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Exploring separated children's experience of migration in Nepal

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Abstract

Most Nepalese children live in rural areas where poverty, employment and education act as key drivers in their decision to migrate to urban centres. This paper reports on a study which researched the experiences of separated children who migrated, as reported through interviews with 20 practitioners working in NGOs in Kathmandu. It describes children's motivations, migratory journeys and situations, when 'promises of work' often failed to materialise. Having seen more children migrating to Kathmandu and recently fearful that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to further increase, practitioners identify the need for an urgent, coherent and multi-faceted response.

KEYWORDS

labour, migration, Nepal, separated children

INTRODUCTION

Many Nepalese children's lives are impacted by migration, either that of their parent(s) or their own. In a country where 83% of the population live in rural areas, poverty and limited employment and education opportunities act as driving factors in decisions to move to urban centres (Adhikari & Turton, 2020). There is a high rate of internal and international migration and children's experiences vary according to their family's circumstances. Some children migrate with their parents, some live with one parent due to the other's migration, some live with relatives as a result of both parents' migrating and others migrate alone.

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This paper emerges from a larger study which explored the experiences of children facing parental separation in Kathmandu through the lenses of practitioners working with separated children in Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Kathmandu (Kay-Flowers et al., 2022). Interviews were conducted with 20 practitioners experienced in working with separated children who have migrated from many districts across Nepal to the capital city, Kathmandu. The paper focuses on the experiences of ‘separated children’—children who have migrated alone, or as part of a family for parental employment and subsequently been separated—as reported in the interviews. It does not consider the experience of those migrating solely for educational purposes or those ‘left behind’ in rural communities as a result of their parent(s) migration. It uses Adhikari and Turton’s (2020) continuum of children’s individual and structural vulnerabilities to frame the findings and understand separated children’s experiences as reported in practitioners’ accounts. It also draws on their interpretation of the UN Trafficking Protocol (2000) to explain how the ‘issue of ‘consent’ is considered irrelevant in the case of children under 18 ... [meaning] any child transported for exploitative work is considered trafficked, whether they have been deceived or have ‘consented’ in any way’ (Adhikari & Turton, 2020, p. 395). It begins by examining patterns of migration in Nepal before going on to consider the extent of separated children and children’s migration and their experiences.

PATTERNS OF MIGRATION

Children’s experience of migration in Nepal varies because of their family circumstances. For some, it involves living with one parent, the other having migrated; for others it involves living with family members, both parents having migrated, or becoming a ‘separated child’. Others may migrate with their families but face separation from them due to the exploitative labour conditions at their destination, known as ‘secondary migrants’, these children are vulnerable because of their parents’ circumstances (Adhikari & Turton, 2020, p. 400). Migration may be within Nepal (internal) or involve leaving the country (international), it may be permanent, long term, temporary or circular, with migrants moving between home and their work site on a seasonal or short-term basis (Khan, 2021, p. 4).

In the last 20 years, Nepal experienced a rise in international migration with approval of over 4 million workers for foreign employment between 2008 and 2018 (ILO, 2021, p. 1; MOLESS, 2020). Annual numbers have declined steadily since 2013/14, due to economic and geopolitical factors, nonetheless over 350 000 approvals were issued in 2017/18 and over 230 000 in 2018/19 (MOLESS, 2020). These figures do not take account of migration to India which has an open border with Nepal, nor illegal migration including the estimated 12 000–30 000 women and children trafficked each year (Simkhada, 2008). Most migrant workers are aged 25–35 (mean age 29 in 2018/19) and male, over half are employed in low-skilled work, often on temporary contracts for 2 years (MOLESS, 2020). The destination countries for 88% of migrants in 2018/19 were Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Malaysia. Females account for about 5% of migrant workers, most migrate to UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Cyprus, where many are employed as domestic workers (MOLESS, 2020).

The volume of remittances received in Nepal was 8.79 billion US\$ in 2018/19, accounting for 28% of GDP and placing the country fifth in World Bank rankings of those receiving the highest remittance by share of GDP (MOLESS, 2020). On average one in three Nepalese households receive remittances (ILO, 2021), this increases to two in three families in the Terai region and one in two in the Hilly and Mountain regions (MOLESS, 2020). Remittances are ‘crucial to

household incomes' and have contributed 'to more than half of the reduction in poverty over the past 20 years' (ILO, 2021, p. 3). They demonstrate the pull factors of migration, giving access to 'jobs with wage differentials and better amenities, social networks and opportunities for upward social and career mobility' (MOLESS, 2020, p. 11). Gains in terms of 'better educational and health outcomes and living standards in Nepal' are also recognised by the Government of Nepal (MOLESS, 2020, p. 4).

