to skin colour] are your thighs?') or 'Jaane Ho?' ('Go out with me?'), which is a phrase used to ask for a sexual service.



Khem's photograph of empty alcohol bottles and packets of cigarettes in the family-run *khaja ghar* where he works. In Nepal, it is illegal for children to buy and sell alcohol under the age of 21.

Some children are forced to drink because it is part of the job. Most venues make more money from high-priced drinks than from the 'entertainment' itself, so the young girls are expected to sit and flirt with customers and encourage them to drink.

Rekha works at night and hardly gets any time to eat cooked food at home. Her work at dance bar normally starts from 7pm to 2am. She takes alcohol and eats with the customers at the dance bar. Her task is to perform dance, but she is also responsible to invite customers to the dance bar and make them spend as much as they can. For all that, she needs to have good contact with the customers, flirt with them, and encourage to have as much order of food and beverages along with alcohol.

(Researcher accompanying Rekha)

Yesterday, I drew a 30,000 bill from the customer whom I personally invited. I was completely drunk. I had so much of wine that I could not even stand on my own. Yesterday, I was dropped home at this time. Staff vehicle dropped me at home. He carried me to my room as I was completely out of any sense.

(Rekha, girl, 17)

Mona works in a dance bar and begins her day with a headache and hangover:

Mona drinks excessively, which leads to moments of vomiting at the dance bar. She remembers very little towards the end of the evening the more drunk she becomes.

(Researcher accompanying Mona)

Last night I drank a lot of alcohol and I have a hangover. I have a headache. I do not like to have regular meals at work as it makes it difficult to perform. When I am with guests, I get to share snacks along with drinks, so I hardly have proper dinner. When I am intoxicated, I become more emotional and I feel the words and actions of customers more seriously.

(Mona, girl, 17)

Drinking without food will obviously make her more drunk; but for Mona it is also a way of dealing with the trauma of the environment that she is working in:

Working at the dance bar can be challenging. To earn more money, I sometimes drink heavily. I feel like the guests can be mean and treat me poorly, so being drunk helps me cope with their behaviour.

(Mona, girl, 17)

The researcher account of Rinku (age 15) describes what happens when she drinks:

She drinks alcohol along with the customers in the dance bar. She feels hesitant initially but once she gets drunk, she does not care about anyone and does whatever to satisfy a customer.

(Researcher accompanying Rinku)

Rinku is drunk at 2.30am. After getting drunk the children are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Children across all the adult entertainment venues talk about how suffocating they find it when customers smoke.

3.3.3 Working while sick

More than a quarter of the children in this small group were feeling unwell, and some had to get medical attention on the day they were recording their experiences. An adult researcher reflects on Preeti (age 14) who works in a *dohori* and was recently in hospital:



Rekha takes a photo as she arrives at the hospital. She is alone and in a lot of pain.

The fact that she has to work even while she is sick makes her feel sad. She shared that she suffered from pneumonia and was admitted to hospital. She was discharged after four days. After the discharge she felt the pain in her abdominal area and went to hospital and, after doing the check-up of abdominal, an abscess was found in her kidney. Therefore, she had to take medicine for that. Later on, when she was still in recovery, she again got infected by dengue fever. Preeti shares, she still feels weak because of all the diseases she went through. Unfortunately, whenever she felt a little better or could walk, she had to go to work. There was no rest for her just because she felt a little weak. (Researcher accompanying Preeti)

Rekha also has health issues and has to go for a hospital check-up on the day of the journey mapping. She says on her journey, 'I am having extreme stomach ache. I am also having problem in breathing.' Later at work she says: 'Yesterday I drank a lot of alcohol, so my stomach is hurting a lot like hell.' And, 'I did not call any customer today as I am unwell. I can eat nothing with the customer even if I call anyone. I am also having diarrhoea.' The link between alcohol consumption and acute sickness is clear. It is an occupational hazard.

Arpita says she has an infection in her uterus and a bad back. Nisha works and collects her brother despite ill health. Ganesh and Rama both experience pressure to work while sick. Rama's manager at the dance bar is strict and does not allow her to take leave while she is menstruating:

I put on my dancing dress and get to work straight away. I am on my period today and due to heavy bleeding, I can't perform and dance well. I have back pain too. The owner won't give me a day off, which makes me feel very bad.

