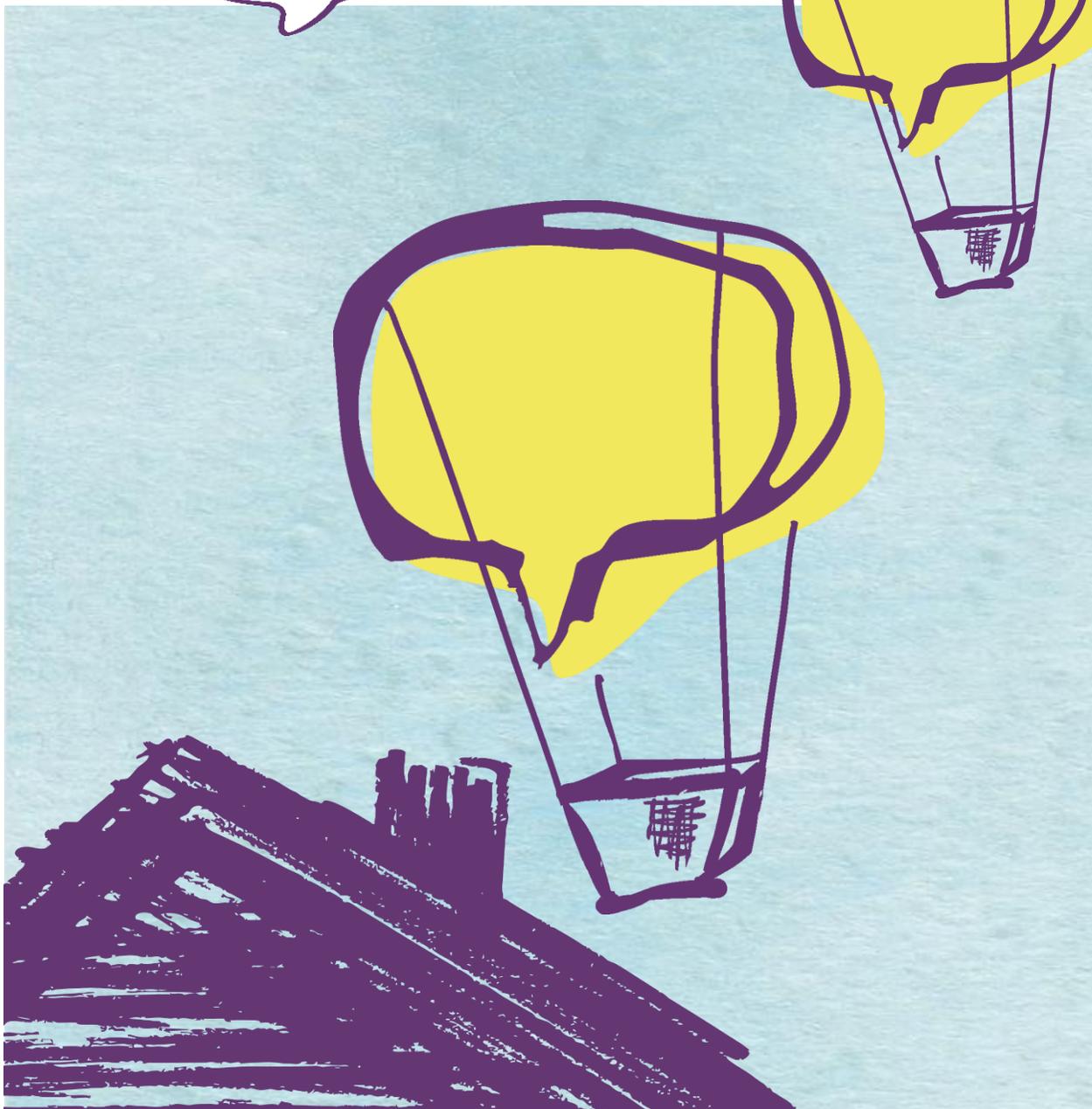


Children

UNITE



ETHYCS : Strengthening Research Ethics
with Marginalised Youth

Bringing evidence and lived experience together to reshape research ethics

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Executive Summary



Background: The ETHYCS project - led by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and Children Unite and funded by the British Academy - addresses the need for practical ethical guidance when undertaking participatory research with children and young people in high-risk situations. These include youth affected by sexual abuse and exploitation, street-connected youth, and those without family care or working in exploitative conditions.

Current ethical frameworks often do not adequately reflect the complex power dynamics and vulnerabilities experienced by these populations, particularly when research adopts participatory or peer-led methods. This report presents findings from fieldwork conducted in Guyana, Kenya, Indonesia, and Nepal between 2022 and 2023. The insights inform the creation of an open-access toolkit to support researchers, NGOs, and Institutional Review Boards in designing ethical, youth-centred research.

Methods: A participatory methodology was used, combining focus group discussions (FGDs) with youth and adults in Indonesia and Nepal, and small-scale peer research studies in Kenya and Guyana. In the peer research pilots, trained youth researchers - young people with lived experience - interviewed their peers and then engaged in reflective ethical discussions. Adult facilitators, NGO staff, and gatekeepers (such as parents and employers) also took part in ethics consultations. All work was supported by local NGO partners and received appropriate ethical approval.

Key Findings



1 CONSENT depends on how children's content will be used and is contingent on trusting relationships

For exploited children, gaining their consent for taking part is dependent on how 'their content' will be used in research publications and consequently connects to how confidentiality and anonymity for research participants is handled by researching organisations. The consent process was influenced by the high level of trust children and

young people already had in the staff from the researching organisation (in most cases this was a local NGO providing services to them).

Group orientations or preparatory workshops are a particularly effective way to gain informed consent from children where the research process is explained, key concepts such as confidentiality and compensation are explored, and trust is built between (adult) researchers and research participants. Role play was found to be particularly effective to demonstrate the research process

Consent for participatory research: Power dynamics were more deeply explored in the participatory research pilots. Youth researchers recognised the ‘pressure’ from others (adults and peers) to take part in a research activity and recommended that consent (to participate) should be obtained individually rather than in a group setting. Undertaking collaborative risk assessments with adult facilitators and youth researchers helps establish *informed* consent for youth researchers and, due to the shared lived experiences of youth researchers and research participants, can be used to inform adult facilitators of the key risks and mitigations that could be put in place to address the risks for research participants.

Consent from gatekeepers: Ethics processes often expect key gatekeepers for children to be parents. However, when undertaking research with working or exploited children, gatekeepers are usually NGOs (organisations providing support services to children – acting as guardians or carers for children) or the children’s employer. The ‘employer’ is an ambiguous figure, who depending on the circumstances, can be the child’s exploiter or a trusted figure (or both). In many cases, gatekeepers, rather than staff from the researching NGO, are the ones to inform potential research participants (the children under their ‘care’) about the research activities and gain their consent to participate.

Consent from NGOs: For exploited children, NGOs are often gatekeepers that are acting *in loco parentis* for them - providing accommodation and care. In field research we found that a staged approach to the consent process was necessary in order to navigate the different power relations involved. This started with gaining consent from board members, then the staff of the NGO gatekeepers (so that staff could identify suitable research participants). The final stage, gaining consent from research participants, was undertaken by NGO gatekeepers rather than the researching NGO – as they knew the research participants personally.

Consent from employers: in order to reach particularly marginalised or ‘controlled’ groups of children and young people, such as the girls and young women in Indonesia who were being sexually exploited in karaoke bars, building trust between the staff from the researching NGO and the employers is crucial to gain employers’ consent as controlling

intermediaries. Consequently, staff from researching NGOs may need to spend many months meeting informally with employers, in order to gain access to research participants. Due to the power dynamics between employers and children, it was difficult for researching NGOs to know how well-informed research participants were about the research process and equally, how freely their consent was given to participate.

Consent from parents: field research found that involving parents in orientations, preparatory workshops or conversations where their children were also present was an effective way of gaining informed consent and building trust between researching NGOs and parents of research participants or youth researchers.

2

CONFIDENTIALITY breaches in the past mean that anonymity is highly valued by children and young people

How

researching organisations handle confidentiality was an important consideration for children and young people when they were deciding whether or not to participate in the research process and consequently is linked to consent.