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted significantly on patterns of migration with an estimated 30% reduction in jobs typically held by Nepalese migrants in the UAE and Malaysia, and 20% reduction in Qatar and Saudi Arabia (Adhikari et al., 2022). At the same time the processing of aspirant migrant applications was suspended. Class, gender and place of residence influenced the impact of the pandemic, with women, undocumented migrants and workers in India suffering the most (Adhikari et al., 2022). This loss of income due to the pandemic has forced men, women and families to adjust to an uncertain situation (Adhikari et al., 2022).

SEPARATED CHILDREN IN NEPAL

Under 18-year-olds account for almost 50% of Nepal's population and there is an increasing trend for Nepalese children not to live with both parents (Adhikari & Turton, 2020). It is estimated those living with only one parent increased from 22% in 2006 to 27% in 2011. The overwhelming majority lived with their mother while a very small but increasing minority lived with their father (Guragain et al., 2015). About 7% lived separately from both parents, in some cases, this was to access better educational facilities (Guragain et al., 2015).

Another study, using the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey from Nepal's first nationwide household survey in 2014, estimated 4.8% of children were living away from both of their parents (Kamei, 2018). Seventy-five per cent of these separated children said their parents were alive, 50% of whom said both parents were residing in other households in Nepal, indicating they had left the households where they were born, 23% said one of their parents was abroad, and 27% said they were somewhere else in Nepal (Kamei, 2018).

Separated children were most likely to live with grandparents or other relatives, including sibling-headed households (Guragain et al., 2015; Kamei, 2018). However, 7% lived in unrelated family households and 2% were adopted or fostered (although this may be under-reported because adoption is uncommon in Nepal) (Guragain et al., 2015).

MIGRATION AND TRAFFICKING—CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES

Understanding the experiences of separated children who migrate in Nepal requires wider understanding of how Nepalese childhood is constructed and conceptualised. In rural areas, children are expected to support their family and accept their role in contributing to the household's economy. Some contribute through agricultural labour and/or domestic work in the family home or on the land or rented plots, others by migrating seasonally with their family and supporting their work, for example in the brick kilns, while others move to the city as independent workers (Daly et al., 2020).

Extreme poverty and the rurality of Nepal, with a lack of employment in villages and limited educational opportunities, act as key drivers in the migration of children to cities in Nepal and

outside the country (Adhikari & Turton, 2020). Widespread child labour, internal conflict and natural disasters, such as the earthquakes of 2015 and COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated the situation and expose Nepalese children to vulnerable conditions (Adhikari & Turton, 2020). Media representations of city life as well as other children returning to the villages after working in the cities, having acquired new technologies, such as mobile phones, incentivise others to make the same journey (Daly et al., 2020).

Moving to the city to secure employment, or access better education opportunities, proves a risky business for some children. Enticed by false promises, children can find themselves forced to work as domestic workers, in hazardous forms of labour, as sex workers in Kathmandu or India, or to occupy themselves on the streets while their parent(s) work in daily labour (Kamei, 2018; Simkhada, 2008). Migration, as well as trafficking 'operate through personal connections, social networks [and] unregistered brokers who may or may not be strangers' (Simkhada, 2008, p. 245). Sometimes family members (uncles, cousins and stepfathers) act as trafficking agents. The root causes of trafficking are complex and beyond the scope of this paper, but most trafficked children are transported indirectly with gender discrimination and cultural factors placing girls at particular risk (Simkhada, 2008).

To understand children's vulnerability to trafficking, Adhikari and Turton (2020) devised a continuum in which they identified their individual and structural vulnerabilities. The individual vulnerabilities of gender, ethnicity and caste, and structural vulnerabilities, relating to work experiences, migration, education and lack of birth registration, were used to understand children's experience. This framework is useful in understanding influences on children's experiences in relation to the level of agency they can exert, or the vulnerability they may experience, in migratory journeys. Therefore, it has been used to inform understandings of separated children's experience of migration in Nepal in the Findings section.

Poverty and lack of educational and employment opportunities in rural areas, key drivers in the children's migration, are structural vulnerabilities that impact on children's experience (ILO and Central Bureau of Statistics of Nepal, 2021). Limited education and employment as a child labourer increase their vulnerability to trafficking, a situation frequently compounded by lack of identity documents which means they are unable to work legally and gain citizenship (Adhikari & Turton, 2020; Khan, 2021; Simkhada, 2008; Tsutsumi et al., 2008).

