



'Bichara', 'Katthai': countering the discourse: understanding risk and resilience in response to child trafficking in the entertainment sector of Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Children working in Nepal's entertainment sector have become associated with the human trafficking discourse. They are generally viewed as innocent, immature and passive actors, who are subjected to forced labour and sexual exploitation and who therefore require rescuing. Limited research has critically assessed current responses to these children engaged in the entertainment sector in Nepal.

Method: Based on document analysis and 60 semi-structured interviews conducted in Nepal with various stakeholders including government representatives, NGOs, INGOs, law enforcement officials, and social workers, this article offers a critique of the anti-trafficking strategy used to target children working in the entertainment sector.

Results: The findings are based on the experiences and perceptions of various stakeholders working in the anti-trafficking sector in Nepal. The findings show that a consensus is yet to be reached as to whether children involved in entertainment work could be considered economic migrants who are exercising their agency and decision-making capacity, given the scarcity of employment opportunities available in the country. The findings suggest that interventions at the organisational level have been inadequate in terms of protecting the rights of the child victims and those at risk. Three overarching themes are identified in relation to understanding risk and resilience among children working in the entertainment sector: (1) Risk factors: poverty, abuse and aspirations for a better life; (2) The failure of protective factors; and (3) Resilience in adverse circumstances: the ways in which children manage, negotiate and cope with, and obtain support that fosters resilience.

Conclusion: The paper argues that analysis of risk and resilience should be central to the child trafficking discourse. It also emphasises the need to develop a holistic collaborative approach that can be used to tailor interventions and address the structural economic underpinnings of migration and exploitation/abuse.

1. Introduction

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2022), children make up almost half of the undetected victims of trafficking and the trafficking of children mainly occurs in low-income countries. However, studies have shown that trafficking of women and children has become increasingly complex due to its intersection with the sex industry, bonded labour, and other forms of human rights violations (Kaufman & Crawford, 2011; Huda, 2006; Rahaman, 2015). In South Asia, children as young as 12 years are trafficked for the purpose of forced labour in the domestic work sector, brick kilns, small hotels, and the garment and agricultural industries (UNODC, 2022). Attempts to enforce effective anti-trafficking initiatives have therefore

drawn the attention of policy makers as well as becoming an important agenda item in the South Asian context (Kaufman & Crawford, 2011; Huda, 2006).

Nepal, like many other South-Asian countries, is a source and transit point as well as a destination for traffickers (Dhakal Adhikari & Turton, 2019). The National Human Rights Commission of Nepal (NHRC) (2019) reported in 2019 that approximately 1.5 million Nepalis are at risk of being trafficked every year. Around 35,000 people were trafficked during the period 2018–2019 to work in different sectors, and almost 20 percent of them were employed in the entertainment sector (ibid). Studies have shown that the entertainment sector in Nepal has been associated to the sex work industry in which young girls face both sexual and labour exploitation (Dhakal Adhikari, 2018; Ghimire,

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Samuels & Bhujel, 2020). Ghimire, Samuels & Bhujel (2020) found that most of the adolescent girls engaged in the entertainment sector are internal migrants from rural areas. Various socio-cultural and economic factors have been identified as attracting these adolescents to the entertainment sector, including peer influence, personal aspirations for a better life, flexible working hours, and social networks (ibid). Although this suggests that socio-economic and cultural factors are driving children's behaviour, no research to date has considered the role of risk and resilience among children in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the realities faced by children involved in Nepal's entertainment sector.

Existing work investigating trafficking in Nepal has largely concentrated on delineating the causes and consequences of trafficking among women (Crawford, 2010; Hennink & Simkhada, 2004) and post-trafficking experiences (Laurie et al., 2015; Laurie & Richardson, 2020; Richardson, Laurie & Poudel, 2009; Poudel, 2011). Previous studies have outlined the unintended consequences of anti-trafficking interventions, such as raids and rescue efforts, in different contexts (Ahmed & Seshu, 2012; Cojocar, 2016; Dasgupta, 2019; Ghosh, 2009; Parmanand, 2019). In addition, trafficked children are presented as poor negotiators, immature, inexperienced and incapable of exercising agency (Kielland, 2018). While recent research has contested these views of trafficked children (Dhakal Adhikari & Turton, 2019; Ghimire, Samuels & Bhujel, 2020), few studies have explored the realities of children involved in Nepal's entertainment sector from the perspective of risk and resilience; research gaps that this study intends to address.

A number of scholars have applied the concepts of risk and resilience to study sexual exploitation/abuse among young people (Kenny et al., 2020; Knight, Xin & Mengo, 2021; Newman, 2002; Pearce, 2009). For instance, Pearce (2009; 91) argues that the interventions should be based on individual, family and environmental protective factors. While individual factors involve 'a more secure sense of self, the confidence in an ability to be self-determined and make decisions for oneself', familial and environmental protective factors include 'housing, leisure and social work intervention' so as to build a sense of agency (Pearce, 2009; 99). The study by Kenny et al. (2020) sheds light on risk factors among confirmed victims of commercial sexual exploitation, arguing that 'those victims identified as at risk may be on a trajectory to commercial sexual exploitation and need early intervention and identification' (ibid,7).