Many youth researchers had experienced breaches in confidentiality (by police), and consequently were very concerned that their personal information will be made public and they may experience further harassment, exploitation or abuse by communities. Because of this, researching organisations need to ensure measures are in place to anonymise research participants and provide data security for their Personal Identifiable Information (PII) – and these measures need to be clearly explained to children and young people during consent conversations.

Because there is a lot of ambiguity around the terms ‘confidentiality’ and ‘data’, youth researchers defined confidentiality as *‘not sharing information in the public’* and data as *‘your story’* to research participants. However, it was found that when children and young people trust the researching organisation, their fears that confidentiality will be breached are reduced.

For participatory research projects there is a tension that needs to be explored with youth researchers around providing anonymity for them or recognising their contribution to the research process – this is particularly pertinent for dissemination activities.

3

COMPENSATION highlights power dynamics between adults and children

Compensating research participants or youth researchers for their time was seen as a ‘sensitive’ issue for many adult facilitators in Kenya as it did not comply with common

practice for NGOs undertaking peer-to-peer activities with children (i.e. children are not paid to attend peer training). Furthermore, when children discussed compensation, it highlighted some of the power dynamics between adult and youth researchers. Overall, there was agreement from adults and children that offering compensation to youth researchers was less contentious than offering compensation to research participants. However, for girls working in karaoke bars in Indonesia, the offer of compensation (money rather than in-kind gifts) was an important issue, both for themselves and their employers, in order to compensate them for their time away from the workplace – particularly when research activities take place during working hours.

4

RESEARCH ENVIRONMENTS must be non-judgemental to build trust

In Indonesia, a non-judgemental attitude towards employers (of karaoke bars/sex industry establishments) and the girls and young women being exploited in these establishments was crucial in both gaining consent and undertaking data collection. For employers, ‘no judgement’ included ‘meeting them where they are’ - appreciating their context; for the girls and young women this meant providing clarity about the research process and building relationships with them over time. As the girls and young women in Indonesia were marginalised and had no experience of research, a collaborative approach was needed for them to feel comfortable engaging as research participants. Trust-building exercises by local researchers (NGO workers) combined with their interest in meeting foreign visitors (researchers/observers from Europe) meant they, and their employers, were happy to attend focus group discussions.

In Nepal, girls and young women had previous experience of being research participants (perhaps of being an ‘over researched’ group), as a result they were quite specific about the characteristics of the ideal researcher and research environment. Overall, they stressed the importance of confidentiality both to gain their consent and to enable them to discuss sensitive topics.

5

SUPPORT for children and young people is informal: friends, family or self-care

In discussing support networks, children and young people in Guyana and Indonesia did not mention NGOs or the police (it should be noted that the girls and young women in Indonesia had no contact with services of any kind). When prompted about how NGOs support them, girls and young women often saw NGOs as offering temporary crisis support or a way out of poverty (in Kenya children turned to community members to provide food or security). As a result, children identified individuals and informal support systems as

supportive rather than organisations or formal support services. Support was quite often depicted as ‘advice’ (i.e. people they would turn to for advice) and centred on siblings (notably sisters) rather than parents - although many of the girls and young women mentioned the use of self-care strategies such as meditation, breathing or time in nature.

Conclusion

This research highlights the nuanced ethical challenges involved in participatory research with children and young people in high-risk situations, including those affected by exploitation, abuse, or marginalisation. It demonstrates the limitations of conventional ethical frameworks in addressing the realities of informed consent, confidentiality, and power dynamics in these contexts. Trust-based relationships, cultural and contextual sensitivity, and transparent communication emerged as critical foundations for ethical engagement. The research also underscores the value of participatory techniques, such as role play and orientation sessions, in supporting children’s understanding and agency, and the importance of informal peer support networks and self-care strategies, which were often more meaningful to participants than formalised safeguarding mechanisms.

Involving young people as researchers, particularly those with lived experience, can generate deeper insights and foster authentic engagement, but also introduces new ethical complexities. These include navigating dual roles, managing emotions, and balancing recognition with protection. Ethical practice must therefore be understood as a continuous, relational process that goes beyond procedural compliance. It requires genuine power-sharing throughout the research cycle, regular reflection on youth researchers’ positioning as both peers and researchers emotional, and thoughtful negotiation of anonymity and ownership. By centring the lived realities and expertise of youth researchers, researching organisations can co-create safer, more inclusive research spaces where youth researchers are respected and their perspectives valued.

A series of recommendations have been produced from the data for those undertaking research with marginalised, high risk, groups of children and young people.



Glossary

- **Researching NGO:** the organisation undertaking research activities with children and young people. In Kenya and Guyana Researching NGOs had previously provided services to the children and young people participating in the research.
- **Participatory research** gives opportunities for children and young people to inform the research design and process beyond solely providing information. Degrees of collaboration will vary along a spectrum from opportunities to consult on some of the issues to research which is fully instigated and led by youth researchers from researched populations (Lansdown and O’Kane, 2015). In the pilots the term ‘peer research’ was used to describe the participatory research process.
- **Youth researcher:** a young person with lived experience of the research topic who undertakes research activities such as data collection and analysis.
- **Exploited children and young people:** exploitation is the abuse of children and young people for the benefit or gain of others. A child or young person is exploited when they are in situations that are harmful to their physical and/or emotional wellbeing.

Background

ETHYCS: Ethics of Participatory Research with Youth in Complex Risk Situations

This research project aims to develop a detailed, open access toolkit to guide research with youth in risk situations, particularly studies using co-produced or peer research approaches. This work has been led by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and Children Unite and funded by the British Academy. The programme of work was developed to respond to increasing donor investment in research to identify the needs of particularly vulnerable youth, especially in low-and middle-income countries (LMIC). Youth in risk situations may include, for example: working youth, trafficked youth, youth living outside of family care, street-connected youth, young people affected by abuse or neglect, youth engaged within the criminal justice system, and unaccompanied, displaced, refugee or asylum-seeking youth.

While there exists guidance on the safe and ethical conduct of research with children, there has been little applied research to explore ethics issues with children in risk situations and even less research into ethical issues relating to participatory or co-produced research methods with children.

This report outlines the findings from field research in four countries on research ethics for two groups of children in risk situations: a) children and youth with lived experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation and b) street connected children. Consequently, this report defines ‘children in risk situations’ as ‘exploited children’ (see glossary). Field research was co-ordinated by Children Unite and conducted in 2022 and 2023 to inform guidance and tools being developed by LSHTM that promote safe, ethical and participatory research with youth in risk situations which can be used by researchers, donors and Ethical and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs).

Children Unite

Children Unite is a values-led collective of children’s rights advocates, researchers and practitioners. With deep expertise in children’s rights, we help organisations strengthen their responses to exploitation by ensuring policies, programmes and funding are rights-focused, child-centred and accountable to those they serve

Research Partners

The ETHYCS research project was co-ordinated by a team at LSHTM led by Professor Cathy Zimmerman. Dr Nambusi Kyegombe undertook a systematic literature review which informed the field research outlined in this report. In turn, the findings from field research will inform the development of guidance on research ethics for children in risk situations to be developed by Dr Nicola Pocock.

Researching NGOs: four partner NGOs to Children Unite supported this research by co-ordinating and supporting all research activities.

ChildLink Guyana works towards the protection of children against abuse and exploitation, including physical, sexual, emotional, neglect and commercial. ChildLink aims to strengthen protection networks, systems, policies, procedures and approaches for further impact on the cause.



Kita Sahabat (Indonesia) works on community resilience for social welfare through community transformation activities that fight poverty and social injustice



Blue Cross Kisumu (Kenya) works with children, youth and families affected with alcohol and drugs in Kisumu County and its neighbourhoods - providing care, protection, rehabilitation, reintegration and support to children and youth living and working in the streets of Kisumu.¹



Swatantrata Abhiyan Nepal runs development activities and campaigns together with the government to end all kinds of fear, discrimination, slavery like practices and deprivation all over Nepal.



¹ The staff of Blue Cross Kenya were supported by Dr Alphonse Omolo, an Associate of Children Unite, who acted as the lead researcher and trainer for the participatory research.