Children's individual vulnerabilities include family circumstances, with those living with divorced, single or step parents or in families where there is conflict, more likely to migrate for employment (Daly et al., 2020) and those living without parental care, particularly if they do not have grandparents as their head of household, at greater risk of being engaged in hazardous forms of labour (Kamei, 2018). For girls, the absence of a parent, parental divorce, re-marriage or dependence on alcohol, places them at greater risk of being trafficked (Adhikari & Turton, 2020).

Gender discrimination, including lack of education and child marriage, place females at greater risk of trafficking. Those divorced or abandoned by their husbands face ostracization by the community, with their families reluctant to offer support for fear of the negative impact on their standing in the community (Simkhada, 2008). Girls from marginalised ethnic groups or castes are at greater risk, although there are indications the situation in relation to caste is changing, with higher caste groups equally exposed to trafficking (Adhikari & Turton, 2020; Simkhada, 2008).

In Nepal, opportunities for education are concentrated in the capital city, Kathmandu, and other big cities. Children may see their migration as purposeful but temporary, with opportunities to move 'back and forth ... from rural-to-rural and rural-to-urban areas' in an 'internal circular migration' pattern (Khan, 2021, p. 4). However, the 'harsh geographical reality' and 'economic

poverty' of Nepal make this very difficult, as seen in Khan's study which saw children in boarding school in Kathmandu seeking to return to their villages for occasional work to offset the cost and to overcome the issue of not having identity documents (2021, p. 4). Almost half were unable to return and while previous generations in the villages had been highly mobile, returning home after a relatively limited period away, the children who did return 'often found themselves negotiating a space between familiarity and unfamiliarity with what they know and did not know about rural work' (Khan, 2021, p. 12). While away, communication could be sporadic, exerting an emotional toll on children and their families (Khan, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The wider study exploring the experiences of children facing parental separation in Kathmandu through the lenses of practitioners (Kay-Flowers et al., 2022), aimed to:

1. Gain insight into the different contexts in which children are separated from their parents.
2. Understand children's experiences of separation from their parents.
3. Identify strategies, interventions or ways of working that could support these children.

The focus in this paper is the migration experience of separated children living in Kathmandu as reported by practitioners working with them.

Twelve child welfare agencies and NGOs in Kathmandu that work with children separated from their parents were selected to take part in the study; six work with trafficked children, one with street children, two provide homes for separated or abandoned children and three work to protect children and empower families. To avoid further trauma, children's experiences were described by the practitioners working with the children in NGOs in Kathmandu, where the children now lived.

The research team comprised a Senior Lecturer from an English University who was the Principal Investigator (PI) and two researchers and four Interns from a Social Work College in Kathmandu. The research team were proficient in English, and all (except the PI) were proficient in Nepalese, enabling participants to choose the language they felt most comfortable using in the interview. Regular team meetings and an ethics workshop, delivered by the PI, ensured a consistent approach in securing Gatekeeper and Participant consent, conducting the interviews, data storage and analysis of the data.

The study used an Interview Schedule (IS) specifically designed for the study to conduct semi-structured interviews via Zoom in which practitioners were asked about: their role, experience and qualifications; the circumstances in which children were separated from their parents; the experiences of separated children; how they and their organisation responded to their needs and examples of good practice. These questions were used to guide the conversation but there was some flexibility, enabling areas of particular interest to be followed up during the interview.

Following ethical approval being granted by the English University, the Manager/Chief Executive Officer of each organisation was contacted by email and invited to take part in the study. The organisations were already known to the Social Work College and these professionals acted as Gatekeepers to their organisation. A Gatekeeper Information Sheet (GIS) explaining the aims of the study and asking whether they would be willing for their organisation to take part as well as a Gatekeeper Consent Form (GCF), were attached to the invitation email. These were sent in Nepalese and English to ensure gatekeepers had a full understanding of

what was involved in the study. If willing to participate, they were asked to sign one GCF in the language of their choice and return English GCFs to the PI and Nepalese GCFs to the Contact in Nepal.

Following receipt, Gatekeepers were asked to promote the study among practitioners who had 5 years or more experience of working with separated children, to see if they were interested in participating. Copies of the Participant Information Sheet (PIS), Participant Consent Form (PCF) and IS were provided in both languages, to forward on to potential participants, to ensure they had full understanding of what was involved. The PIS explained what taking part in the study involved and that in the writing up of the study, their identities would be protected, their comments anonymised and their place of work kept confidential. This meant they were able to talk openly and honestly and that the privacy and confidentiality of the children and families with whom they worked would be maintained (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018). If willing to participate, practitioners were asked to sign one PCF in the language of their choice and return English PCFs to the PI and Nepalese PCFs to the Contact in Nepal, indicating whether they wanted the interview to be conducted in English or Nepalese.