(Rama, girl, 17)

Yakthumma, who works in massage and spa points out the difficulties of working on days when she is menstruating:

I was on my period. I had my menstruation cramps. Working during the menstrual days is very tough. I use hot bags, but sometimes I also take painkillers so that it will be easy to work.

(Yakthumma, girl, 17)

Pema remarks on a girl on her period who is refused a key to a clean toilet and told to use a dirty toilet.

Megha recalls calling her manager at the *dohori*: 'I'm not feeling well, and my symptoms are getting worse. I call the *dohori* to say I can't come today. But Dai [the manager] insists that I do, as other staff are absent. I agree to go.' Some children are working while injured. At the end of her day, Bidisha reveals that she has an infected wound on her foot which aches at night. Sushma fractured her hand and it still bothers her when she gives massages. By 8am, Khem is cooking food in the *khaja ghar* and he burns his hand: 'It's not serious, but it is painful. Unfortunately, I won't get a day off,' he says.

3.3.4 Tolerating sexual and verbal abuse

Sexual and verbal abuse is the norm when working in the AES. The children working in massage and spa parlours often talk about customers 'behaving badly' when they try to touch them. In the *khaja ghars*, the children have to deal with rude customers, verbal abuse, and those who refuse to pay.

The children are adept at profiling customers who behave well and those who do not, but even when they dislike the way a customer behaves this does not mean they can avoid them. In one case, Mona describes how she has formed a relationship with one of these men: 'There is one guest who is a pervert. But I don't mind. I am romantic with him, and we have a relationship.'

Girls are also sexually abused by co-workers within a venue. The frequency of abuse in children's working days does not minimise its impact on a child. One boy is very upset by what he sees:

I feel secure when everyone at the workplace respects me. I feel very uncomfortable when the male staff dominate the young female staff. It is very disappointing. Waitresses are the victims of this abuse, most of the time.

(Batsa, boy, 16)

For singers and dancers in *dohoris*, it is sometimes easier to keep a boundary and a distance from the guests:

I didn't get off the stage because I don't like to flirt with guests. I have seen guests touching the body of the waitress. If I get off the stage, then the guests would ask me to sit with them. After that the guests normally touch our body. I feel very unsafe when seeing that situation. I hate boys who treat us like that.

(Preeti, girl, 14)

Preeti goes on to explain how having a female owner is helpful because she proactively mitigates harassment-related issues and will directly involve herself when needed, whether to console the staff or request the customers to behave well. Most dance bars and *dohoris* are owned and run by men, however.

Samita, who will stand up for herself, articulates that the ability to tolerate poor customer behaviour is equal to food on the table:

When I massage the customers, they try to touch me. I have literally beaten three people because of that. Then again, I felt like because of them we are getting food. So, we should treat them well.

(Samita, girl, 14)

Samita describes how she is pressured by her co-workers to start providing sexual services. Rinku is sexually exploited in her workplace: her boss gives her supplements and medicine to enlarge her breasts, she is touched forcibly on her breasts and thighs, and she wears revealing clothes as this is what customers demand. She also relates how her friend who is under 18 is involved in the provision of direct sexual services.

While Dawa feels that girls are more at risk than boys in his workplace, he says that young boys are also vulnerable. He has seen cases of girls and women abusing young boys. When participating in an analysis workshop, Batsa reflects how he is sometimes abused by more senior female singers in his workplace. He also gives this example:

I was abused by a girl when delivering the order. She was in a room. I went to deliver her order. She asked me to come inside the room and not to be scared. She told me that she will talk to my owner and I won't be in trouble. She was around 20 years old. Maybe she was from a rich family. What I feel comfortable in my business is that my seniors also speak to me politely which is very rare with other staff.

(Batsa, boy, 16)

Rama has contrasting feelings about her jobs: her beauty parlour gives her a sense of empowerment and accomplishment, whereas her work at a dance bar makes her feel powerless to dictate her choices and aspirations.

In *khaja ghars* and party palaces, the children are observed being reprimanded by family members and supervisors in front of customers. They say the rudeness is commonplace and they are accustomed to it, but the researchers observed the embarrassment it causes.

