

Pathways for children to exit commercial sexual exploitation in Kathmandu

Background

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) affects an estimated 1.8 million children globally.¹ In Nepal, the adult entertainment sector (AES) is recognised as a high-risk environment for children where sexual exploitation is known to occur. The sector includes venues such as restaurants, folk dance bars, erotic dance bars, massage parlours, guest houses and hotels. Not all these venues are exploitative or engage children in sexual services. However, working in these venues can lead many girls and young women to a gradual or forced familiarisation with, and immersion in, the sex industry.

In 2016, the Freedom Fund partnered with the University of Hong Kong, Griffith University and Terre des hommes Foundation in Nepal (Tdh) to conduct research on services that support girls and young women in Kathmandu to exit situations of commercial sexual exploitation in the AES. The specific aim of the study was to identify what services and systems are needed for girls to speedily, safely and permanently leave the AES.

¹ International Labour Organization (2015). Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Children in a Nutshell. Geneva: ILO.

Pictured: A billboard advertisement in the Thamel neighbourhood of Kathmandu, where adult entertainment venues are common.



Image, cover: Katie Orlinsky, Legatum Limited, 2018.

The research included four phases of data gathering and analysis:

- 1 A systematic literature review of both academic research and grey literature;
- 2 A detailed mapping of service providers supporting girls and young women involved in the AES;
- 3 A standardised survey administered to 87 young women who started working in the AES as children;
- 4 Five in-depth case studies with a focus on pathways into and out of the AES.

The goal of this research is to generate evidence to inform the actions of policy makers, service providers and funders working to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

This Evidence in Practice report is prepared by the Freedom Fund, based on a longer research paper led by Dr Lucy Jordon, University of Hong Kong. The research paper can be accessed at: <https://freedomfund.org/newsroom/our-reports/>

Key findings

The AES in Kathmandu can be an exploitative environment for children.

- Of the 87 young women interviewed, more than two-thirds (68 percent) started working in the sector when they were 16 years or younger.
- One in four respondents reported kissing and cuddling with clients and one in ten reported engaging in sexual intercourse. Guest houses, cabin restaurants and dance bars were the most sexually exploitative venues.
- Respondents earned an average USD \$159 each month working in the sector, with tips from clients making up over half this amount. This illustrates the pressure on workers to meet their clients' demands.

Decently paid work is scarce for young women who exit the AES, making it harder to leave.

- On average, girls and young women worked in the sector for 18 months and attempted to leave 2.5 times before they successfully exited, citing access to alternative income as a key barrier.
- Immediately after exiting, 38 percent of respondents were not in paid work. Of this number, half were looking for work and half were undertaking vocational training and education.
- Many young women described the challenge of finding decently paid work outside the AES. Respondents who had exited earned, on average, 35 percent less than those still working in the sector.

Support services are not always accessible to AES workers due to restricted movement.

- The study identified 67 providers across 120 locations in Kathmandu that offered a range of support services to girls and women working in the AES. Despite their availability, many workers face significant barriers to accessing these services. For example, 45 percent of respondents reported restrictions on where they can go during non-work hours.
- Workers in highly exploitative venues, such as guest houses, experience the most restrictions to accessing services. This underlines the importance of service providers reaching out to those workers whose freedom is most constrained. It is also important to build relationships with girls as early as possible, as their first jobs in the sector tend to be in less restrictive establishments.

Support services need a dual focus on building economic skills and restoring emotional health.

- Respondents said that psychosocial support, vocational training and education opportunities were the most helpful services. Among those who had exited the sector, emotional resilience and coping skills played a crucial role in helping them to leave and stay out of the AES.
- High levels of depression and anxiety (16 percent) were recorded among those young women who had exited the sector. Many displayed characteristics suggestive of the long-term effects of complex trauma. More intensive and longer-term interventions are needed to address mental health conditions among current and former AES workers.