In a similar vein, O'Brien (2018) explores the role of interpersonal relationships in the lives of domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) in the United States and the ways in which these relationships result in creating risks while fostering resiliency. O'Brien (2018; 2) further argues that the DMST can encounter risk factors in the community, as well as within themselves and their own family (e.g. low self esteem). This implies that when addressing one risk factor (e.g., low self-esteem), a person is likely to face the challenges of overcoming other risk areas (e.g., community and family). The study suggests that risk factors therefore lead to negative relationships for DMST at the early stage, although positive early relationships are sought to protect children from DMST victimization (ibid). Moreover, interpersonal relationships established through support groups (e.g. religious organisations and safe house staff), are claimed to have the potential to promote survivor's resilience against ongoing and/or renewed exploitation (ibid).

Scholars have shown interest in understanding the notions of risk and resilience, linking them with children and adolescence (Coleman & Hagell, 2007; Olsson et al., 2003; Ungar, 2013). In terms of risk and developmental pathways, Coleman & Hagell (2007; 2) argue that 'adolescence is often portrayed as an age of particular risk'. They identify four ways through which the concept of risk can be applied to young people: risk factors (referring to factors related to poor outcomes, such as poverty, dysfunctional family, and illness); risk behaviour (referring to potentially harmful behaviour such as unsafe sex, substance use, and abuse); young people at risk (referring to socially excluded young people who are subject to abuse or neglect); and young people who pose a risk to society (referring to anti-social behaviour). The term

'resilience' refers to the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with risk' (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; 399). Coleman & Hagell (2007) state that both risk and protective factors can enhance resilience. Protective factors associated with resilience, include individual characteristics, family conditions and environment support (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). In this sense, a young person may express a degree of emotion or stress as a result of negative experiences but can 'still show resilience in the management of everyday tasks and responsibilities' (ibid,14). Thus, interventions should be closely linked with resilience – for example, capacity building, which facilitates the negotiation of high-risk environments for 'removing or avoiding factors ... implicated in the development of problematic outcomes' (Olsson, Bond, & Bursh 2003; 9).

Ungar (2013; 256) defines resilience as 'the capacity of both individuals and their environments to interact in ways that optimise development processes'. Thus, individual resilience occurs when an individual's social ecology (formal and informal social networks) facilitates access to resources in ways that are culturally sensitive (ibid). Studies argue that these resilience-based interventions designed to assist young people to overcome the adverse effects of risk, differ in terms of outcome and context, e.g. rural or urban, socio-economic status and gender (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Knight, Xin & Mengo, 2021; Ungar, 2013). Research on resilience tends to be limited to the investigation of single risk or protective factors, whereas young people are exposed to multiple risks and may benefit from multiple protective factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Prior work has identified that limited use of the notions of risk and resilience has so far been made in the study of trafficking in non-western countries (Gray, Luna & Seegobin, 2012). These notions are considered important in terms of examining the responses to trafficking and acknowledging the socio-economic and development factors that are operating. Drawing on the notions of risk and resilience, the paper critically assesses current responses to children involved in Nepal's entertainment sector, as informed by the anti-trafficking framework. In doing so, the paper identifies various risk factors such as poverty, abuse and children's aspirations for a better life, and discusses how protective factors (rescue and rehabilitation) can unintentionally result in the reproduction of risk factors. The paper argues that the way in which children manage, negotiate and develop resilience in adverse circumstances should be acknowledged in order to better understand trafficking in the entertainment sector and thus to facilitate more effective interventions.

2. Child migration and child trafficking in Nepal

If we look deeper, uncontrolled migration is a problem in areas such as sexual and labour exploitation. For example, young people go abroad to work; there is a demand for sex work. A vacuum exists, which is a space available for children to work in any kind of work, including sex work. Therefore, children come to Kathmandu for work – migration is therefore itself a problem (G6).

The phenomenon of children moving to urban areas to find work is not new to Nepal. Historically, structural factors such as poverty and limited access to education and skilled jobs have driven children and young people's mobility. During the early 1990 s, the growth of the export-oriented carpet industry had a significant impact on promoting children's mobility within the labour market (Graner, 1999). The way in which these children and young migrants were recruited by the carpet industry was relatively straightforward. Family and community members already employed in the sector – and in some cases middlemen – recommended younger family members/villagers/neighbours for factory jobs after making their annual trips home (ibid). However, the boom in the carpet industry did not last, and by the late 1990 s it had collapsed. More importantly, the carpet industry drew severe criticism from the media, NGOs and INGOs, for its poor working conditions and

exploitation of child labour. Critics forced the government to scrutinise the carpet industry more closely and action was taken to remove all children from this economic sector (ibid). This, along with the decline of the industry, meant that many children who had previously been employed in the sector were made redundant, and were thus compelled to look for opportunities in other informal sectors such as the entertainment sector, *brick kilns* and domestic work (as discussed later in this paper).