The study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic (June and July 2021) which meant the interviews were conducted using Zoom and were recorded. On receipt of the PCFs, two members of the research team were selected to conduct the interview reflecting the choice of language indicated, one took on the role of lead interviewer and arranged a suitable time for the interview to take place. Twenty participants took part, interviews varied in length from 55 min to 1 h 30 min.

Interviews were allocated an identifier code and the interview pair took responsibility for transcribing the interviews into English. These were checked for accuracy by the two researchers before initial content analysis was undertaken by the PI. The first step involved open coding analysis by the PI which enabled common themes to be identified. Initial content analyses were shared with the research team and subjected to further detailed scrutiny to identify key emergent themes. The following key themes emerged from the content analysis: reasons why children separated from their parents; separated children's experiences after leaving home; the difficulties they faced; issues due to lack of birth and citizenship certification; good practice and government responses (Kay-Flowers et al., 2022).

This paper focuses on the experiences of children separated from their parents because of migrating alone (separated children) or as part of a family. The following key themes emerged from thematic content analysis of the data in relation to children's migration experience: vulnerability due to family environment and their migration journeys, vulnerability due to employment situation and psychological responses. These headings are used to report findings in the next section.

FINDINGS

The findings showed how separated children's experiences of migration could be understood in the context of individual and structural vulnerabilities. Individual vulnerabilities were created by children's family environments as well as their migratory journey experiences. Structural vulnerabilities related to their work experiences as child labourers, domestic workers or workers in restaurants, brick kilns, entertainment sector or sex trade. These combined to influence psychological responses to their separation experience.

VULNERABILITY DUE TO FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND THEIR MIGRATION JOURNEYS

Practitioners described how many children experienced conflict and violence between their parents at home, a situation that became unbearable for the child and led to their migration. A lack of good parenting skills was also commonplace among migrating children's experience. Children whose mothers were victims of trafficking were at particular risk as their mothers often had difficult marriages with husbands who fought, blamed and/or disregarded their past life. One practitioner reported a mother who was a victim of trafficking, trying to strangle her own child out of stress, due to the abuse and violence she received from her husband. These experiences led to mental trauma, made the child vulnerable at home and led to increased vulnerability when they migrated due to their previous experience of adult-child relationships.

Children's vulnerability sometimes stemmed from their experience of secondary migration. Having migrated with their parents from a rural village to an urban environment, the cost of accommodation forced families to live in low rental areas, where they rented a one or two roomed house. In such situations, adolescent children often witnessed parental sexual relationships which they found awkward and made them not want to stay in the home, as one practitioner explained,

They say they do not like to be in this situation and so leave the home, becoming street children ... [where they] work or roam around.

In some cases, practitioners found separated children experienced continuous abuse, firstly, at home and then while migrating. They reported children being abused by adults who they encountered and claimed to help them on their migratory journey and in running away to go to another place to avoid the situation, experienced further abuse when it happened there as well. One practitioner described how it took one girl two days from leaving home to reach her destination during which time she was physically and sexually abused five times.

Another practitioner gave the example of three girls who were studying in grade eight and nine in a village, who migrated following a phone call with a woman who told them to go to Kathmandu where she promised them job opportunities. When they left their village, they were in contact with the woman from time to time but during their journey she switched her mobile phone off and they were dropped off in a small town with no idea where to go. The person stood there, waiting, could identify that they were new to the place and took them to a guest house. It was 3 days before the girls were able to contact the organisation in which the practitioner worked, and by that time, they had been sexually abused by many people.

False promises of educational or employment opportunities in the city were commonplace. Many children migrated for a better education and were brought to the city with the promise of a good education in a boarding school and a better future. However, once they reached Kathmandu, many found, while they were enrolled in a government school, their attendance was irregular due to their work responsibilities which had to come first, and their education was given little priority. They were living in children's homes to access these educational opportunities, which was a form of trafficking. In many cases, they became school dropouts. Even when they continued to attend school, practitioners reported many children studying in classes below their standard.

Other children experienced physical, verbal and sexual abuse from their employers. Practitioners reported how those who migrated for domestic work or were involved in child

labour often reported physical violence, such as, beatings from their employer. This is discussed in more detail in the ‘[Vulnerability due to employment situation](#)’ section.