Background to commercial sexual exploitation of children in Nepal

In Nepal, the terms 'adult entertainment sector' and 'entertainment establishments' generally refer to venues such as cabin restaurants, dohori restaurants, dance bars, massage parlours, guest houses and hotels. The sector comprises a complex web of venues engaged in the sex trade - involving a mix of consensual, exploited and forced workers - and venues not associated with the sex trade at all. That is, the AES intersects with the sex industry, but not all establishments in the AES are part of the sex industry. We use the term 'adult entertainment sector' to avoid stigmatising all workers in the sector as sex workers.

In Nepal, the AES is recognised as a high-risk environment for children. It is a sector where the commercial sexual exploitation of children is known to occur. It is important to note that not all children working in the AES provide sexual services to customers. Undeniably, however, children working in the sector develop a gradual or forced familiarisation with the sex industry. Many end up as victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

Children in the AES experience long and anti-social working hours in a non-protective environment, surrounded by alcohol and violence, involving flirtation to upsell goods and services which could lead to prostitution. As a result, this work meets the international definition of the 'worst forms of child labour' and is illegal under international law (ILO Convention No. 182) that Nepal has agreed to ratify.

Accurate and recent data on the prevalence of the commercial sexual exploitation of children in Nepal is scant. Nevertheless, the available studies provide some insights into the situation before the 2015 earthquake. According to a 2010 report by Tdh Nepal, as many as one-third of females working in Kathmandu's AES are under the age of 18.¹

¹ Frederick, J. (2010). Trafficking and Exploitation in the Entertainment and Sex Industries in Nepal: A Handbook For DecisionMakers. Kathmandu, Nepal: Terre des hommes Foundation.

Children are particularly vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation because they have limited knowledge of their rights.

Snack restaurants often serve as an entry point for girls and young women into the commercial sex industry. Grooming practices, such as chatting and flirting, are used to establish a rapport with the waitresses and can be a precursor to the provision of sexual services.

In **traditional folk dance bars (dohori)**, male and female dancers perform to live music. The bars are frequented by families and sexual services are not provided on the premises, although customers may make arrangements with waitresses to meet for sex elsewhere after work hours.

Contemporary dance bars feature young women and girls dancing to Bollywood music in short dresses or sometimes naked. They may smoke or drink with male customers and afterwards go to hotels or guest houses for sexual services.

'**Cabin restaurants**' sell sexual services directly and offer the privacy of small compartments. Waitresses provide a range of sexual services, such as intimate touching, masturbation or oral sex. Nearby hotels or guest houses are used for intercourse.

Massage parlours are often disguised brothels that provide sex within the parlour premises in small cabins with a bed.



Photo credit: Jenna Mulhall_Brereton/Geneva Global

Children are particularly vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation because they have limited knowledge of their rights and the mechanisms through which they can access support and justice. It is therefore crucial that there are programs to reach out to child workers, to assist them to exit exploitative labour and to support their recovery and reintegration. However, the quality and quantity of care and support available to children who have survived commercial sexual exploitation varies significantly.² A 2016 study into aftercare services for victims of child trafficking found very little research devoted to this topic worldwide.³

Even though Nepal has made declarations and signed international accords - including the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention of the Rights of the Child - consistent underfunding has resulted in these agreements being largely ineffective. To fill this gap, the Freedom Fund supports local NGOs to play a critical role in raising awareness about sex trafficking in Nepal, including the commercial sexual exploitation of children, and providing services for those who may be victims of trafficking.⁴

² Asquith, S. & Turner, E. (2008). Recovery and Reintegration of Children from the Effects of Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking. Geneva: Oak Foundation.

³ Muraya, D. & Fry, D. (2016). Aftercare services for child victims of sex trafficking: A systematic review of police and practice. *Trauma, Violence and Abuse*, 17 (2), 204 -220.

⁴ Dhungana, S. K. (2006). Anti-trafficking challenges in Nepal. *Forced Migration Review* (25), 21-22.