The armed conflict in Nepal that lasted for a decade from 1996 to 2006 is another reason why children were prompted to move to large cities. By the end of the war, approximately 19,000 people were dead and an estimated 15,000 people had lost their homes and were internally displaced (Rajamohan, 2008). The conflict not only displaced a large number of people but also led to the outmigration of large numbers of people to urban areas, South Asian countries and the Gulf region. Some scholars have argued that young people displaced by the conflict had few opportunities and were subject to sexual and economic exploitation (Regmi, Simkhada & Teijlingen, 2008).

Finally, natural disasters tend to trigger substantial displacement and child migration (National Planning Commission, 2015). The 2015 Nepal earthquakes claimed the lives of 9,000 people and forcibly displaced a further 2.8 million (ibid). The data show that almost 70 % of the affected population continued living in temporary settlements for many years after the earthquakes, and the displacement and migration of children continued (National Planning Commission, 2015; USAID, 2015). These children became easy targets for traffickers; an increase in sex trafficking after the earthquakes perhaps serves as evidence (Joshi et al., 2020).

Given the steady rise in migration over the past few decades, it is perhaps unsurprising that debates about trafficking and migration intersect and overlap, with the prime target being women and children (as reflected in the above quotation by a government officer). Children have been trafficked within the country for labour and sexual exploitation in the entertainment sector, for example working as *Dohori* singers (duet folk songs), in dance bars, massage parlours, *Khaja ghar* (snack bars) and other informal sectors (Maiti Nepal, 2021; Subedi, 2009). However, identifying and separating economic migrants employed in the entertainment sector in urban and semi-urban areas from those who are actually trafficked for forced labour and sexual exploitation, has proved problematic.

Having recognised child trafficking as a violation of human rights, governments bodies at different levels, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international non-government organisations (INGOs) working in the country, have adopted several international human rights instruments over the past few decades. These include the introduction of an anti-trafficking law and regulations to control both cross-border and internal trafficking, the establishment of national level anti-trafficking networks, cross-border surveillance activities, awareness raising programmes, rescue and rehabilitation activities and the prosecution of offenders.

Despite the considerable efforts made by the government, NGOs and INGOs, the ineffectiveness of anti-trafficking measures has continued to draw wider attention. For example, Silverman et al. (2007) observed that there are very few prevention or intervention programmes for the victims, mainly due to limited resources. Meanwhile, Shrestha et al. (2015) highlighted that despite increasing awareness of sex trafficking among female adolescents in Nepal, certain groups continue to be marginalised as a result of their lower socio-economic status within the community. Kaufman & Crawford (2011) noted that most of the anti-trafficking programmes in Nepal have not been formally evaluated, and therefore it is likely that several unintended and negative effects have remained hidden. For example, a number of scholars have argued that the restrictions imposed on women and children regarding migration to the Gulf countries in the name of protection (as they are considered vulnerable to sexual and labour exploitation) have in fact further exacerbated their vulnerabilities, plunging them into poverty (Bhagat, 2022; Ghosh, 2009; Kaufman & Crawford, 2011). In a similar

vein, Dhakal Adhikari & Adhikari (2022) have demonstrated how Nepal's anti-child trafficking policies are often stifled at the implementation stage due to their failure to acknowledge the role of socio-cultural and regulatory factors. The authors further argue that 'the fact that policy diffusion is driven by pro-innovation bias has meant that globally inspired policies and frameworks have fallen short in terms of delivering the intended benefits to the victims and making their voices heard' (ibid., 1).

Following the interviews, conducted between April 2016 and September 2018 with key stakeholders including government officials, NGO and INGO representatives, and former entertainment workers, this paper critically assesses current responses to children involved in the entertainment sector and the efficacy of the anti-trafficking framework in addressing trafficking in Nepal. In doing so, the paper illustrates the limitations of the framework and other anti-trafficking strategies in identifying the root causes of the problem, as well as their failure to counter the dominant narratives, which implicitly play a part in motivating minors to migrate for the purpose of obtaining employment and educational opportunities, escaping day-to-day abuse, and pursuing a better life.