Conceptual Framework

The overarching research question for the project:

What does ethical research mean to children and young people living in diverse 'high risk' situations?

A conceptual framework for the research was developed which served to frame the field work in each research context. However, significant diversity of settings covered by the research required an open and flexible approach to allow for new and culturally specific/relevant themes to emerge during data collection.

OUTCOMES	RESEARCH QUESTIONS
INFORMED. Information about the study and young people's role in research activities is fully understood by young people.	What are effective ways and language to provide study information and request consent?
VOLUNTARY CONSENT. Young people feel free to decide to participate or decline and free to continue or stop participating.	How do different power dynamics affect young people's consent to participate in research?
DATA PROTECTION. The storage of data from responses and/or research products is assured in appropriate and comprehensible ways to avoid current and future risk of harm to young people.	What systems are used to store data safely to keep data confidential?
LIMITS ON CONFIDENTIALITY. Child and youth participants are clearly informed on the limits of confidentiality.	How are the limits of confidentiality communicated sensitively to child participants?
ANONYMITY. Recognise that there may be a need for young people to stay	What are safe, respectful ways to recognise young people's contribution/role in research?

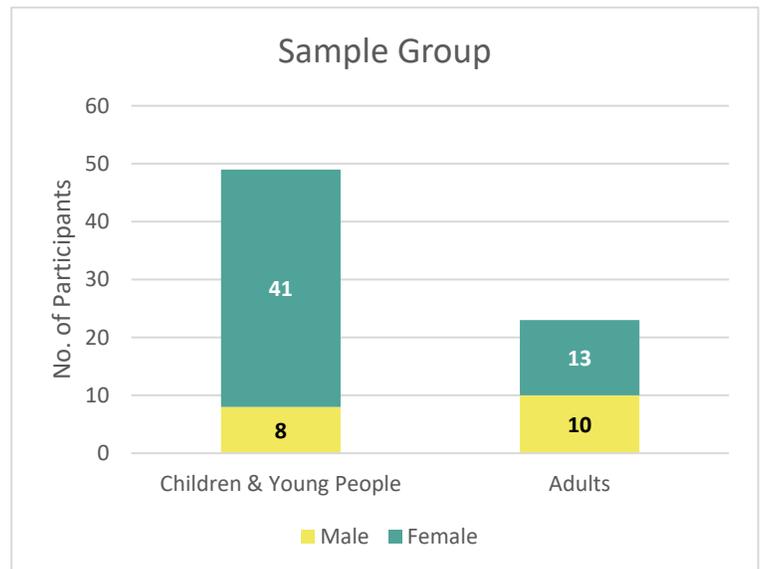
OUTCOMES	RESEARCH QUESTIONS
anonymous to counter stigmatization or threats to their safety.	
EXPECTATIONS. Clear and well-understood expectations of the limits of participation.	What expectations do participants have about research with them and what measures are needed to set realistic expectations and meet them?
SUPPORT SERVICES. Clearly offered and well-supported support services and referral mechanisms.	How useful are referral mechanisms in local contexts and what formal and informal support services are available?
STRESS. Young people feel at ease and self-confident.	What aspects of research are most likely to increase distress and what measures are needed to avoid it?
MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT. A clear rationale for young people’s involvement and transparency on young people’s level of influence in research process and outcomes.	What techniques will foster genuine engagement of young people in research about them?
APPROPRIATE COMPENSATION Compensation that is appropriate to the context and population and not coercive.	What are effective ways to determine appropriate compensation?

Sample

In total, the sample group for the field research consisted of 72 adults and young people. The sample group can be divided into adult and youth participants as follows. In total, 49 children and young people (ranging in age from 10 to 22 years, 41 young women/girls, 8 young men/boys) were involved in discussions about research ethics – either as research participants in FGDs or as Youth Researchers in peer research. In addition, 23 adults (10 men and 13 women) took part in discussions on research ethics as adult facilitators, researchers or gatekeepers.

Children and Youth Participants

- **Indonesia:** Ten participants (all female) with lived experience of sexual exploitation and, at the time of the research, were working in karaoke bars. (ages not known)
- **Nepal:** Ten participants (all female) who have lived experience of sexual abuse or exploitation and had received services from local NGOs. Ages ranged from 17-22 years.
- **Kenya:** Twelve participants (six male and six female) with lived experience of living and working on the streets, alcohol and substance abuse and violence. Ages ranged from 10-17 years.
- **Guyana:** Eight participants (all female) with lived experiences of sexual abuse. Ages ranged from 13-17 years.



Youth Researchers

- **Kenya:** five young people (two male and three female) who had lived experience of living or working on the streets (street connected children) and alcohol or substance abuse.
- **Guyana:** four young women who had lived experience of sexual abuse.

Adult Research Participants

- **Adult facilitators** all worked for the researching NGO, acting as facilitators of FGDs in Nepal and Indonesia and in the pilot countries, Guyana and Kenya, supported youth researchers. A total of 19 adult facilitators took part in de-briefing discussions on research ethics.
 - Kenya: five adult facilitators (three male and two female)
 - Guyana: four adult facilitators (one male and three female)
 - Indonesia: six adult facilitators (three male and three female)
 - Nepal: four adult facilitators (all female)
- **Adult Gatekeepers:** In addition, in Indonesia an FGD was held with four adult gatekeepers (three men and one women) for sexually exploited girls and young women, these gatekeepers were also the young women's employers/exploiters as they ran karaoke bars that the girls and young women were working in.

Methods

All research activities were co-ordinated by Researching NGOs and data collection was undertaken through focus group discussions and small-scale participatory research projects (peer research using semi-structured interviews). Participatory, creative techniques were used in FGDs with children/young people and adults.

Focus Group Discussions

FGDs were held in Nepal and Indonesia with sexually exploited girls and young women. FGDs used participatory research techniques and explored two key ethics issues: 1) support networks for exploited children and 2) the ideal research environment (looking at the ideal researcher and the ideal situation for research).

Participatory Research (Peer Research)

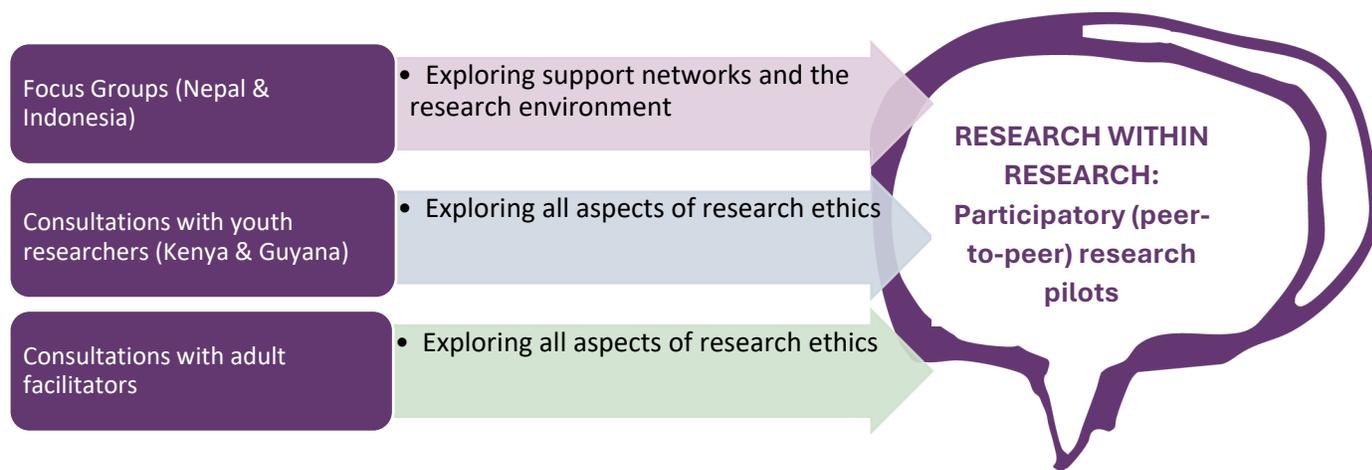
In Guyana and Kenya, small-scale participatory studies were undertaken to explore research ethics for participatory research. Young people with similar lived experience to the sample group were selected and trained to be ‘youth researchers’ and undertook data collection with their peers through semi-structured interviews. In Guyana, youth researchers also undertook data analysis through ‘sense checking’ workshops. Consequently, participatory research was called ‘peer research’ in both contexts and was seen as ‘research within research’ in relation to the study as a whole. In Guyana and Kenya, once youth researchers had undertaken interviews with their peers, they took part (as research participants) in discussions about research ethics – focusing on ethics issues that included consent, anonymity, compensation, the ideal researcher, wellbeing and support for youth researchers.