Methodology

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW:	ACTOR MAPPING:	QUANTITATIVE SURVEY:	IN-DEPTH CASE STUDIES:
that identified 12 relevant academic, NGO and government reports on the AES in Kathmandu.	to identify services available to children working in the AES in Kathmandu.	administered to 110 women who started work in the AES as children (under 18 years); 87 responses were included in the final analysis.	with five girls who have experience working in the AES: three had exited and two remain in the sector.

This research project had a number of components, outlined above. This Evidence in Practice report focuses on the findings and recommendations from the quantitative survey.

The research team consisted of three international consultants: Dr Lucy Jordan (University of Hong Kong), Dr Stephen Larmar (Griffith University) and Prof. Patrick O'Leary (Griffith University). They worked alongside Terre des hommes (Tdh) Nepal, who were responsible for implementing the research in country.

Ethics approval was granted from Nepal Health Research Council and the Ethics Committee for Human Research, Griffith University. A letter of consent was issued by the Central Child Welfare Board describing the conditions and protocols that must be followed by the research team. Three female interviewers were employed by Tdh Nepal throughout the data collection period. Each interviewer received two days of training, including facilitating mock interviews, to ensure consistency between interviewers. All interviewers had previous experience working with children in Nepal withdrawing from situations of commercial sexual exploitation.

The purposive selection of respondents was facilitated through referrals from community-based organisations supported by the Freedom Fund and Tdh Nepal. The aim was to ensure a diverse sample of respondents, including those who had experienced extreme cases of exploitation. Interviews were generally conducted in a private space within the corresponding partner's drop-in centre, at a time that was suitable for the respondent. No financial incentives were given, although respondents were offered refreshments during the interview and reimbursement of travel expenses. Completed questionnaires were entered into a CSPro database and analysed using Stata software. Paper-based surveys were stored in a locked cabinet in the Tdh Nepal office. All identifying information was coded to further protect the anonymity of respondents.

A total of 87 surveys were completed with young women (18 years and older) who started work in the AES and/or experienced commercial sexual exploitation as a child (under 18 years). Of the 87 young women surveyed, 62 had exited the sector and 25 still work in the sector.

Profile of respondents

Demographics

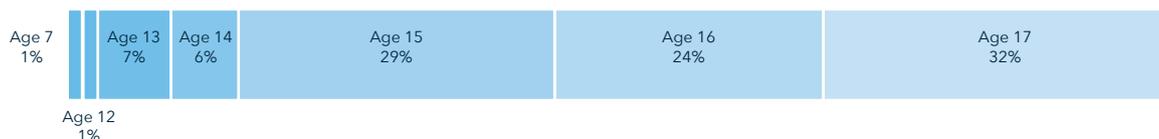
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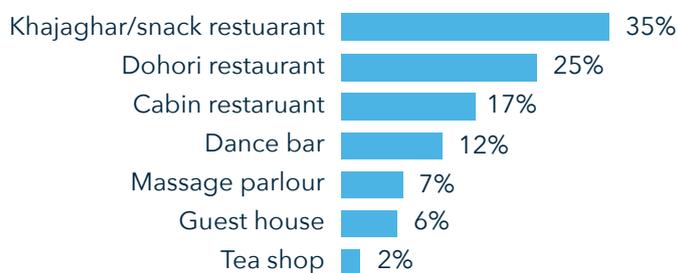
Education level at time of interview



Age at first entry in the adult entertainment sector



Venues worked



(Note: the above does not total 100 percent as one respondent could have worked in multiple venues)

Most exploitative venues

1. Guest house

80%

of workers have engaged in sexual intercourse with customers.

100%

of workers have engaged in intimate touching with customers.

2. Cabin restaurant

80%

of workers have engaged in sexual intercourse with customers.

50%

of customers have engaged in intimate touching of private body parts with customers.

3. Dance bar

50%

of workers have engaged in intimate touching with customers.