Children who ended up living on the streets were exposed to drugs and sexual abuse. One practitioner estimated that 90%–95% of the street boys that she worked with faced sexual abuse and 20% were involved in criminal activities. Many were involved in stealing, with older boys in the group guiding the younger ones and directing their actions from a distance.

The lack of birth registration documents prevented children from accessing basic rights, such as education. This was a common problem particularly among those who migrated at a young age. Even if they were able to overcome this with other supporting documents, difficulties often arose in securing their citizenship at the age of 16 which prevented them finding a good and stable job. One practitioner reported,

The biggest problem right now is that children don't have a birth certificate for education ... the other, is that when the children are rescued, their age is written as certain but when we investigate their age is found to be much younger than recorded at the time of rescue.

VULNERABILITY DUE TO EMPLOYMENT SITUATION

Child labour

Practitioners found most separated children involved in child labour felt independent when earning for themselves and managing all their expenses alone. There was a sense of pride in doing this even among those working in stone breaking work. While living with their family they had tended to feel great pain, but after leaving home, they had learnt how to survive—they had migrated to the city, looked for work and found a job with income, albeit very little income.

Domestic and restaurant workers

Practitioners found those working as domestic workers may be treated very well in the beginning. They were given good food and cared for well. However, as time went on this could change, some children described being treated as a servant, forced to live in degrading situations (under the stairs or on an old, urine-soaked mat) and given excessive work to perform. One practitioner described how a child

was not given certain foods like fruit nor clothes for themselves. Instead, they were given family members' used clothes to wear.

Individual vulnerabilities meant children faced caste-based discrimination, with only those from upper castes able to cook and help in the kitchen, while those from lower castes (Dalits) were employed in cleaning, washing and gardening. In such situations, children described their isolation and how they missed the love and warmth of their families.

Children working in restaurants described the strangeness of being in the city for the first time. The living conditions associated with their work situation highlighted the structural vulnerabilities these children faced. Children often reported having to sleep in the workplace alongside other workers and

in the winter sleeping on a cold floor with shared blankets. Given leftover food to eat and lacking access to basic hygiene facilities, they experienced physical deprivation. Their employers often warned they would be punished if they went outside of the workplace and some experienced beatings as a consequence. Some children told practitioners they thought they would die in these places.

Brick kilns

Practitioners described the work and living conditions of separated children working in the brick kilns, identifying the structural vulnerabilities they faced. Children got up at 05.00, worked without proper rest and were unaware of how much they were being paid. Rather than being paid wages in the form of a monthly income, their employers tended to buy them items. For example, if a child needed a recharge card for his phone, his employer would give him around 50 Nepalese rupees and if his shoes were torn, his employer would give him around 250 Nepalese rupees. They were provided with non-vegetarian meals which, as children from economically poor families, they found an exciting treat and made them forget about other things. Consequently, as one practitioner explained,

Children are not aware of their duty hours, they don't demand a salary and they won't ask for a holiday. These children have migrated not to fulfil their ambition or dreams but simply for survival. They won't have plans for their future like having a family, getting an education. They won't have goals; their goals are limited to how many bricks they are going to make in a day ... and complete the orders given by their employers. These children who are separated from parents, are victims of abuse and trafficking and are not able to distinguish between right and wrong. Their mentality is limited to eating food, sleeping in a warm place, using mobile phones and earning a little money, that's life for them.

Entertainment sector/sex trade

Gender was an individual vulnerability that placed girls at particular risk of working in the entertainment sector or sex trade. Some knew something about the sector through their friends, sisters or someone they knew from their village, but many were unknowing. Most of the girls, practitioners worked with, were looking for work and landed in this sector unintentionally.

When new to the sector, they were taken around Kathmandu for a tour of the markets with their employer buying them new, fashionable clothes. They knew little about their wages and when it was time to be paid, the cost of these clothes was deducted. This left them with very little money and meant they could not go elsewhere to work. They were indebted to their employer and in many cases, they were under bondage (Simkhada, 2008). During police raids their situation worsened. Following arrest, they did not have the money to get out of prison and were dependent on their employer paying the cost of bail (usually 20–25 000 Nepalese rupees) which was then added to the sum of money they already owed. In this way their employer created structural conditions in which all their income was spent on food and clothing, they had no savings and therefore, were trapped.