One of the workers who is working in the snacks section is scolded very badly in front of all the guests and I feel bad for him. His mistake wasn't that big. The boss should have talked with him separately and not in front of everyone. It was his first day here too.

(Pema, girl, 15)

Pema explains how it helps to have supportive peers who have the same experience. Yakthumma's account demonstrates the importance of fun and friendship. The fact that she is allowed to sing and dance and spend quality time with her co-workers makes all the difference to how she experiences her day.

3.3.5 Using technology to attract customers

The stories reveal how children use TikTok live on their mobile phones to attract and retain customers. They flirt with potential customers and invite them to their workplace. This seems commonplace in massage and spa venues, in particular.

Samita... often goes live and this has been her daily routine, through which she invites customers to the massage and spa. She is the youngest member in the massage and spa. Her elder sister introduced her to this business. She is also working in the same venue.

(Researcher accompanying Samita)

Customers approach Yakthumma through social media sites. They usually chat online then visit her at the massage and spa venue. Sometimes they propose that she provides them with sexual services, which Yakthumma rejects. She suggests at first that this does not bother her and that she can easily shrug off such behaviour, but the adult researcher observed that she finds the sexual abuse and the customers following her online very stressful.

3.3.6 Not earning enough to survive

None of the children working in *khaja ghars* are paid anything more than small change because they are contributing to a family business in exchange for education, accommodation, and basic necessities. The children working in party palaces are paid US\$4–5 (NPR⁹ 534.4–668) a day on an ad hoc basis. Children in

massage and spa venues are usually paid US\$3–4.50 (NPR 400.8–601.2) a massage. Earnings vary according to levels of custom. On the day of the journey mapping, one child expected to earn US\$10 (NPR 1,336) that day and another child only completed one massage because they didn't receive many customers. Children working in dance bars and *dohoris* earn a monthly salary, ranging from US\$38 (NPR 5,076.8) for working in the kitchen to around US\$100 (NPR 13,360) for dancers, singers, and waitresses. The base salaries in dance bars and *dohoris* are well below the minimum wage (US\$40/ NPR 5,344 per month), which leads to a dependency on tips and commission on the sale of food and alcohol, which makes children vulnerable to sexual exploitation. For example, the children may also earn commission and tips, raising the base monthly incomes to upwards of US\$200 (NPR 26,720) in high season. Children working at massage and spa venues can earn US\$230–280 (NPR 30,728–37,408) a month in high season if they perform sexual acts. So, with tips and commission, children earn the equivalent to or above the minimum wage (NPR 17,300/US\$130 a month) in high season. Their earnings dip in the winter season when the venues are less busy.

The difficulty for most of the children is that they are earning for dependants in high debt scenarios. The 400 children's life stories collected by CLARISSA clearly show that family debts and loans often drive children into jobs in the AES. The stories show that pressure is a day-to-day experience; for example:

There was a moment when she was talking to someone over the phone. She was asking for some time for paying in order to pay her loan back (maybe the money lender was calling her asking to return the money). Simi said, she cannot pay the money return back at the moment and she still needs another 15–20 days. She also said she shared how she has to pay NPR 3,000 [US\$22.8] to a medical shop.

(Researcher accompanying Simi)

The children's earnings do not match their expenses. Samita, who works to look after her mother and sister, says that when she is at the market:

Everything is so expensive. It is difficult for us if I don't earn money. I am feeling bad buying vegetables. It is too expensive.

(Samita, girl, 14)

9 NPR – Nepalese Rupee.

Despite having a long day, waking at 7am and returning close to 1am, Supriya is struggling to make the combination of work and school pay financially:

The full-day salary at the party palace is NPR 1,500 [US\$11.50]. However, I am paid less than 50 per cent of normal staff payment because I must go to school during daytime and can only work part-time, which in fact is deducted by the manager. I was promised to be paid NPR 400 [US\$3]; however, I was only paid NPR 300 [US\$2.20] without any notice. Why the manager deducts my salary isn't clear to me yet. The owner and manager also hesitated to give us [working staff] enough food to eat as well, even though there is abundant food in the party palace where leftover food is plentiful after the party. I can't make a complaint without fearing I will not get the job next time. This makes me feel powerless.