50%

of customers have engaged in kissing and cuddling with customers.

4. Khajaghar/ snack restaurant

20%

of workers have engaged in intimate touching with customers.

16%

of customers have engaged in kissing and cuddling with customers.

5. Dohori restaurant

5%

of workers have engaged in intimate touching with customers.

14%

of customers have engaged in kissing and cuddling with customers.

Main findings

Research question 1: What pathways out of commercial sexual exploitation are available to children working in the AES in Kathmandu?

Common pathways out of AES

- Many young women who had exited the AES did so while working at snack restaurants and dohori restaurants, which are seen as (comparatively) less exploitative venues. The pathways of the 87 respondents - including the 62 who successfully exited the sector - are illustrated on the next page.

Attempts at exit before success

- On average, girls and young women **attempted to leave 2.5 times** before they successfully exited the AES.
- Of those respondents who had successfully exited the sector, 39 percent were successful on the first attempt and all were successful within five attempts.
- On average, this group of respondents worked in the sector for 18 months before exiting.

Life after exit

- Of the 62 respondents who had exited the AES, 19 percent were not involved in any work or training immediately afterwards, while a further 19 percent participated in vocational training and education.
- Of those who transitioned from work in the AES to other forms of employment, the most common jobs were in sewing and handicrafts, street vending and beauty parlours.
- Many young women described the challenge of finding decently paid work outside of the AES. Respondents who had exited the sector reported significantly lower monthly earnings (USD \$104) compared to those still working in the sector (USD \$159).
- High levels of depression and anxiety were recorded among respondents. Within the past 12 months, nine percent of the study group had seriously considered suicide.

- Among respondents who had exited the AES, 16 percent reported signs of clinical depression compared to 12 percent of respondents still working in the sector. This pattern is consistent with the theory of complex trauma, where psychological effects often emerge after sexual abuse ends. It highlights the need for ongoing psychosocial support and psychiatric services for current and former AES workers.

Research question 2: What are the current identified services and systems to assist children to safely leave sectors where commercial sexual exploitation exists?

Access to support services aids a successful exit

- An AES worker who is able to access support services during her first job has a **greater likelihood of being able to permanently exit the sector**.
- Among respondents who had exited, 63 percent accessed services during their first job. However, only 38 percent of respondents still working in the sector had accessed services.
- The study found that girls and young women working in guesthouses are the least likely to access services and also the least likely to exit the AES. This emphasises **the need to reach girls and young women as early as possible**, when their first jobs in the sector are often in more accessible establishments.

Most useful services

- Respondents viewed services that combine psychosocial support with vocational training and education opportunities as being the most helpful. Specific services they identified as 'most useful' are:
 1. Vocational training
 2. Life skills training
 3. Counselling
 4. Health check-up
 5. Self-help/peer support

COMMON PATHWAYS OUT OF THE ADULT ENTERTAINMENT SECTOR (AES)

JOB PRIOR TO AES

The majority of the young women interviewed did not have any prior experience before entering the AES. This leaves them more docile to unrealistic and abusive workplace norms.

FIRST JOB IN AES

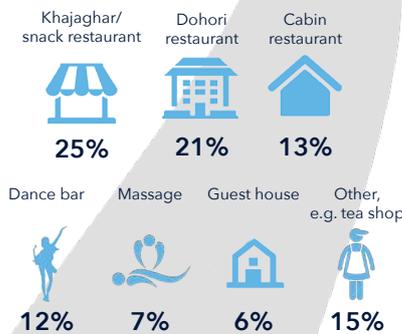
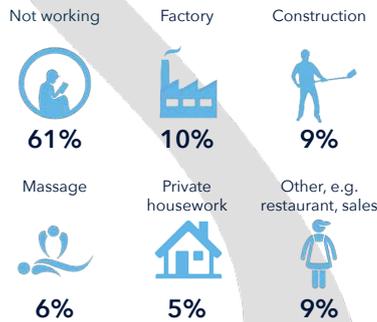
The average age of first entry into the AES was 15.6. Girls would usually start in more humble roles such as cleaning and taking orders. However, they are quickly lured into more lucrative activities such as flirting, cuddling and kissing with customers.