Drawing on the risk and resilience framework (see for example, Coleman & Hagell, 2007; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Knight, Xin & Mengo, 2021; Ungar, 2013), the paper puts forth the argument that the analysis of risk and resilience should be central to child trafficking discourses in Nepal. The essence of the framework concerns the contextualisation of various risk and protective factors that children engaged in the entertainment sector tend to encounter. It attempts to advance critical trafficking studies by underscoring the importance of interventions informed by resilience in challenging 'the trauma-dominant narrative of survivor incapacity, lack of agency, and victimhood' (Knight, Xin & Mengo, 2021, 12). The application of the risk and resilience framework is therefore pertinent to the Nepali context, not only for the purpose of engendering a better understanding of children's motivations for migration, but also to shed light on their negotiation, managing and coping skills in adverse situations and the support they need in order to develop resilience. Given this context, the research addresses the following questions: What are the perceptions of the government, NGOs and INGOs towards child trafficking and anti-child trafficking interventions in the entertainment sector? What are the factors that contribute to risks and how do children cope with them?

3. Child trafficking discourse and its implications in Nepal

Stories of child trafficking in Nepal are grounded on general assumptions about the idea of childhood, the image of victims and their family circumstances. Similarly, the notion of trafficked children has been constructed through envisaging children as innocent, immature and passive actors. For many years, key stakeholders such as NGOs, government agencies, INGOs and activists, have pursued this notion both in policy formulation and practice, disregarding the agency of the victims (Frederick, 1998; Frederick et al., 2010). Given the predominance of this narrative, government agencies and NGOs have adopted the rescue model, as part of their anti-trafficking strategy (Hennink & Simkhada, 2004). This model, emerging in the late 1990s in response to cross-border trafficking, has a particular focus on protecting children from danger. This dominant *cheli-beti* discourse (Joshi, 2007), one which is predicated on the assumption that human trafficking is primarily an issue relating to the buying and selling of women and girls in the sex industry (Sanghera, 2005), has led to a highly interventionist approach. Dhakal Adhikari & Turton (2019), however, argue that child trafficking is an issue that goes well beyond the stereotypical vulnerable victim discourses and that anti-trafficking interventions enacted without understanding of childhoods or different types of exploitation, are ineffective.

In Nepal, the Ministry of Women and Senior Citizens (MoWSC) is a key agency with the authority to use all means possible to make sure that

children are prevented from being trafficked. The MoWSC is also involved in developing, coordinating and monitoring anti-trafficking policies and programmes across the country. Along with the MoWSC, the government has established and rearranged some of the existing bodies including the National Child Rights Council (NCRC), by granting them added responsibility to deal with children's issues.¹ In recent years, the government's attempt at regulating the entertainment sector has resulted in the issuance of a number of guidelines and regulations. Of these, the most notable regulations: *The Directives to Control Sexual Exploitation among Female Workers in Dance Bar Restaurants and the Like Business*, 2,065 (2008) and *The Code of Conduct for the Night-time Entertainment Industry*, 2,065 (2009) (NHRC, 2019). The extent to which these regulations have been implemented in practice is, however, questioned (discussed later).

In the absence of an effective framework that can address the specific needs of children in the entertainment sector, responses offered by various agencies have remained rather ambiguous. Similar strategies devised by NGOs, government agencies and INGOs for cross-border trafficking interventions (such as raids, rescue and reintegration) have been used, aiming to prevent minors from participating in the entertainment sector (despite the fact that some may have consented to work in the first place). However, contrary to the cross-border trafficking narratives, tensions remain in terms of identifying the victims in the entertainment sector, i.e. whether they are 'coerced' in the process or their involvement is self-determined and 'non-coerced' (discussed later).

In the context of child trafficking, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) provides an international human rights framework for 'the protection of the rights and dignity of the children who have been trafficked or are vulnerable to trafficking' (Gallagher, 2010; 65). In fact, a number of scholars of childhood have long critiqued the globalised/idealised vision of childhood conferred by the CRC, as being a western perspective (Baker and Panter-Brick 2000; Montgomery, 2001; Stainton Roger, 2009). In particular, it is argued that the CRC has negated ideas about the cultural and social meanings that are attached to local systems and age-based ranking. Consequently, this western perspective leads to the othering of childhoods and ignores childhoods across different geographical contexts (Koomson & Abdulai, 2021; Twum-Danso, 2016). An underlying argument in this paper is that the socio-economic conditions in which children live are too often ignored. As a result, implementing the vision of better protection of children has become challenging in practice, and this is perhaps more striking in Nepal, where children's experiences are shaped by multiple socio-economic and cultural factors, including, amongst others, child labour, *Kamaiya* (bounded labour), institutional care and child marriage (Dhakal Adhikari & Turton, 2019). With minimal state intervention and an absence of a welfare system, children have very different experiences in reality. Moreover, the status of adolescents apparently falls within a grey area in Nepal – in some respects they are treated as children, but at the same time they are expected to behave/perform like an adult (UNICEF, 2007). In light of these discussions on childhood and trafficking, I use the notions of risk and resilience to take a closer look at the realities of children in the entertainment sector.