Research within Research

In Kenya² and Guyana, the research question for the studies was co-created by youth researchers and adult researchers/facilitators during training and focused on gaining feedback from children and young people on the services they had received from the researching NGO. In this sense, the peer research was ‘action research’ as the findings will be used to improve the services to children and young people offered by the Researching NGO. In Kenya, there were 12 research participants (6 male and 6 female) who had lived experience of living or working on the streets, had experienced alcohol or

² For example, the research question for the pilot in Kenya was: What are the key issues that services need to consider to prevent or minimise harm to children and youth in risk situations?

substance abuse and had received rehabilitation and reintegration services from the researching NGO. In Guyana, there were 8 research participants (all female) who have lived experience of sexual abuse and had received services from the researching NGO. Once all 20 research participants had taken part in interviews with their peers, they were involved in an FGD to gather data on the ethical considerations and wellbeing of research participants.



Research Ethics

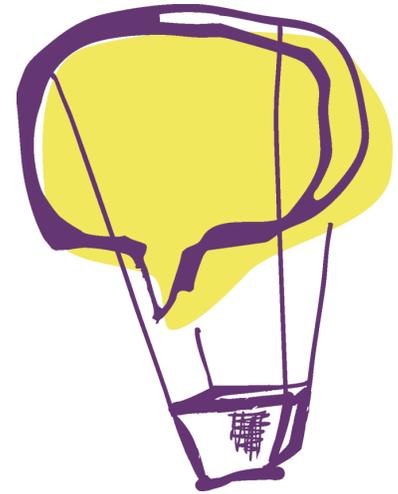
- Ethics approval was received from LSHTM for field research on 31 August 2022
- Ethical approval was received for peer research in Guyana from the Ministry of Health’s Institutional Review Board on 16 September 2022 and in Kenya from the Maseno University Scientific and Ethics Review Committee on 31 May 2023 and from Maseno University Office of the Directorate Linkages Outreach and Consultancies on 29 June 2023.³
- Ethical approval for FGDs was secured in Nepal from the Social Welfare Council on 21 January 2023 and was not required for the FGD in Indonesia as the discussion was part of a needs assessment process rather than a research project in its own right.

An ethical protocol was developed for the peer research in Guyana and Kenya and training on research ethics delivered to youth researchers by Researching NGOs.

³ The ethics approval for Kenya: Institutional Affiliation Letter - Maseno University Office of the Director Linkages Outreach and Consultancies; Research Ethics Approval - Maseno University Scientific & Ethics Review Committee; Research License - National Commission for Scientific, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), 3 authorisation letters - Director of Education, Commissioner & Governor of Kisumu County.

Findings

Analysis identified five ethics issues from the data: consent, confidentiality, compensation, the research environment and support networks. For each issue implications for participatory (peer) research have also been identified where relevant.



1 CONSENT

GAINING CONSENT FROM CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Consent was defined by young people as 'agreement' or 'asking permission'. More specifically, for research participants, consent was defined as *'I am ready to be part of this research'*.

Taking part versus use of research data

In all field research there was confusion about the difference between gaining consent for use of 'my data' (i.e. research data) and not using 'my personal information' such as children's name, age or address (known as Personal Identifiable Information or PII) in research publications or news articles using research data.

Consequently, consent is required from children and young people for two key issues:

- a) **taking part** in the research (as a youth researcher or a research participant) and for research participants only:
- b) **use of their data** (which usually means children's words but in creative methods may also include their illustrations, writing or photographs/films they have created).

Use of children's data was better understood by children and young people as use of 'their story' or 'their content'.

Field research found that, for exploited children, gaining their consent for taking part (see 'a') was dependent on how 'their content' would be used in research publications (see 'b') and consequently connected to how confidentiality and anonymity for research participants was handled by researching organisations.

For youth researchers in Guyana, the most important aspect of the consent process was a detailed explanation of confidentiality - once this was understood and they were reassured that their PII would not be shared with the public, they were comfortable to give their consent to participate

The consent process was influenced by the high level of trust children and young people already had in the staff from the researching organisation (in most cases this was a local NGO providing services to them). In Nepal, Kenya and Guyana examples were given of children and young people 'turning up' to any event organised by an NGO they trust and have been connected to for a long time (without even knowing why they are expected to be there).



Research participant, Nepal

“I was not at home when they [partner NGO] telephoned but when I returned, I was told [by my aunt] that I am needed at the [partner NGO] the following day. The one who was giving the information did not have additional information concerning what I was going to do. So, I came to [partner NGO] since whenever they telephone us, we come to the [partner NGO] Centre. Even when I was writing my name in the attendance list, I still had no idea about the reason for being required at the [partner NGO] but Madam [adult researcher] told me to write “youth researcher” after my name. By then I still had no idea what was the research all about. I only had an idea about what research might be.”

Jacky (female), Youth Researcher, Kenya

Gaining ‘informed’ consent

In order to gain ‘informed’ consent it was important that the research process was adequately explained to children and young people and their role in this research process. It was also important that they had an opportunity to discuss their role. This was best achieved through orientations or preparatory workshops which were held with children and young people who were either potential research participants or youth researchers. Group orientations were particularly helpful when research methods included group discussion with children enabling adult facilitators or researchers to explore group dynamics.

- **Group orientations or preparatory workshops explaining the research process** were used in Nepal, Kenya and Guyana to explain the research process, explore some of the key concepts (such as consent and confidentiality) and build trust between (adult) researchers and research participants.

- **Orientations were useful to manage the expectations** of potential research participants and youth researchers, particularly regarding payment of compensation and the kind of support offered to participants.
- **Role-play about consent helped young people understand the concept** and was used to good effect in orientations with children in Nepal, staff spontaneously undertook a role-play of a research interview to explore consent where the ‘research participant’ in the role-play did not give consent to participate in research, saying the research would trigger her.

‘I think the orientation is the best tool to make the participants realise what they are going to participate in, and then they will decide themselves whether they want to be in this or not - so I think orientation is necessary before the consent.’

Adult Facilitator, Nepal

- **Consent can be gained at the end of the orientation** when potential research participants have been fully informed and, ideally, have a better understanding of researchers’ and research participants’ perspectives.
- In Nepal, **a short quiz / questionnaire was used with potential research participants** to check their understanding of the research project (with answers included in a participant information sheet about the project).

Consent and Participatory Research

In discussing consent, children and young people explored the possibility and consequences of *not consenting* and the power dynamics at play for children and young people versus the adults facilitating the research process. Power dynamics were more deeply explored in the participatory research pilots. In Kenya, youth researchers recognised the ‘pressure’ from others (adults and peers) to take part in research activities and recommended that consent (to participate) should be obtained individually rather than in a group setting. Other children and young people wanted an opportunity to consult with trusted others (such as peers, family or staff from supporting organisations) before deciding whether to participate in a research project. In Guyana, discussions about the meaning of consent for young people resulted in youth researchers viewing consent as research participants’ right not to answer a question, consequently, this was explained by youth researchers to research participants before each interview began.

In Guyana, risk assessments⁴ were undertaken jointly by the whole research team (adult facilitators and youth researchers) and were seen as a key building block to establish *informed* consent for youth researchers. In addition, because of a shared ‘lived experience’ (of sexual abuse) between youth researchers and research participants, youth researchers were able to inform adult facilitators of the key risks for research participants and some of the mitigations that could be put in place to address these risks.

GAINING CONSENT FROM GATEKEEPERS

Ethics processes often expect key gatekeepers for children to be parents. However, when undertaking research with working or exploited children, key gatekeepers are usually NGOs (providing support services) or the children’s employers. In many cases, the ‘employer’ is an ambiguous figure, who depending on the circumstances, can be the children’s exploiter or a trusted figure. In field research with sexually exploited girls and young women in Indonesia the employer, often referred to as their boyfriend, was both.