LAST JOB IN AES

On average, young women in the study remained in the AES for 18 months before exiting. Motivations for exiting included: experiencing depression as a result of the working conditions, being sexually assaulted, the toll of working long hours and a lack of dignity in the work.

FIRST JOB AFTER AES

Girls and young women who received support services were 1.4 times more likely to permanently exit the sector. Emotional resilience was identified as crucial factors for exiting the AES, underlining the importance of psychosocial support alongside vocational training.



Least accessed services

- Among all respondents, the services least likely to be accessed are reconnecting with family and child care.
- The survey did not explore whether these services were seen as being not relevant, were not expected to be useful, or whether respondents would like to but were unable to access the services.
- For example, the proportion of young women with children is quite low (less than 20 percent) which means child care is less of a need. In other cases, respondents said the money they were able to send back home resulted in low support from family members to leave the sector. Therefore, reconnecting with family may not be seen as helpful among those looking to exit.

Suggestions for additional services

- The young women were asked to suggest services that are not currently offered but would help them and others leave the AES. Support for pursuing advanced, formal qualifications – rather than basic education or vocational training – was a clear priority in order to access better paying jobs (e.g. nursing and midwifery).
- They also highlighted the value of assisted placements into professional/technical sectors based on an individual's qualifications.

- Many of the respondents said that financial support, such as low-interest loans, could help young women as they exit the AES. The loan would be used to support them as they transition into new forms of employment – including the opportunity cost of being re-trained – or as 'seed funding' to start new enterprises. This financial support would also reduce the likelihood of loan recipients returning to the AES due to financial hardship.

Note on service quality and referral mechanisms

- The study identified 67 providers offering services through 120 outlets in Kathmandu. While there is a wide range of services available for girls and young women in the AES, the quality of those services is variable. In addition, these services are not specifically focused on the needs of this group of women and girls and coordination between service providers can be inadequate.
- Most organisations attempt to provide a comprehensive range of services rather than focus on specialist care. Of the 20 organisations that do mass outreach to workers in the AES, 18 also offer services such as vocational training and legal support. **There would be value in having clearer specialisation between service providers**, with some doing initial outreach, assessment and case management, and others providing specialised, trauma-informed and rights-based health, economic empowerment, education and legal aid services.

Research question 3: What are some of the barriers that limit access to services for children in the AES?

Restrictions of freedom

- Restrictions imposed by employers were the most significant barrier to girls and young women accessing support services. **Nearly half of all respondents (45 percent) reported that their employer restricts where they can go** during non-work hours and one in seven (14 percent) said that they cannot freely communicate with their friends and family.
- Although drop-in centres are viewed extremely favourably by those respondents who are able to access them, service providers should bolster their outreach and peer educator work through inconspicuous workplace visits in order to connect with workers who experience severe restrictions on their freedom.

Emotional fear and stigma

- Emotional factors, such as the social stigma attached to disclosing where they work and fear of retribution by employers, are also obstacles that can prevent young women from seeking support services. During the exit process, one young woman described how she was hesitant to disclose to a service provider that she continued to work in the AES as a call girl.
- It is important for service providers to ensure that program participants understand that they are eligible to receive services regardless of their continued engagement in the AES (in contrast to an abstinence-only program). **Service provision is most effective when it is low-threshold and non-judgemental.**

Lack of viable income alternatives

- Even when young women have access to support services, many still grapple with different challenges before taking the decision to leave the AES. One major barrier is the lack of viable alternatives to earn a living wage. As part of their transition into new forms of employment, many women struggle to make ends meet.
- A number of respondents reported **moving back-and-forth between their new job and work in the AES** in order to supplement their income. This highlights the non-linear nature of exiting the sector.
- While those who exited the AES describe living on a lower income, their comments shared in the in-depth interview demonstrate that they do not regret their decision to leave and that they hope to put behind them the traumatic memories from their time in the sector.