(Supriya, girl, 16)

Batsa earns US\$190 (NPR 25,384) a month, but this salary is not enough to plan for the future, and delays in payment make him worry about the present. During a lull at work when there are not many guests, he says:

I think about my future a lot. I don't know how I will fulfil my dreams. I don't want to be working but I have no other options and I don't have anyone to support me in my family. Also there haven't been many guests coming to the dohori recently, perhaps because of the fasting during the month of Srawan, and I haven't been paid. I feel quite stressed about this.

(Batsa, boy, 16)

Mona (age 17), who has been working in a dance bar since she was 12 years old, earns US\$114 (NPR 15,230.4) a month, plus commissions on food and drink sales and tips. She struggles on this salary because of repayments on loans the family took out for her late father's medical expenses and her mother's cancer treatment. Rama, who has her own beauty parlour, also works in a dance bar at night otherwise she can't make the bills (including her mother's medical treatment) add up.

Children are paid less than adults, even though they are often given the same responsibilities as adults:

We children are discriminated when we are given the salary. No matter what sort of work I have done, I was always treated unequally. I was paid only NPR 600 [US\$5] in a party palace, which is less

than half of the actual NPR 1,500 [US\$13] that I should have gotten. In construction site also, with all its dangers, a full-day salary was supposed to be NPR 800 [US\$7] which I believe is very little and on top of that, I get only NPR 400 [US\$3] just because I am a child. The payment also isn't made on the same day and sometimes I have to wait weeks to get the money. I am discriminated against even though I am very confident that my work proficiency and strength is better than many of the adults.
(Dawa, boy, 17)

When working in ad hoc jobs, such as in party palaces, the children talk about employers paying less than they expected. For her first working day, Pema is only paid US\$5 (NPR 668) when she expected US\$12 (NPR 1,603.2). The manager takes a 50–60 per cent cut. Pema feels bad about not being able to object to this, but she knows she will get fired if she questions the salary deduction. Pema thinks this happens to other children as well.

Given that basic pay is insufficient to manage a household, support a family, and pay off debts, many children elect to work on a commission basis. This can give children more agency to define their limits and boundaries, but it also means the money they earn is contingent on their ability to attract and retain customers, which may increase the risk of child sexual exploitation.

Rekha works in a dance bar and used to work on salary but prefers to work on commission:

I used to work on a salary basis. But now I am working on a commission, and this has been good for me. Before I had no option other than to tolerate unwanted touch from the customers. But now, that does not happen.

(Rekha, girl, 17)

By eating and drinking with customers she can persuade her customers to spend NPR 50,000–60,000 (US\$377–453) in one evening, and this earns her commission.

3.4 SCHOOL

There is perhaps a surprisingly high number of children working in the AES who are trying to keep up their studies at the same time. Education is seen as a route out of poverty and the children are ambitious, often with clear dreams. Their current job is only ever seen as temporary, and the perceived temporary nature of the work helps them to stay positive.

Yakthumma works 12 hours a day serving customers at a massage and spa venue, then goes home to have dinner, do some housework, and study for an hour. By this point, she is struggling:

I study at night after returning from work. I feel happy when I understand the lessons in my course book. I'm on a Facebook group where I connect with others studying the same course. Tonight, I find it hard and I'm irritable.

(Yakthumma, girl, 17)

Even the children who have ad hoc seasonal work in party palaces feel the pressure to put work ahead of their studies.

The manager called me to tell me to come to work at 8am tomorrow. I felt bad as I would have to miss the college. I have decided I will attend college tomorrow, take two periods of classes, and return back home. Then I will go to work.

(Pema, girl, 15)

Nisha lives with her parents above the family *khaja ghar*, but she still struggles to balance work and education. She does her homework at night when all her jobs for the business have been completed and others in her family are sleeping.

The consequence of work is that education is always squeezed into the beginning or end of the children's days, lengthening how long they are required to focus and concentrate.

3.5 THE LENGTH OF CHILDREN'S DAYS

Children work very long hours. Dance bars, *dohoris*, and party palaces are open late, and this means children start their shift around 5pm and continue until the early hours of the following morning. *Khaja ghars* and massage and spa venues are open all day to catch the morning, lunch, afternoon, and evening trade. Some girls are doing housework, educating younger siblings, going to school, and doing a full-time job. Other children are working multiple jobs. Children are often stressed by the little

time they have available to move between activities, like school and work. This means they have little downtime and often do not eat, and they rarely sleep enough hours.