Consequently, gaining consent from working or exploited children is dependent on gaining consent from gatekeepers to access the children and young people in their ‘care’. In field research with (sexually) exploited children, gatekeepers (NGOs or employers) explained the research process and were the ones to gain consent from the children and young people to participate in research activities.

NGOs as Gatekeepers: In Nepal, where FGDs were undertaken with sexually abused or exploited girls and young women. Consent from parents was not necessary for potential ‘child’ research participants (aged under 18 years) as NGO partners were housing them or heavily involved in their care (providing reintegration services). NGO partners were, consequently, gatekeepers who were acting ‘in loco parentis’ (in place of a parent) for children and young people. As the organisation undertaking research activities was not providing services directly to children and young people (potential research participants) a staged approach to the consent process was necessary in order to navigate the different power relations involved:

- The **first stage** was for the researching organisation to **gain consent from the board members of the NGO partners** to undertake research with their beneficiaries (research participants).
- The **second stage was a discussion between adult researchers and the staff of NGO partners** to explain the research project and the consent process so that they could identify suitable research participants.

⁴ The most common risk was research participants being triggered by research questions. In the Guyana research rules were developed to mitigate aspects of concern to youth researchers.

- The **final stage, where consent was gained from research participants themselves** (girls and young women) was undertaken by NGO partner staff (rather than the researching NGO) as the partner staff all knew the girls and young women personally.

Employers as Gatekeepers: In Indonesia, as the group of girls and young women who took part in FGDs had no contact with support services (NGOs or state services), the gatekeepers were their employers - the men (and one woman) who ran karaoke bars where the girls and young women worked/were sexually exploited. Although male employers were sexually exploiting the girls and young women they employed, many of the girls and young women referred to them as their boyfriends. Initially, employers expected compensation for 'allowing' their girls to be part of the research process (in much the same way as they charged a fee for karaoke clients to spend time with the girls and young women). However, as the researching NGO was unwilling to provide compensation to the employers (as doing so could be seen as legitimising or condoning exploitative practices), their staff spent many months meeting informally with the employers to build trust and gain their consent to run FGDs with the girls and young women working for them. The time commitment and resources required from the NGO to build trust with the employers was deemed appropriate as the ultimate goal of the partner NGO was to gain access to the girls and young women in order to offer them support services.

GAINING CONSENT FROM PARENTS

In Guyana and Kenya gatekeepers were parents. In Kenya, parents were invited to orientation workshops for their children or young people and meant that they received the same information as children and young people about the research process and their son or daughter's role in it. In Guyana, adult facilitators explained the research process by phone to parents in order to gain their consent for their child to attend an initial orientation. However, as parents either misunderstood or forgot the information during this call, youth researchers recommended that those explaining the research either speak to children at the same time as parents (or immediately after) or are given written information about the research.

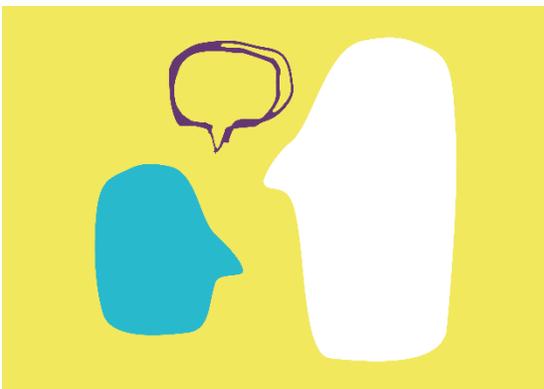


2 CONFIDENTIALITY, ANONYMITY AND PRIVACY

There are strong links between confidentiality, privacy and anonymity for children and young people involved in research activities. The greatest concern for many young people involved in research is that personal information about themselves i.e. their name, address or location or their contact details – known as Personal Identifiable Information (PII) will be made public and they will subsequently be harassed, exploited or abused. Young people in Guyana were particularly concerned about online abuse and harassment through social media.

At its simplest, confidentiality was described by children and young people in Nepal as ‘privacy’ and therefore had more in common with the concept of ‘anonymity’ in research ethics. Privacy was an important consideration for children and young people when they were deciding whether or not to participate in the research process and consequently is linked to consent.

Use of the term ‘confidentiality’ or ‘confidential’ is widespread and has different meanings depending on the context. Consequently, there was a lot of ambiguity from adults and children in field research regarding its meaning in relation to the research process - in one case, understanding of ‘confidentiality’ was confused with ‘self-confidence’. Additionally, there is confusion around the term ‘data’ more generally (i.e. data collection, data analysis) and which data will be kept confidential. Youth researchers were able to explain ‘data’ as ‘your story’ to research participants in order to differentiate it from Personal Identifiable Information (name, address, contact details of research participants) and explain which ‘data’ will be kept confidential and which ‘data’ will be shared publicly as research findings.



In Guyana, youth researchers defined confidentiality as “not sharing information in the public”. Other children and young people wanted an explanation of confidentiality to include an explanation of data security measures such as who (which individuals) will see the raw data (their stories), how long data is kept for and how/when data is anonymised. This was based on youth researchers’ lived experience of police involvement in their case

(of sexual abuse) and a resigned acceptance of confidentiality being broken so that their story of abuse becomes 'common knowledge'.

“No matter how if you try to keep your story private and it still gon’ happen I mean because there is people in your streets, you know, community, when they speak about...when they find out your story, it like public, its going to go public. So, you have to walk the road full of shame, full of embarrassment, a lot of talking and so on. So the agency (researching organisation) na gon say you can't stop people from talking about your story but the only thing you guys gonna do is to make us feel safe and comfortable I know that you guys got our back and that's the only thing you guys can do right now but not to keep our story safe because it gonna keep safe in you agency but not on the road.”

Youth Researcher, Guyana

As is highlighted in the quote above, when children and young people trust the researching organisation, their fears that confidentiality will be breached are reduced. However, it also means that, because they have already experienced a breach of confidentiality, measures in place to anonymise them and provide data security for their PII need to be clearly explained and rigorously followed through.

Considerations on Confidentiality for Participatory Research

For participatory research projects where young people (with lived experience of the research topic) are taken on as youth researchers there is a tension between considerations around anonymity - usually reserved for research participants - and recognition of youth researchers' contribution to the research process. Adult researchers are usually named in research publications as authors or data collectors; however it is often assumed that youth researchers will want their identities to be protected. There were, similarly, mixed responses when this ethics issue was explored by youth researchers in Guyana and Kenya through a vignette of a fictional street child who is asked whether she wants her name as a youth researcher included in a research report. In Guyana and Kenya, youth researchers felt that public recognition of their role in the research process would be helpful in evidencing their skills and experience in a CV and would help them get a job in the future. In Kenya, youth researchers also mentioned the possibility of financial compensation (for youth researchers). However, recognition of youth researchers' lived experience (in the vignette this was of being a street child) was less appealing to youth researchers in Guyana, as it would require them to have accepted their status as a street child and to 'take pride' in it - which not all youth researchers agreed they could do. Finally, from this discussion it was noted that it is better to wait until initial findings have been produced and shared with youth researchers before asking them how they want to be represented in research publications (whether their names are used).

3 COMPENSATION

Compensating Research Participants and Youth Researchers

In Kenya, compensation for research participants and youth researchers was discussed at length with youth researchers and adult facilitators from the partner NGO. Youth researchers defined compensation as a way to say thank you to someone when you are pleased with their work.

“I may explain it like this. The way I understand it. If someone has done something to you and you are pleased by it, when it is done, the process of telling him thank you is the compensation.”

Youth Researcher, Kenya

Adult facilitators felt that compensation was a very ‘sensitive’ issue for them as they undertake a lot of peer-to-peer work. They expressed a fear that if children are compensated for taking part in research (as research participants) they may demand to be paid to attend future training or other activities they run for children (as beneficiaries) and this would be financially unsustainable for their organisation.