4. Method

Data for this article are derived from 60 semi-structured interviews with key actors and stakeholders working on anti-trafficking interventions in Nepal, including former entertainment workers, representatives of government agencies, I/NGOs, and donor agencies, lawyers and human rights activists. Interviews were conducted in two large cities of Nepal, Kathmandu and Pokhara, where the majority of anti-trafficking organisations are located, between April 2016 and

September 2018. Initial participants were recruited through gatekeepers in Kathmandu, whereas the other informants were enlisted through snowballing.

The main criterion for selecting the research participants was their direct involvement in anti-trafficking interventions (prevention, protection/victim support services and prosecution), and they therefore included government officials, NGOs, INGOs and those involved in anti-trafficking networks. The key informants held various positions within the organisations (including, programme coordinator, clinical supervisor, inspector, and public attorney, among others. See Table 1 for details of the interviewees and their positions) and had worked for at least five years in the sector. Two former entertainment workers and one trafficking survivor (now running NGOs providing victim support services) were also selected for the study, as their views could provide insights

Table 1
Details of Research Participants.

Type of Organisation	Position of research participants	Code
Government (n = 16)	Programme Coordinator (2)	G1, G2
	Child Rights Officer (1)	G3
	Children's Department-Undersecretary (1)	G4
	Trafficking Desk-Undersecretary (1)	G5
	Women and Children Officer (1)	G6
	Child Rights Officer (1)	G7
	Public Attorney (1)	G8
	Senior Superintendent of Police (1)	G9
	Inspector (1)	G10
	Superintendent of Police (1)	G11
	Advocate (2)	G12, G13
	Judge (2)	G 14- G15
	Chairperson, National Women's Commission	G 16
	Programme Coordinator/Officer (11)	N17- N 27
	Clinical Supervisor (1)	N 28
	Executive Director (2)	N 29–30
Non-government organisation (NGO) (including NGOs run by trafficking survivor and former entertainment workers) (n = 28)	Programme Manager (7)	N 31- N 37
	Social Worker (1)	N 38
	Project Coordinator and Psychosocial counsellor (1)	N 39
	President (1)	N 40
	Chairperson (1)	N 41
	Programme Director (1)	N 42
	Human Rights Officer (2)	N 43
	Child Protection Officer (1)	IG 44
	Programme Officer (2)	IG 45–46
	Programme Manager (3)	IG 47–49
	Child Protection Manager (1)	IG 50
	Programme Manager, Child Protection and Child Governance (1)	IG 51
International non-government organisation (INGO) (n = 12)	Chief of Party, Combatting Trafficking in Persons Programme (1)	IG 52
	Project Coordinator (3)	IG 53
		IG 54–56
	Programme Coordinator (1)	AN 57
	Former member (1)	AN 58
	Independent consultants (n = 2)	IC 59
Anti-trafficking network (n = 2)		IC 60
Other (n = 2)		

¹ National Child Rights Council (NCRC) is the government body for the overall protection and promotion of the rights of the child in Nepal.

into the lived experiences of entertainment workers. The interviews lasted for about 30 to 90 min and included questions about topics such as: (i) working conditions in the entertainment sector and reasons for working in the entertainment sector; (ii) the organisation's approach to the entertainment sector and anti-trafficking; (iii) the process of identification and the difficulties involved; and (iv) existing interventions and the challenges that they pose, among others.

Interviews were supplemented by document analysis. Key documents reviewed included academic work, and several published and unpublished documents/reports of the UN and other agencies. These documents helped engender in-depth understanding of the construction of 'child trafficking' legislation and policies and the role of anti-trafficking organisations in Nepal, as well as to ensure the reliability and validity of the interview data.

It is important to look at ethical issues in relation to research participants, researchers and the sponsoring organisations. The ethical approval was undertaken by the researcher prior to conducting the study. The following strategies have been applied to ensure that ethical codes and practices were maintained in the study. The researcher respected the rights of the research participants and ensured that informed consent was sought and obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. No personal identifier such as name and full address of the participants were collected at any stage of the study, and the study followed the rule of confidentiality to minimise such risk to research participants. Additionally, the position of the participants (NGO or INGO) was used to ensure confidentiality in reporting of the research results.

Thematic analysis was employed for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview transcripts, field notes, and documents collected were thoroughly analysed. A summary was then prepared on the basis of the major themes from the interview guide (e.g., stakeholder's response to entertainment sector, the current anti-trafficking responses and so), which then helped in naming an early set of categories/themes. Using the risk and resiliency framework to guide the analysis, three overarching themes emerged: (1) Poverty, abuse and aspirations for better life as risk factors; (2) failing protective factors- how some protective factors might in fact reproduce risk factors; and (3) resilience in adverse circumstances- the way children manage, negotiate and cope in adverse situations, and the support they need in order to foster their resilience.