Practitioners working with girls rescued from the entertainment sector and sex trade described how they faced sexual harassment, were often not paid for their work on time, had to go to places wherever and whenever their employer demanded and were physically and sexually abused, sometimes raped. Their experiences often resulted in physical injury, contracting various

diseases, including HIV and mental trauma (Tsutsumi et al., 2008). All the girls drank alcohol and said they took drugs because then they did not care what the client did to them. Marijuana use was commonplace and used alongside other drugs. Those working in restaurants were told they had to drink and sometimes were not paid if they did not, while those working in massage parlours reported drinking after work to ease their stress.

Some children found themselves trafficked into circuses in India. Practitioners described girls' reports of abuse by trainers who would touch them, place restrictions on their food during the training period, require them to work very long hours and move them around from one place to another as the circuses were held in different places. Even if their parents travelled to India and found them, the children were not allowed to return to their care because they were trapped in paperwork relating to the Entertainment Act which states circus organisers must train the children they have taken. If any parent wanted to take their child back during the training period, they would have to pay double the amount that was negotiated initially and as one of the practitioners said,

Parents have had to take loans to reach India so where will they find the money to bring their child back?

Girls in the entertainment sector were not comfortable talking to their parents about their source of income which meant when organisations rescued them, they requested that their parents were not informed about their involvement. They feared what their parents would think. They viewed their job as immoral and consequently, experienced a secretive life in which they had to lie all the time in order to hide the truth. They felt trapped and stressed about life and did not want to return to school after their experience. If they went back to their village, often they lied about their work, saying they had worked as a salesperson or in other jobs. In this way, other girls from the village were lured into employment in the entertainment sector and sex trade when they went to the city.

Practitioners described how in many cases, when children were rescued and attempts made to re-unite them with their family and community, they were not accepted. Those rescued from cross-border experiences faced particular stigmatisation from communities with assumptions made that the girls had been rescued from red light areas in India (Simkhada, 2008). One practitioner explained how,

Many times the people of the village threw stones at the organisation and us after rescuing and bringing the girls back. We had to take the children to India for a statement for their legal cases, bring them back and report it to the police as well. This had to be managed very carefully.

In cases where children migrated at a very young age (11–12 years), by the time they returned their parents, who were living in squatter areas, they had moved on to other places and could not be traced. In other cases, strenuous efforts by NGOs brought about some re-integration successes (Crawford & Kaufman, 2008).

Psychological responses

Separated children exhibited a range of different psychological responses to their situation. Practitioners found those who left home and lived away from their family for a long time, met

various people who did not stay in their lives for long. This led to problems in their ability to trust others, difficulty in sharing their stories with anyone and a lack of self-confidence. Many found difficulty in accepting their mistakes and resorting to lying was not uncommon.

In their experience, the children often become angry very quickly and were sometimes aggressive. Many practitioners described how the children they worked with, sought attention and love, displaying anger and frustration if they did not get it. Sometimes they also displayed jealousy, believing staff were giving more attention to other children in the setting.

Most separated children felt deprived of family relationships with their parents, siblings and grandparents, particularly at the time of festivals and holidays, when they wondered what they were doing. Those who had lived in an organisation and away from their parents for a long time, often faced problems socialising in the outside world. Some faced individual vulnerabilities associated with their caste, leading to a lack of knowledge of their own culture and tradition which could create significant difficulties in re-integration attempts with distressing consequences, as one practitioner explained.

One child who came to a Brahmin household and lived as a domestic worker [became] ... habituated with the rituals and practice of a Brahmin. After reintegrating her, she had a problem in her own house. Her family sold alcohol which according to her caste was not a big deal ... unlike Brahmins who consider selling alcohol is not within their caste ... After seeing her family selling alcohol, it became difficult for her to live with them and she tried to attempt suicide.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Extreme poverty and lack of employment and educational opportunities in rural villages were key drivers in children's decisions to migrate but individual vulnerabilities placed some children at particular risk, with family environment and the quality of parental care highly influential in their decision-making. The urban environment proved attractive to children; it offers opportunities to earn money, gain an education and access to technology including mobile phones. This has resulted in practitioners seeing increasing numbers of separated children from different ethnicities coming to Kathmandu in recent years.