Youth researchers in Kenya talked about those compensated being able to buy products such as sanitary towels or underwear that they didn't feel comfortable asking their parents for. Equally, a number of youth researchers talked about the disadvantages of compensating children (with money) which could lead to disrespectful behaviour towards parents (not doing chores etc.). They connected the idea of children having money with children behaving like adults and/or being independent, as this quote illustrates:

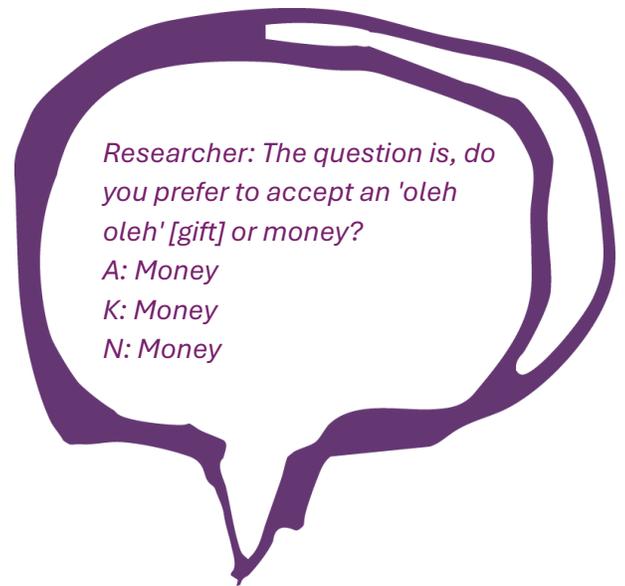
“They may start thinking that they are grown-ups and have more money than anyone else. They might start thinking that they have more money than their parents.”

Youth Researcher, Kenya

Compensation for Working Children

Offering compensation for participants' time was an important issue for working children in Indonesia and was linked to when data collection takes place. For example, when data collection takes place during working hours then both the young person and their employer may need compensation for their time. Working children agreed that compensation should be in cash form rather than in-kind gifts, as the following excerpt from an FGD with working girls and young women highlights, although the actual amount may not need to be specified until it is paid.

Overall, there was less sensitivity about compensating youth researchers for their time than research participants (although paying youth researchers to take part in training was more contentious and did not comply with common practice for partner NGOs). It was recommended by adult researchers and facilitators that a risk assessment on compensation should be undertaken by researching organisations to explore the risks of paying cash to research participants and/or youth researchers that includes telling parents/employers that children or young people will be paid and how much to pay children and young people.



Research participants, Indonesia



4 ETHICS AND THE RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

Background: FGDs with sexually exploited girls and young women in Indonesia and Nepal focused on identifying indicators of a conducive environment for research activities - looking at characteristics of researchers (adults) and the environment (location) for research. This links to research ethics issues around gaining 'informed consent' from research participants and providing a clear rationale for young people's involvement and transparency on young people's level of influence in the research process and outcomes.

The Research Environment

In Indonesia, informal discussions (FGDs) were held with employers who are managers of karaoke bars (which are a 'cover' for sex industry establishments) and key gatekeepers for the girls and young women they employed. Consequently, discussions about a conducive environment for research activities were, essentially, about the engagement of gatekeepers - and were crucial to gaining access to a marginalised and isolated group of research participants.

Employers' previous experience of 'research' was media interviews with journalists which, from the following account from employer 'B', was an extractive process:

"Just like a journalist, asking for information directly? So, it's like the one who receive the question is not understand it. Aaaa, direct, info, info, info, the person asked for info, info, info, like that..."

This extractive view of research meant that staff from the researching NGO (acting as researchers) created a similar environment in the focus group discussion with employers to the preparatory stages of their engagement with employers - gradually building trust with employers. This was primarily achieved by not having a judgemental attitude towards the employers, but also by 'meeting them where they are', including by smoking with the employers, using the same slang/language, getting involved in 'chit-chat' or banter in order to create an informal atmosphere. These are characteristics highlighted by employers when describing the ideal researcher:

*"Employer: Perhaps throwing jokes or something like that.
Employer: So, people don't see us as too serious
Employer: Making us to be like part of their group, the interviewer, as a part of them.
No barrier."*

Employers stressed the importance of using 'intermediaries' (such as staff from the researching NGO who live in the same community) to approach girls and young women informally, using small talk to build trust. Also, the one female employer (who had previously worked at a karaoke bar/brothel) talked about the importance of regular meetings (weekly) with girls so that they can be approached easily.

In Indonesia, this informal environment created by local researchers combined with an interest and/or excitement from employers to have an opportunity to meet foreign researchers (from Europe) created a conducive environment for data collection and enabled access to an isolated group of girls and young women.

“ This is my assumption, if you see why they [employers] are interested and excited about foreigners because their experience on the margins of life makes them not have the opportunity to meet outsiders, to be accepted in society, they are already grateful, let alone meeting foreigners.”

Adult Researcher, Indonesia

Girls and young women in Indonesia identified the most important characteristic for an ideal researcher as ‘a good attitude’ i.e. non-judgemental: *‘no derogatory tone, no insults, no blaming us, don't be rude. Be friendly.* The ideal researcher would also be clear in their thinking - not using complicated or confusing language, and dress neatly (but informally).

“Sometimes we need someone with the same frequency. We can talk openly with person like that. We need also to hear some jokes from them. We are not doing an interview, but we exchange our story or experience too.”

‘N’ Research Participant, Indonesia

Perhaps due to their lack of experience of research and lack of connection to NGO support, most girls and young women in Indonesia wanted researchers to act as an advisor, consequently they expressed a preference for male researchers and older researchers (rather than peer researchers) as they felt men would be able to give them guidance and use logic (to explain questions to them). In contrast, girls and young women in Indonesia who thought they would feel more comfortable with a female researcher (on the same frequency as the quote above illustrates) were particularly concerned about confidentiality and keeping information private.

“We prefer to have female researchers because we want our privacies. Because we are from the same sex, so we can keep our privacies. But it also depends on the person, whether they can keep our privacy or not.”

Research Participant, Indonesia

Furthermore, in debriefing discussions researching NGO staff connected the preference for males as researchers to the lack of positive female role models for the girls and young women.

In Nepal, where the girls and young women had previous experience of being research participants, they were very articulate about the characteristics of an ideal researcher. They identified that the most important characteristic for an ideal researcher was that they could maintain privacy. In addition, they needed to be a good listener, help participants to understand the questions, and inform participants about the purpose of research before discussing consent. They also mentioned the researcher should be trustworthy, polite and confident, and respect their opinions.

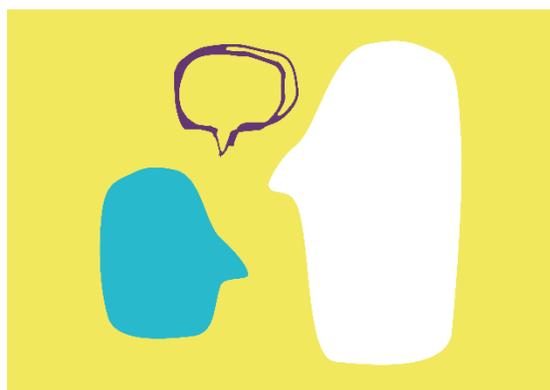
“[the ideal researcher] should be aware of time limits and time preferences. An ideal researcher should be aware of taking a consent form first and pre-inform the participant why this research is conducted and what is the importance of taking this interview.”

Research Participant, Nepal

Both employers and the girls and young women in Indonesia agreed that the best time for a research activity is their 'free time' (when they are not working) in a public place, such as a café, that is not too crowded. Girls and young women wanted an opportunity to 'check-out' the research location before they consent to take part, to see if it is suitable.

In Indonesia, girls and young women said that they would prefer group discussions to individual interviews (although a group discussion was their only experience of research). Employers were aware of the importance of not being overheard during data collection, consequently they had thought the girls would prefer an interview.

The research participants from Nepal had previous experience of being research participants so recognised the difficulty in providing privacy in a group setting and tended to prefer interviews for sensitive questions (such as personal experiences of violence or abuse). None of the participants in Nepal suggested bringing a friend to an interview - but some suggested bringing their mother or their counsellor.