5. Findings

5.1. Stakeholder's responses to the entertainment sector: tensions and ambiguities

Contrary to the cross-border trafficking narratives, tensions are clearly evident among government agencies, NGOs and INGOs in establishing girls' victim status in the entertainment sector, in terms of distinguishing between those who are coerced and non-coerced. For instance, a government official commented on the pattern of entry into the entertainment sector:

Girls in dance restaurants, massage parlours, etc. work on a contract basis. Initially girls work in dance bars in Kathmandu on a contract basis; they contact owners and try to go abroad (G 5).

In the above-mentioned narrative, the element of non-coercion is evident, contrary to the innocent victim discourse. Interestingly, an NGO officer remarked:

We ask the girls how did you get into this industry? They tell us that their friends influenced them – their friends are wearing nice clothes and have mobile phones; they want to work too (N 17).

Mentions were made about the trend of agents being involved in offering girls opportunities for employment in the entertainment sector. The entertainment sector operates in various forms, for instance, cabin restaurants, *dohori* (duet singing) restaurants, massage parlours and dance bars in urban spaces. All these businesses are constantly in search of girls from rural and other deprived areas of the country. This pattern was explained by a government officer:

The entertainment sector is also a sector easily accessible to unskilled people lacking formal academic certificates and other relevant documents. The sector offers types of jobs that are made available on the basis of a personal connection and network ... Brokers and perpetrators are on the lookout for such girls (G 6).

While some officials were of the view that children are non-coerced into entertainment work, others asserted that they are victims of trafficking. Based on the latter groups, girls are initially employed as waitresses, dancers and singers, and are very often sexually exploited and eventually forced into sex work while performing such duties; the following statement of an INGO officer serves as an example:

... a child might be brought to Kathmandu for a short period of time to work in a dance bar or a restaurant in the city ... After the girl has reached the destination, the trafficker or owner will tell her that she is going to work as a waitress, dancer, massage parlours, before she is forced into sex work (IG 49).

Views are expressed, however, that this transition may complicate the identification of victims, given the presence of some forms of agreement and consent between the children and the employers. For example, one INGO official observed the ambiguity in identifying trafficking in the entertainment sector, stating: '*It is very difficult to establish the involvement of middlemen for movement for the purpose of exploitation*' (IG 55). Such diverse experiences of children in the entertainment sector raises concerns over the one-size-fits-all interventions. It is hard to determine whether these children fit into the category of migrants who voluntarily work in this sector (as it is easily accessible to them in a new city), or of victims of child trafficking. In the Nepali law, '*differences between the two categories are not well articulated either*' (G10).

5.2. Interventions: monitor, raid and voluntary withdrawal

What are the major implications of the discussion outlined above? Despite opposing responses to the entertainment sector, most stakeholders interviewed echoed the claims outlined in extant work. There exists a consistency in the understanding of the entertainment sector in that it is inherently exploitative and that all girls under the age of 18 (with consent or no consent) (echoing the international definition of child trafficking, see Palermo Protocol) should be *rescued*. As a government officer stated that children are seen as '*innocent, naive in the sense that they are unaware of long-term consequences, incapable of undertaking decisions about their welfare and that they need rescuing*' (G 4).

Another government official stated:

We have to rescue them, if we feel that if we don't rescue them, they might be in danger. They are rescued and placed in a rehabilitation centre. This is short term though (G 2).

A programme coordinator of an anti-trafficking network added: '*If the girls are under 18, then their consent is no consent. We have to rescue the girls*' (AN 57). These narratives in many ways reproduce the story of innocent and passive victims. Thus, these organisations and other stakeholders involved in interception, have a clear goal to '*rescue them*' (N 43) because '*if they are children, they cannot make their own decisions*;

² The interviewees used the term 'girl' more broadly for anyone below the age of 18, blurring any attempts to distinguish girls and young women. As such, this shows a lack of understanding regarding the way age has actually impacted their experiences.

they are forced to engage in sexual activity, they are deceived into it and are forced to do disgraceful activity' (IG 49). Thus, the diversity of children's motives to migrate to work (discussed below) in the entertainment sector are simplified and reduced to a scenario of either trafficking or exploitation.

Such rescue programmes are operated by various partnerships between NGOs, INGOs and other government agencies. I was told in the interviews that children are identified by the Monitoring and Action Committee (MAC), guided by the two government regulations (mentioned earlier); the MAC, which includes the Chief District Officer (as the chairperson), the police, and Women and Children officers (G16), is responsible for monitoring the entertainment sector. However, monitoring has been weak due to the absence of effective mechanisms. According to the chairperson of the National Women's Commission:

The monitoring mechanism should be strengthened, and we are working on this – there are children working in the sector, but we do not have effective monitoring mechanisms to rescue those children because the owners hide them, and children cannot leave themselves (G 16).

The effectiveness of MAC is also undermined by limited resources so that monitoring has not been conducted on a regular basis (G1, G2, G7). Moreover, in the absence of an effective regulatory framework, the most common intervention has been police raids. A police officer with the legal authority to rescue children explained:

We [the police] are reported through various sources – mainly NGOs, unknown phone calls or the victims themselves or their family or friends. On the basis of the report, we then make a decision whether to raid the place or arrest the person involved (G 11).