Many separated children migrated to escape home environments in which conflict and violence were endemic and effective parenting unknown. These early experiences shaped expectations of adult-child relationships and increased individual vulnerabilities during the migratory journey and at its end. Promises of better employment or education in the city made by adults often failed to materialise, creating difficulties in children's ability to trust other adults. This could be compounded by negative experiences encountered on the migration journey, with girls at particular risk of sexual abuse and harassment. Girls trafficked into the sex trade or working in the entertainment sector often knew the person initiating the arrangements, who was a relative, a friend or a local woman already in the sex trade who returned to the village to act as a recruiter (Simkhada, 2008; Tsutsumi et al., 2008). Understanding children's agency in decision making in such circumstances is complex but under the UN Trafficking Protocol (2000) the issue of 'consent' is considered irrelevant for children under 18, meaning those transported 'for exploitative work [are] considered trafficked, whether or not they have been deceived or have "consented" in any way' (Adhikari & Turton, 2020, p. 395).

Most of the children experienced poor health because of their working conditions. Those working in construction worked with dangerous tools and machinery (Kamei, 2018). Those working in brick kilns worked long hours, undertook heavy manual labour, had poor living conditions, and experienced many health problems as a result (Daly et al., 2020). Common complaints included headaches, coughs, fevers, stomach problems as well as ‘musculoskeletal, respiratory, dermatological, and auditory injury and debilitation ... nutritional deficiency disorders and stress’ (Ibid, p. 8). The lives of girls in the sex trade were strictly controlled; working long hours, they knew little about monetary arrangements and very few were able to communicate with their families (Simkhada, 2008). Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) positivity were common. They showed higher levels of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than those working as domestic and circus workers (Crawford & Kaufman, 2008; Tsutsumi et al., 2008).

Some children having acquired increased responsibility through their independence, exhibited considerable resilience, this was particularly so where they had escaped from abusive home situations. Nonetheless, deprived of parental care, many felt ‘unconnected’ and as a result of migratory experiences, often were fearful and felt unable to trust others. Those who migrated at a young age and had been separated from their parents for a long time, often lacked familiarity with their own culture, family traditions and customs which caused difficulties in any re-integration attempts.

Practitioners described how the isolation separated children experienced could lead to psychosocial distress and was often exhibited as frustration, anger, sometimes aggression, as well as attention-seeking behaviour and a desire for love. These behaviours were usually accompanied by low levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. Difficulties in trusting others meant children found difficulty talking about their situation. Children working in brick kilns felt unaccepted, lacked confidence, had low self-esteem and poor relationships with other child labourers as well as ‘a disconnect with cultural norms, leading to anxiety disorders, panic attacks and social phobias’ (Daly et al., 2020, p. 9). The situation of child labourers meant they were particularly vulnerable to trafficking with enticements of better lives or better jobs elsewhere and lacking awareness of the risks and consequences of migration (Adhikari & Turton, 2020; Crawford & Kaufman, 2008; Simkhada, 2008).

Wherever possible practitioners sought to re-integrate separated children with their families but in many cases, parents had ‘moved on’ geographically, migrating to another part of Nepal and were therefore untraceable or ‘moved on’ socially, having formed new relationships and maybe had other children. Therefore, they were reluctant to resume responsibility for the child who had migrated. Where parents could be traced there were often significant difficulties in children returning, particularly for those who had worked in the entertainment sector due to the high level of stigma attached to the nature of their work. Parents were unwilling to accept their return due the perceptions of other villagers and possible negative implications for the marriage prospects of other family members (Simkhada, 2008). Re-integration was time consuming, required careful handling and a sensitive approach. Despite some successes, it was not possible for many children, who remained in rehabilitation centres run by NGOs for long periods, sometimes until they reached adulthood.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Practitioners highlighted the need for an urgent, coherent, multi-faceted response to the situation of separated children who migrate, incorporating a range of preventative and responsive measures that address the following four areas:

- Better education and employment opportunities in rural areas.
- Education for parents and for children about the risks of migration.
- Stronger emphasis on the importance of birth certification and citizenship documentation.
- Consistent enforcement of the legislation and policy already in place to protect children.

Undoubtedly there is a need for better education and employment opportunities in rural areas in Nepal. Access to good quality education in their local area would mean children no longer feel obligated to migrate to cities to attend school to gain a good education. Increased employment opportunities would enable children to make active and effective contributions to the household income while remaining in the family home. This would ensure the knowledge, skills and talent of the younger generation were retained, enabling villages to develop and prosper and would ensure children were able to maintain familial bonds, social 'connectedness' and access to the protective environments of home and school. Technological infrastructure and reliable internet connectivity is fundamental to such developments. Dependent on government funding and commitment, there are questions about whether this can be achieved given the current economic situation in Nepal, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Practitioners highlighted the need for parents to be educated, so they are aware of what letting their children migrate may mean for them, and also for children to be educated, so they are aware of the risks associated with migration. Rural villagers and communities need to understand how to use social networks to migrate safely as well as the tactics used by traffickers, and their identities, to protect their children (Crawford & Kaufman, 2008; Simkhada, 2008). Children need to be provided with information and educated about the risks and girls need to be empowered in migration rather than merely protected (Adhikari & Turton, 2020; Simkhada, 2008). There is a role for education in conveying the importance of registering births to the community as a child protection issue with teachers, social workers and child protection workers working in schools, able to play a key role. Located within the community, they can reach parents through Parent and Teachers Associations (PTA) and School Management Committees (SMC) which consist of community members and parents of students enrolled in their school. Public health initiatives, aimed at reducing maternal and infant mortality are well placed to support such work as they know every child born in the area.