Nisha has a stomach ache brought on by hunger. On a journey from college to home she says: 'I am not feeling well and am very hungry. I feel sick and light-headed while walking.' Other children (Batsa, Simi, Rinku) report feeling 'sluggish', 'lazy', tired, and hungry as they are required to serve and entertain customers. Batsa and Megha say they get home so late and they work so long, that they are too tired to sleep. Others say that they get home so late that they have no time to eat:

I struggled to fall asleep as I was feeling too tired and sick. I slept without eating... On seeing how I was when I returned home, my brother asked me if I want any medicine. But I didn't even want to move from my place and was just lying lethargic. I was in a horrible condition. He asked me if I wanted a meal, but I was not willing to eat. It was already 10.30 at night. So, I replied to him that if I feel like it, I will eat later, but I slept without eating.

(Megha, girl, 16)

Supriya says: 'Today I don't eat because I am suffering from gastric.' Ganesh eats little at all:

It seems Ganesh does not have proper meals during the day as he prefers to sleep after getting back home early in the morning. The only meal he has is after he goes to work at a dance bar.

(Researcher accompanying Ganesh)

Rama is working in two jobs and is exhausted but still cannot sleep:

I normally wake up at 9am and still people think I wake up very late. What they don't understand is, I work whole night and go to bed at four in the morning. When I try to sleep, the memories of that bright light, smoke, and loud music of dance bar give me nightmares and disturb my sleep. Lack of sleep is hindering my day-to-day life as well.

(Rama, girl, 17)

Nisha only gets six hours sleep.

THIS PAGE IS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

Section 4:

DISCUSSION

4 DISCUSSION

There is sometimes a perception that work in the AES is alluring to young people, girls in particular. Some of the children have interests that intersect with aspects of night-time economy work: Yakthumma dreams of being a guitarist, Batsa wants to be a rapper, and Rinku wants to become 'a big personality'. However, an adult researcher reflected:

The lifestyle that she portrays and her real life were completely different. [She] was genuinely living a hard life. When she was about to go to massage parlour, she was having back pain and hand pain. But still, she had to do massage, wearing a forced smile and make-up, to earn money for a better future.

(Researcher accompanying Arpita, girl, 16)

Some of the children talk about how much they enjoy listening to the songs and watching the dancing when they are working in *dohoris*, but this is because these moments provide some colourful relief from the difficulties and abuses many of them are experiencing. The children take their education seriously and most can articulate clearly their plans for the future at a young age. A job in the AES is never portrayed as the end game. And yet, none of the children in this study earn enough to improve their financial circumstances.

The stories highlight some variety in children's experiences across venues in the AES. For the children working in *khaja ghars*, very long hours are the norm. These children do not have a separation between work life and home life. They have very little privacy, deal with difficult customers, and frequently keep the business running almost single-handed without getting paid to do so. They get education, accommodation, and basic items paid for them, but this feels insufficient for the hours they contribute and the responsibilities they are given. Shifts in party palaces are poorly paid. For children earning more through commission and tips in dance bars, *dohoris*, and massage and spa venues, their income is seasonal and insufficient to cover their expenses, because these same children are breadwinners, looking after sick parents and in debt.

The stories of children's days show that all the children are at risk of child sexual exploitation through exposure to customers who feel entitled to make sexual advances. Those children working in *dohoris*, dance bars, and massage and spa venues are working in a highly

sexualised environment where they are extremely vulnerable to sexual exploitation. For the children who are sexually exploited on a daily basis, alcohol is both a tool to earn commission and a coping mechanism. It is having an impact on both their immediate and future physical health.

Just as the stories of children's days provide a more nuanced picture of the AES, they also encourage an appreciation of the cumulative hazards that children navigate in a single day and the sustained levels of stress and strain children in WFCL experience. By looking at the child's whole day, end to end, we see the interconnections between evening work and health; between customer expectations, business models, and child sexual exploitation; and between the work children do and the environment they do it in. We witness how exhausting a routine combining night-time work and education can be, why children travel a long way to keep a geographical distance between home and adult entertainment venues, and how difficult this reality can be for children trying to keep themselves safe.