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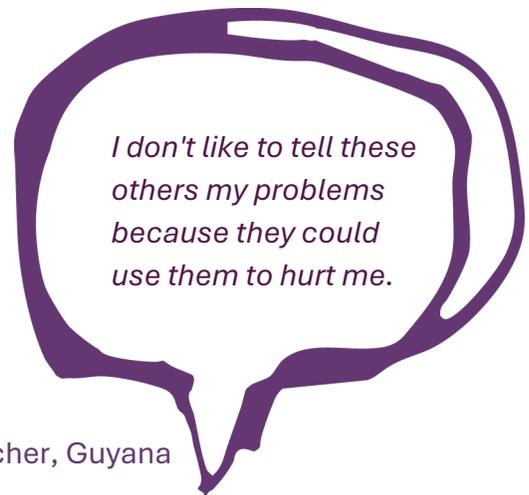
SUPPORT AND SERVICES FOR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Background: in most ethics protocols it is expected that support services such as counselling and/or clear referral pathways are provided for research participants by researching NGOs – particularly when data collection takes place with children and/or young people who have lived experiences of the research topic. As it is quite common in action-oriented research, for take-up of this kind of support (i.e. services) to be low, we wanted to explore the kinds of support children and young people make use of in their daily lives to see if this could be adapted to the research environment.

Consequently, in FGDs with research participants in Indonesia and Nepal and youth researchers in Guyana and Kenya, we explored the question: *How useful are referral mechanisms in local contexts and what formal and informal support services are available?* Creative participatory research techniques⁵ were used to explore children and young people’s support networks.

Support and Services

When discussing support, children and young people tended to mention people rather than organisations that supported them. NGOs and police were notable in their absence for girls and young women in Guyana and Indonesia. In Guyana, a number of youth researchers said that they didn’t trust support organisations, they saw 'support' as a temporary, post-crisis need for help that was relevant to their past not their present situation.



Youth Researcher, Guyana

Similarly in Indonesia, even when prompted by adult researchers, girls and young women did not mention NGO services as supportive. Support services, for most of the children and young people were seen, primarily, as offering a way out of poverty - by providing

⁵ in Guyana, Nepal and Kenya young people used a flower to represent themselves and their support network, the centre of the flower is the young person and the petals around them are their support networks, in Indonesia young people drew themselves as the sun with other planets representing their support networks.

training or financial assistance to access education. In Indonesia, where girls and young women had no access to services, the research activities themselves were seen by the local NGO organising (Setara Foundation), as the first step for the NGO in assessing the needs of this marginalised population.

“Because this is the first time I do research, so I can see an opportunity to learn something here. It is also because I know the Mami and Papi [colloquial term for employers] so far and I don’t know how to reach them. So, when Setara Foundation has this research which involves them, get some inputs from them, at least we can still keep in touch and collaborate in a different program when this research is finished.”

Adult Researcher, Indonesia

In Indonesia, in the absence of NGO support services, girls and young women talked about ‘boyfriends’ as people who they turned to for support. In reality the boyfriends they referred to were also their employers who facilitated their sexual exploitation.

One young woman, Mbak Y, highlights the ambiguity of these relationships:

‘I don’t know if he’s a boyfriend. I mean we talk even though we’re sad, we’re sad...I can talk about my story with him, the right person.’

Across all four countries children and young people mentioned the importance of family as a support network. In Guyana, girls and young women mentioned the importance of the family’s wellbeing to them. However, it was siblings (notably sisters) that were mentioned as the group that children and young people turned to for advice rather than their parents (where there was a sense of obligation for some children and young people). This quote from a research participant in Indonesia highlights how this reluctance to turn to parents was often because the girls and young women lived in cities a long way from their parents who would not understand (or did not know about) the situations they were living in:

“But this problem is here. I have this problem in here not in my village. So, it will be different...but I don’t bring my parents into my life. Is it okay?”

Research participant, Indonesia

Children and young people in Kenya were the only group to mention elders and the church as a support network. And they talked more about community members or neighbours - who offered support such as food or security - than children and young people in the other countries.

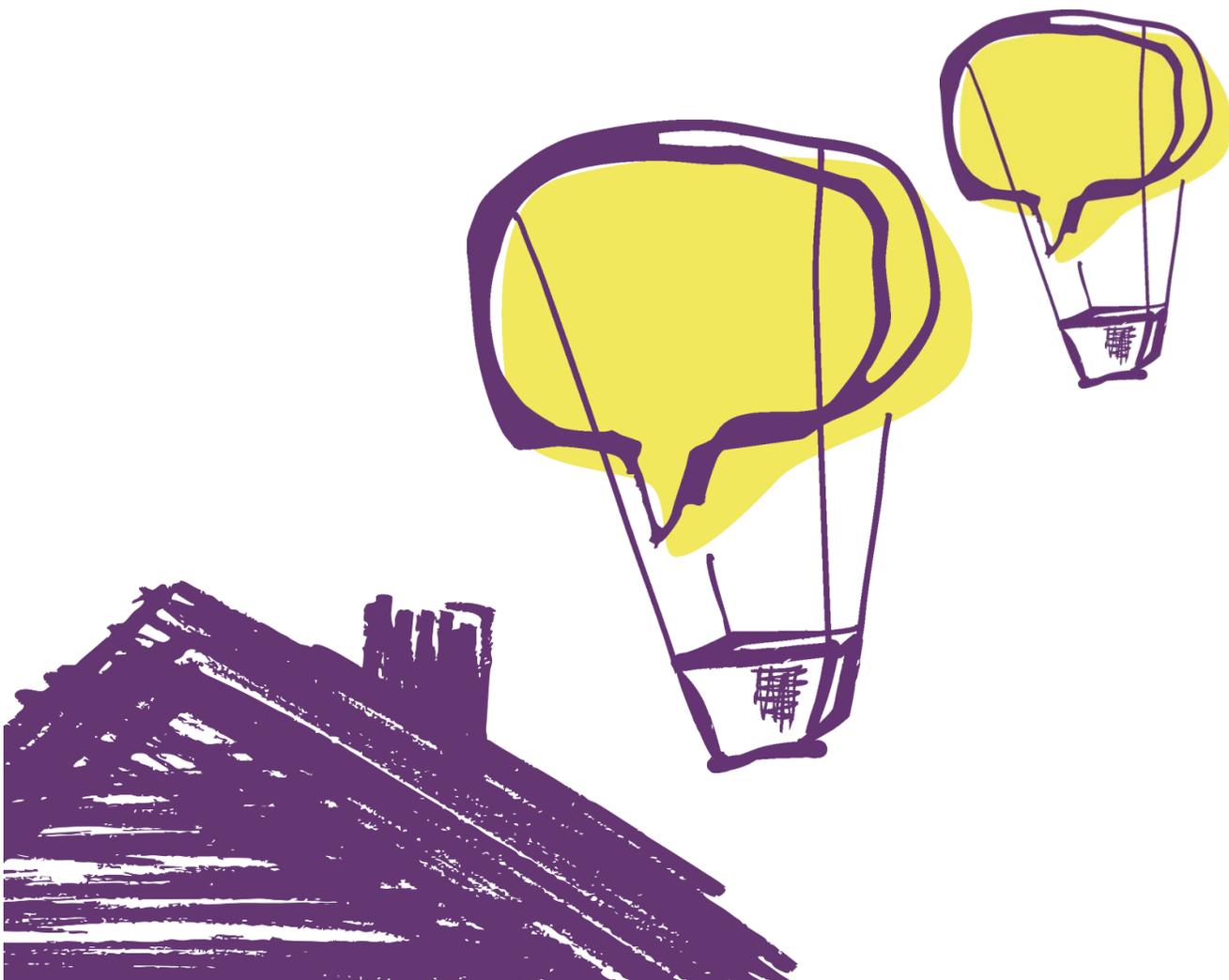
Perhaps the most interesting finding when exploring who children and young people turn to for support was the use of ‘self-care’ strategies. This quote from a research participant from Nepal is typical of the kind of self-care strategies children and young people

mentioned: *“Getting fresh air, watching movies, spending time with friends, crying, listening to music, watching memes, scrolling through Facebook.”* Other self-care strategies included sleeping, being alone, meditation or breathing exercises and creative activities such as knitting.