A stronger emphasis on robust implementation of the birth certification system and citizenship documentation would enable children to work legally and enable those who go missing and placed at risk of trafficking, to be tracked. There are signs of improvement in this area now birth registration is a requirement of school enrolment with the birth registration rate of children under 5 years reaching 77% in 2019/20 (MoWCSC and National Child Rights Council, 2020). However, until all children are reached, including those who at an earlier time were able to start school without such registration, there is no mechanism to identify missing children and those without birth certification face considerable delay and difficulty in acquiring citizenship documentation (Adhikari & Turton, 2020; Khan, 2021). The issue is sometimes intergenerational, with previous generations lacking such documentation (Khan, 2021). Hence the need for education about the importance of birth registration and targeted support for those families without documents. Without a consistent and systematic approach to addressing the issues older children without registration face, they will continue to be vulnerable to exploitation in work settings and to trafficking, and practitioners working with them will spend much of their time trying to resolve these issues. The issue requires a multi-agency approach, with school social workers and child protection workers working to address the issue if a parent seeks to enrol their child in school without the mandatory birth

certificate. Since the transition to federal government, wards have been considered the primary legal entity to protect children in their respective municipality and soon each will have a child rights officer who will look into this issue, their work will be overseen by the ward executive body and the government's Women and Children department.

Legislation and policy are already in place to protect children from trafficking, child labour and working in hazardous conditions in Nepal, and practitioners were of the view that more was not necessarily needed but that current measures needed to be enforced systematically and consistently. This view is supported by the ILO (2021) which highlighted the significant number of children engaged in child labour in Nepal and therefore, the gap in proper implementation of the laws and policies in relation to child labour and child protection. Practitioners emphasised the need for 'collaborative responsibility for identifying and protecting children at risk' in all districts in Nepal (Adhikari & Turton, 2020, p. 402). There are some early indications that the move to federalism and decentralisation of power has facilitated a higher level of engagement by officials at the local level which enhanced the sharing of information and data at national level during the pandemic, when practitioners working with separated children living in hostels sought to reintegrate them with their families (Punaks & Lama, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper analyses the experiences of separated Nepalese children who migrated and found themselves supported by NGOs in Kathmandu. Based on practitioners' accounts, it elucidates children's different motivations, migration journeys and situations, in which their vulnerabilities due to their isolation, and lack of support, are common themes. The circumstances of their situation in the city often militate against the circular migration pattern their elders experienced, and they might have anticipated at the time of leaving their village, meaning their migration becomes long term or permanent unintentionally (Khan, 2021). The short-term impact of this can be seen in their psychological responses, the longer-term impact on their ability to re-connect and maintain family bonds, to form adult relationships and future employment opportunities is unknown and worthy of further investigation.

Practitioners fear that the COVID-19 pandemic, during which children lacked access to usual support and protective services such as schools and its impact on parental patterns of migration contributing to economic decline, may lead to increased child migration, with more separated children employed in child labour, engaged in hazardous work or in the entertainment sector and sex trade. Based on their experience of working with separated children who migrate, they identify a range of preventative and responsive measures to identify and protect children at risk in all districts in Nepal. The measures involve many players, among which the national government needs to take a lead, particularly in emphasising the importance of birth certification in protecting children and the consistent enforcement of existing legislation and policy. There are indications progress is being made on the former. However further training may be needed to assist newly formed structural agencies with implementation.

These measures require collaborative responsibility and support from agencies at the local level working together to protect children, including schools, local district offices, police and NGOs. There is an important role in education for parents and for children and an argument for informal education programmes being delivered by multi-agency teams in community settings such as schools, supported by networks of practitioners with expertise at the national level.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved through Liverpool John Moores University's Ethical Approval process. Informed consent was obtained from all parties.

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