Some stakeholders were of the view that the frequent raids in the entertainment sector may trigger unsafe practices. For example, a trafficking survivor (chairperson of a survivor led NGO) stated that: *'regulating the entertainment sector is necessary so as to discourage the girls from street-based prostitution'* (N 41). Most of the stakeholders working in rescue programmes were of the opinion that police raids take little consideration of the impact that such interventions may have on children, the following statement of a programme manager of an NGO being an example: *'Victims get re-victimised and a police raid is not a solution'* (N 37). O'Connell Davidson (2011; 472) observes that the:

Dominant discourse on 'child trafficking' does not question or challenge these contradictions... It invites us to grieve the fate of 'trafficked children' precisely because they are ... 'unwilling and unknowing victims', snatched from the safe and protective arms of their families.

Acknowledging this adverse impact of police raids, some organisations focus on alternative approaches, such as children's *'voluntary withdrawal from the entertainment sector'* (IG 49). NGOs and INGOs – for instance, Change Nepal, the Child and Women Empower Society (CWES), Biswas Nepal, and World Education – have been advocating the adoption of the so-called soft approach, to help children motivate themselves to get out of the sector. A programme manager of an INGO further elaborated on this approach:

Our main goal is to withdraw children who are in exploitative situations. We cannot free all children from exploitative situations, since not all are willing to get out ... our role is to raise their awareness, empower them to build their confidence ... sooner or later, they will get out. This means that it is an effective and sustained withdrawal (IG 48).

When asked what happens to the children once they withdraw, a social worker of an NGO replied:

Minors are rescued and withdrawn from their work. They are provided with non-formal education or formal education ... Also, children are referred to orphanages (N 38).

In this regard, such measures appear to acknowledge children's agency to some extent, where the emphasis is on empowering children to leave the entertainment sector and focus on providing them with assistance. NGOs have played a key role in filling the gap left by the government's partial protection of vulnerable children and victims of trafficking. However, the fact that NGOs' funds are often limited (dependent on donor funding) means that when a project terminates, these centres have no other alternatives than to refer the children to children's homes. This is problematic, given the evidence of abuse and exploitation of children in children's homes (NHRC, 2019). An independent consultant who has over more than 15 years' experience working in various anti-trafficking organisations stated:

All organisations are donor funded; we have to work according to a donor's nature of work, and there is also competition to get funding ... It is very number oriented: 'we are giving you this much money – you have to repatriate about 100 children'. Of course, we can help these children, but can we address their individual needs? Are we bringing them back to the same situation? (IC 5).

In this regard, such measures appear to acknowledge children's agency to some extent, where the emphasis is on empowering children to leave the entertainment sector and focus on providing them with assistance.

No proper evaluation of the impact of such programmes has been undertaken and the extent to which such programmes 'empower' children in any meaningful way, remains questionable. Despite various efforts by government agencies, NGOs and INGOs, the *'entertainment sector is still known as a trafficking hub'* (N 40). Rescue programmes offered do not take into account the realities of the needs (both social and economic) of children (particularly adolescents) in the entertainment sector. The possibility that children in the entertainment sector can also be driven by their own autonomous decisions to improve their lives or escape their circumstances, is largely ignored.

5.3. Understanding risk and resilience among children in the entertainment sector

This section analyses the risk and resilience among children in the entertainment sector. The first subsection covers risk factors such as poverty and abuse and discusses children's aspiration for better life. Failure protective factors are then discussed, highlighting how some protective factors can lead to the reproduction of risk factors. Lastly, resilience in adverse circumstances is discussed, delineating the way children manage, negotiate and cope in such situations and develop resilience.

5.3.1. Poverty, abuse and aspirations for better life as risk factors

Various motivations drive girls to look for work in the entertainment sector emerged from the interviews, many of which can be seen as risk factors. The first one concerns their aspirations towards a better life in the city. For instance, a former entertainment worker (also an executive director of an NGO) stated:

The trend of urbanisation has increased the influx of people in the city. Especially girls who are willing to transform their appearance and lifestyle are taking this risk. Girls see their friends and siblings wearing nice clothes or carrying a mobile etc. so they would accompany their friends and siblings to the city for work (N 29). A former entertainment worker (also a programme coordinator of an NGO) added:

Girls working in the entertainment sector have big dreams; they want to get richer quickly; their lifestyle has already become different; for

example, they prefer to drink only juice and alcoholic beverages, commute in taxis, and use expensive mobile phones (N 25). While the majority of girls focus on short-term benefits, a few are concerned about their future, in particular, pursuing higher education. For instance, a children's rights officer commented: There are also some girls who want to continue their study, and are looking for new opportunities of getting into big cities like Kathmandu and Pokhara and fulfilling their dream. Different motives are driving girls although they have common pathways (G 3).