For many of the children and young people, the experience of being a research participant or a youth researcher strengthened their support network, or at the very least, reminded them of all the different types of support available to them.

“When I wrote ‘Me’ in the big circle I felt that I am so alone, how am I going to fill up this large circle? But when I started to add the support system ‘petals’, I felt that there are so many people around me, who are there for me. After adding petals, then I got to realize that I am not alone there. What I think is, I am the doctor for myself first, then there comes the family, then only the real [medical] doctors.”

Research participant, Nepal



Conclusion

This research highlights the nuanced ethical considerations required when conducting participatory research with children and young people in high-risk situations. Traditional ethical frameworks often fall short in addressing the complexities of informed consent, confidentiality, power dynamics, and compensation when participants face exploitation, abuse, or marginalisation. The findings underscore that ethical practice must be deeply rooted in trust, cultural sensitivity, and transparency. Children and young peoples' decisions to engage in research were closely tied to their relationship with trusted NGO staff, the clarity of information provided, and assurances about the protection of their personal information. Participatory processes, such as role play and orientations, proved vital for building understanding and mutual respect between adults and children.

Equally significant is the role of informal support networks and self-care strategies, which were often more meaningful to children and young people than the formal support services more commonly associated with research ethics referral pathways. These insights challenge researchers, NGOs, and ethical review boards to reconsider assumptions about support, agency, and protection.

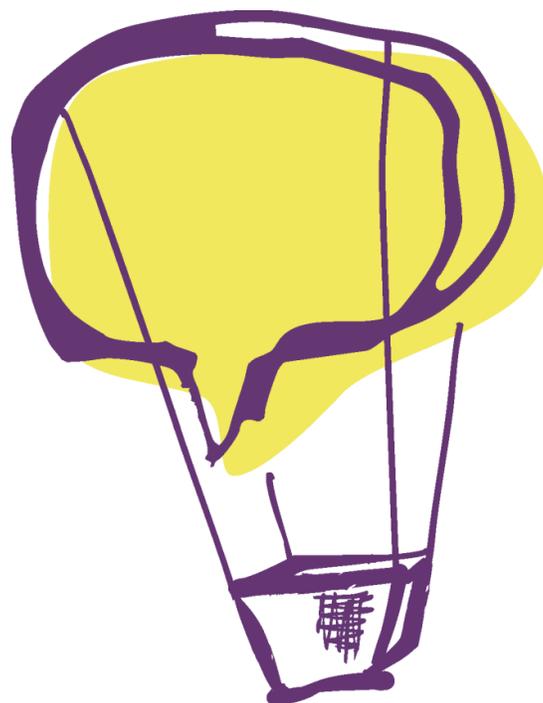
When children and young people take on the role of researcher, particularly those with lived experiences of marginalisation, ethical research becomes both more powerful and more complex. This report shows that involving youth as researchers—rather than just participants—can foster richer insights, greater relevance, and authentic engagement. Yet, it also introduces new ethical responsibilities. Youth researchers must be supported not only in developing research skills, but also in navigating the emotional demands of gathering peers' stories, managing confidentiality, and balancing their identity as both insider and investigator.

Power-sharing must extend beyond token involvement to real influence in design, analysis, and representation. Recognition of youth researchers' labour and lived or contextual knowledge must be offered thoughtfully, with sensitivity to the risks of disclosure and stigma. Adult facilitators have a crucial role in holding space for young people's agency, while ensuring safe and structured opportunities for reflection, debriefing, and care. In participatory or peer research, ethics is not a checklist—it is a continuous, relational process grounded in trust, transparency, and mutual respect. By centring these principles, we not only protect young people, but also affirm their right to shape the knowledge that affects their lives.

Moving forward, policy and practice for children in high risk situations - exploited or marginalised - must be shaped by the lived experiences of the children and young people being studied. Ethical protocols should be adaptable, inclusive, and responsive to their realities. At its core, ethical research in these contexts requires a commitment to co-creating safer spaces where children and young people are respected as equal partners in the research process.

Five key practical implications for ethics have been identified for participatory research with children and young people:

- **Dual roles and ethical complexity:** Youth researchers straddle two identities: peer and researcher. This dual role creates unique tensions—such as navigating confidentiality when interviewing friends, or carrying the emotional weight of peers’ disclosures. Ethical support and reflection must be built into the research process to safeguard their wellbeing.
- **Agency and power redistribution:** Involving young people as researchers shifts power dynamics not just between adults and young people, but between children and young people themselves. Genuine power-sharing in research requires space for youth researchers to influence data collection, research design, analysis, and dissemination.
- **Capacity and support needs:** Marginalised youth researchers may bring deep insight but often have limited prior experience of research or formal education. This makes sustained training, mentorship, and emotional support essential - not only to build their capacity, but to strengthen the ethics of participatory research methods.
- **Recognition, ownership, and anonymity:** Youth researchers often want recognition for their contribution to the research process. However, use of their real names in research outputs may cause stigmatisation. Deciding how they are named, acknowledged, or anonymised in research outputs should be a shared, iterative decision.
- **Integrating trauma-informed approaches:** Hearing stories similar to their own may be re-traumatising for youth researchers. Trauma-informed approaches such as regular reflection, self-care practices, peer debriefing, and access to therapeutic support must be integrated, not optional.



Recommendations

Gaining Consent from Children and Young People

- Hold orientations or preparatory workshops with potential research participants/youth researchers to explain key concepts (such as consent and confidentiality), build trust and manage expectations of participants.
- Make use of role play to explore consent (include a scenario where a child/young person does not give their consent to explore power dynamics between children and adults) and to explain the implications of confidentiality.
- Potential research participants should have time to consider giving their consent to participate in research, consent should be gained individually (rather than in a group setting) to avoid potential research participants feeling pressurized by their peers or adults to consent.

Consent and Participatory Research

- Involve youth researchers (who have similar lived experiences to research participants) in a risk assessment process to identify risks for research participants – these risks can be addressed in consent conversations with research participants.
- Give youth researchers some time/space to discuss the role of researcher with each other before they consent to take part.

Gaining Consent from Parents

- Involve parents of potential research participants or youth researchers in orientations or preparatory workshops being held with their children, or hold ‘consent conversations’ with children and their parents.

Gaining Consent from Gatekeepers

- Employers as gatekeepers: building trust between employers and staff from researching NGOs is crucial to ensure access is granted to potential research participants and may take many months.
- NGOs as gatekeepers: taking a staged approach to gaining consent from NGOs enables NGO staff to inform

Supporting Children and Young People

- Include a budget in research projects for provision of support to child/youth participants and/or youth researchers.
- Current support networks should be explored with research participants and/or youth researchers and researching organisations should be open to incorporating

informal support (rather than formal services) such as self-care strategies or peer networks/groups into budgets for support services.

- Support services for exploited children should include financial assistance programmes and skills or career development programmes that enable children to reduce the poverty they are experiencing.
- In participatory research, when discussing support with youth researchers explore self-care strategies and find ways to facilitate the use of self-care strategies in times of stress or anxiety during the research process.

Confidentiality and anonymity

- Explain confidentiality to research participants before discussing whether they consent to participate.
- Explain confidentiality to children and young people as ‘not sharing your personal identifiable information (PII) to the public’. Explain the data security measures the researching organisation has in place to anonymise children and young people’s PII (how and when will this be done) and when their data (their story) will be deleted.
- In participatory research, discuss the tension around *anonymity and recognition* with youth researchers once draft publications (reports/articles) have been produced so that youth researchers can discuss and decide how they want to be represented in research publications.

Compensation

- Researching organisations should undertake a risk assessment on paying compensation to research participants and/or youth researchers to help them make decision.
- When undertaking data collection with working children compensation may need to be offered to compensate children for their loss of earnings if research activities take place during working hours.

Research Environment

- Time spent building trust between local researchers and research participants is likely to result in richer and more in-depth data.
- Ensure that systems to keep data confidential are set up and are explained and discussed with research participants before gaining their consent.
- Give research participants options for different data collection methods - such as interviews which are more suitable for exploring sensitive topics than group discussions.