The cumulative hazards also point to some important interdependencies. After reading the children's stories of their days it becomes difficult to look at a child's work life as separate from their home life. For children working in the AES who are the primary breadwinners and carers for other family members, there is no easy route out. For children who are reliant on relatives or who feel they cannot return to their family because of conflict, they too experience constrained agency in the choices they make.

4.1 MINIMISING THE IMPACT OF WORST FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR

While work in the AES is intrinsically WFCL, the stories of children's days point to circumstances, norms, and behaviours that contribute additional hazards and worsen the situation for working children. All the while the socioeconomic context does not remove the financial imperative for children to work in the AES, the stories of children's days can be used to identify some provisions and interventions which would ease the physical and emotional toll of their work. Some of these could be communicated to owners of adult entertainment venues to shift perspectives and behaviours when working with children.

4.2 CREATING PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS

Nisha feels better when she can refuse to serve difficult customers:

I am serving snacks to the customers. They are well behaved so I feel comfortable. There are some customers who stare at me but [I] don't serve them and I ask my father or mother to serve them.

(Nisha, girl, 16)

Other children talk about owners throwing out customers who behave badly. But in many of the stories, children appear isolated and alone in how they navigate work and its impacts on them. This is especially the case with technology, where child sexual exploitation happens digitally, devoid of a social context.

Owners, managers, customers and peers often pressure children into sexual exploitation. There are few open conversations in workplaces about what children are comfortable with and how owners and managers can reinforce agreed boundaries. The example of a female business owner who better looks after child workers could model a different approach to the running of *dohoris* and dance bars. For those children working in workplaces that are psychologically unsafe, peer-to-peer support groups, which bring children together from different workplaces, would enable children to discuss how to deal with pressure. The conversations may start to make more visible to children some of the better employers and work practices in the sector.

4.3 GETTING HOME SAFELY

The stigma associated with work in the AES has a direct impact on the choices children make. They purposefully live a long way from the venues where they work, even though the transportation costs are met personally. Sushma decided to live close to where she works so she does not have to worry about travelling costs, but she made this decision out of economic necessity. Other children walk or take public buses to reduce transportation costs, raising the risk profile of their journeys to and from work substantially, and adding to their levels of exhaustion. Children say it makes a difference when an employer frees up a male colleague to help them home, indicating that workplaces can put in

place practices which support children to get home safely. In Supriya's case, the owner will pay for her ride home after work but the manager does not. The issue is that the owner usually leaves early. If it was a policy to pay for rides home, then Supriya would feel confident she could get home safely regardless of who is on shift.

4.4 MINIMISING EXHAUSTION AND HEALTH IMPACTS

The children are tired and hungry, which means they are often running on empty. They do better when they can sleep and rest during quiet times at work; for example, when customer footfall is low. Awareness that children frequently do not eat at home is important and the provision of food in workplaces is always welcome. Children would do better if they were supported to eat regularly and earlier in the day, and sufficient time was given between food and physical activity.

Children struggle to work when they are feeling unwell. Long shift patterns exacerbate the problem. Alcohol consumption is integral to the business model to increase food and drink profits, and yet there may be practical ways children can be supported by businesses to lessen consumption and its impacts – for example, more frequently rotating dancers and waitresses, swapping out alcoholic drinks from non-alcoholic ones, and a menu for non-alcoholic cocktails.

4.5 RESPECT FOR CHILDREN AT WORK

Khem talks about how good he feels when customers appreciate the food he serves, showing how a dignified position in a work environment goes a long way to making a tedious and long day better. It is a shame, and unnecessary, that most of the children are treated poorly and their self-worth is compromised. This experience is especially incongruent with the responsibilities children are given in their roles. While the treatment of children in workplaces may echo age-related hierarchies in Nepali society, there is scope to redefine these relationships in a context where children are integral to the running of businesses. For example, verbally appreciating the role children play and talking to them privately when they make a mistake.