Recommendations

Reaching vulnerable children

- **Reaching children in the AES early on increases the likelihood that they will successfully exit the sector.** Frontline outreach workers and peer educators have a vital role to identify children at risk of commercial sexual exploitation, assist individual girls explore their options and help them access support services appropriate to their needs.
- **Service providers should also focus on girls working in tangential roles** to prevent them from becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation. Girls working in the AES often start off in positions such as cleaning and taking orders, before being 'lured', often by lucrative tips, into more sexually exploitative activities.
- **Preventative efforts are important** to help families explore other livelihood options before sending their children to work in urban centres, where some child workers inadvertently enter the AES. Preventative measures could include working with would-be migrants in source communities or new arrivals in urban centres to provide links to alternative employment opportunities and to build their knowledge of legal rights and protections.

Services to address the trauma of commercial sexual exploitation

- **Outreach work should target the most exploitative venues**, such as guest houses, because workers in these venues often suffer the most trauma and are the least able to access support services. Frontline outreach workers need to develop skills to engage employers/venue managers and help cultivate opportunities for AES workers to eventually gain access to support services.
- **Girls and young women in the AES sector can experience trauma on multiple levels:** social, physical, sexual and emotional. For this reason, there needs to be an emphasis on a suite of services being provided, and funding made available to enable NGOs to provide such a range of services. Improving specialisation of responses and cross-referrals between providers would increase the coverage, quality and effectiveness of support services.
- **More intensive psychological and psychiatric interventions** are needed to screen for and treat high levels of mental distress among girls and young women who have left the AES and those still working in the sector.
- **A continued focus on strengthening life skills and peer-support mechanisms** will help girls and young women address challenges on a day-to-day basis through their own social networks and reduce reliance on service providers with finite resources.

Services to support sustainable exit

- **Referrals to further training, education and job placement programs are vital** to help girls and young women as they exit the sector and transition to new employment. Small loans to support them during the transition phase, along with financial advice to help them adjust to lower levels of income, will also help them to permanently leave the AES.
- **The livelihood and economic empowerment support offered by service providers appears to concentrate on vocational skills** (e.g. sewing, hair and beauty) and business start-ups. There is clear demand, expressed by the young women interviewed, to acquire more advanced qualifications (e.g. nursing and midwifery) and gain entry into more technical and higher-paying jobs.

Further research

- **Greater adoption of case management plans** will help service providers track the progress of girls and young women attempting to exit the AES. This is especially necessary considering the non-linear pathways into, through and out of the sector observed through this study. Service providers must continue to support girls and young women who choose to exit the AES, and NGOs need to have the resources available to enable them to support victims through the complex routes that lead to fully exiting the sector.
- Although there are many service providers and programs that support child victims of commercial sexual exploitation in Kathmandu, there is **limited evidence regarding the relative effectiveness of existing interventions**. An evaluation of services and programs that address recovery from the harmful effects of commercial sexual exploitation of children would help identify and encourage more effective practices across the sector.
- **Research to determine the prevalence of commercial sexual exploitation of children in Kathmandu would help direct services and resources** to the groups and locations where it is most needed. This is especially important because of anecdotal reports of an increase in the scale and level of exploitation in the AES since the 2015 earthquake. The Freedom Fund has embarked on this research and the results will be ready by early 2019.



Photo credit: Ginny Bauman/The Freedom Fund

The Freedom Fund (UK)

Lighterman House
26-36 Wharfdale Road,
London, N1 9RY
+ 44 203 077 2222

The Freedom Fund (U.S.)

215 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10003
USA
+1 (929) 244-9722

info@freedomfund.org
freedomfund.org