THIS PAGE IS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

Section 5:

CONCLUSION

5 CONCLUSION

The stories of children's days reveal the emotional, relational, sexual, and physical demands of life as a child worker in the varied venues of Kathmandu's AES. Children assume responsibilities beyond their years and become the object of desire, even though they rarely receive the pay or respect of adults. Both girls and boys are routinely exploited sexually, and they work long days and navigate tiresome commutes through poorly lit and unsafe areas. The children retreat into an online world, and this world is also part of their working lives with the use of social media sites to attract and retain customers.

Children strive to maintain a delicate balance between work and family responsibilities, and between work

and education, often missing school. Despite their contribution to their households and their workplaces, the children acutely feel the stigma and social isolation that accompanies work in the AES. When people around them express care and concern it makes a difference to the children's days, reminding them of their self-worth.

While it is imperative that the socioeconomic situation of children like those in the stories is changed, it is simultaneously important that government actors, NGOs, businesses, and children themselves, work to improve the safety and wellbeing of working children in their workplaces, at home, and on their journeys to and from work.

REFERENCES

REFERENCES

- Bhattarai, K. *et al.* (2024, forthcoming) 'Learning from GIS Mapping with Children Who Work in the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Bangladesh and Nepal', CLARISSA Learning Note, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies
- Bhattarai, K. *et al.* (2024) *Qualitative Analysis of 400 Life Stories from Children and Young People Working in the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Nepal*, CLARISSA Research and Evidence Paper 7, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/CLARISSA.2024.004](https://doi.org/10.19088/CLARISSA.2024.004) (accessed 29 May 2024)
- Burns, D. and Apgar, M. (2024, forthcoming) 'A Synthesis of Systemic Action Research Processes in the CLARISSA Programme on Worst Forms of Child Labour', Brighton: Institute of Development Studies
- Cecchetti, R.; Karkara, N.; Sterky, L.; Stuckenbruck, D. and West, A. (2012) *City Kids: Urbanisation and its Consequences for Children's Right to be Protected from Abuse, Neglect, Exploitation and Violence*, Save the Children
- Christensen, P.; Mikkelsen, M.R.; Nielsen, T.A.S. and Harder, H. (2011) 'Children, Mobility and Space: Using GPS and Mobile Phone Technologies in Ethnographic Research', *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 5.3: 227–46
- CLARISSA (2023) *CLARISSA's Quality of Evidence Rubrics*, Design Note 2, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/CLARISSA.2023.003](https://doi.org/10.19088/CLARISSA.2023.003) (accessed 29 May 2024)
- Dank, M.; Kyle, V.; Hughes, A.; Dhungel, N.; Gurung, S. and Jackson, O. (2019) *Prevalence of Minors in Kathmandu's Adult Entertainment Sector*, London: Freedom Fund
- ECPAT Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children (2016) *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*, Bangkok: ECPAT International and ECPAT Luxembourg (accessed 8 May 2024)
- Kyttä, M.; Ikseda, E.; Ahmadi, E. and Smith, M. (2018) 'Children as Urbanites: Mapping the Affordances and Behavior Settings of Urban Environments for Finnish and Japanese Children', *Children's Geographies* 16.3: 1–14
- UNICEF (2012) *The State of the World's Children 2012: Children in an Urban World. Executive Summary*, New York NY: United Nation's Children's Fund
- Wilson, K.; Piaskoski A.; Gilliland, J. and Coen, S.E. (2018) 'Children's Perspectives on Neighbourhood Barriers and Enablers to Active School Travel: A Participatory Mapping Study', *Canadian Geographer* 63.4: 1–17
- Zaman, Q. (2023) *Children-Centred Urbanism*, Routledge



T +44 (0) 1273 606261
E clarissa@ids.ac.uk
W clarissa.global
T @ChildLabourActn
F #ChildLabourAction

T +44 (0) 1273 606261
E ids@ids.ac.uk
W www.ids.ac.uk
T @IDS_UK
F facebook.com/idsuk

CLARISSA works by co-developing with stakeholders practical options for children to avoid engagement in the worst forms of child labour in Bangladesh and Nepal.

The participatory processes which underpin the programme are designed to generate innovation from the ground which can sustainably improve the lives of children and their families.

The programme's outputs are similarly co-designed and collaboratively produced to enhance local ownership of the knowledge, and to ensure that our research uptake and engagement strategy is rooted in the direct experience of the people most affected on the ground.