The fact that many girls are willing to take risks, challenges the dominant discourse in which the girls are perceived as innocent and passive children being forced into working in the entertainment sector by traffickers. Importantly, developmental researchers argue that adolescence (between the ages of 10 and 19) is a period of rapid physical, emotional and cognitive growth (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Giedd, 2008). There is evidence to suggest that adolescents are predisposed to take risk and likely to act impulsively due to emotional lability, poor self-control and eagerness to impress (Gardner & Herman, 1990; Lamb & Sim, 2013). It has been shown that the area of brain development involved in decision-making continues to develop into adulthood (Giedd & Rapoport, 2010). Adolescents' risk-taking behaviour and decision-making are influenced by external factors such as peer pressure and social cues (Blakemore, 2018). These developmental factors are particularly important when considering the role and capacities of children involved in the entertainment sector.

Furthermore, children in the entertainment sector may have chosen to take risks to improve their living conditions, or simply to survive, seeing this as the only available escape from their adverse circumstances. For example, a former entertainment worker (also executive director of an NGO) stated: *'The girls are already in exploitative situations, working as maids, which is low-paid. The entertainment sector is far better for them both in terms of money and flexibility'* (N 29).

A former entertainment worker (also a programme coordinator of an NGO) highlighted:

Some children have no other choices than to learn from experience and become mature. Their parents want them to migrate to Kathmandu and other big cities to earn money and support the family. It is an easy job because they do not need school certificates, nor do they need formal documents, and getting a job in this sector is very easy through the help of people they know (N 25).

The findings suggest that children migrate for both economic and social reasons, driven by the desire to explore new cities, to pursue education and gain material possessions, in order to conform to peer group aspirations. Moreover, the structural barriers, such as the decline of garment and carpet industries (discussed earlier), meant that *'they were compelled to look for opportunities in other informal sectors, such as factories, brick kilns, domestic work and entertainment work, in the big cities, as well as in foreign labour markets'* (IC 60). As a result, efforts to prevent children from economic exploitation, as identified in the carpet industry, domestic work and bonded labour, have had unintended and even inverse consequences.

5.3.2. Failing protective factors

Protective factors such as rescue and rehabilitation, although initiated with good intentions, can have adverse consequences in certain circumstances and contribute to reproducing risk factors. This theme was echoed in many interviews, the following statement of an INGO officer serving as just one example:

Raid is done in a massage parlour and girl who is like 21-year-old or a child who is 13 years old, if they are arrested together, government does not provide specific support to that child, everybody is treated in a same way, they do not even try to identify the accurate age of the child (IG 45).

Many interventions have therefore turned out to be ineffective in terms of protecting children. Family reunification/reintegration is an integral component of victim support, but it is not without challenges. A clinical supervisor for an NGO highlighted some of the challenges associated with reintegration:

If girls are missing for a long time, parents do not want to accept them. Even if they do accept their child, the community makes it hard for them—the family face a lot of stigma. The attitude of the community is that, that the child is sold and if they have been away for a long time, she might have HIV or AIDS, which might be transmitted to everyone (N 28).

In some instances, prosecution itself became rather problematic, leading to children being re-victimised. The following statement of a children's rights officer serves as an example:

Prosecution does not work and there are few cases in which the traffickers are actually punished. For example, in Pokhara, children are sexually exploited in hotel and restaurant but NGOs refer to them as entertainment sector workers. There are many children working in this sector, but only few cases are filed by the police here in the Women and Children Cell in Pokhara. Trafficking cases are filed against entertainment business owners, because they are the ones who have brought the girls into sex work. But what happens is that the victim suffers the most in the prosecution process. In many cases, by the time it reaches to the judge, their statement changes being influenced by many factors. Before, the majority cases of trafficking were trafficking of women and children from rural places of Nepal to India. In such cases the victims have been through lot of torture and bad experience, therefore do not tend to change their statement while filing the case. But the entertainment sector is different, they do not feel that they have to make a complaint (G 7).

Mentions were also made that once potential young migrants enter the entertainment sector, there are high chances of them returning to the same work, even if they are rescued and reintegrated into their families. This is because of several reasons including: money, peer pressure, and social stigma (discussed below). An NGO officer noted:

Once they are involved in the entertainment sector it is almost impossible to reintegrate them with the family and in the society. More than 100 are reintegrated, only two girls are back with their family and many they will go back to the same sector (N 20).

5.3.3. Resilience in adverse circumstances

As discussed earlier, for some girls, working in entertainment is a choice (although limited), often made to escape abusive situations and poverty, among others (seen as risk factors). Such choices that may give them the feeling of being more in control of their lives, are examples of resilience. An INGO officer stated:

Children of the ages of 14 and 15 who are working in this sector – for them it is very difficult to convince them of any kind of changes because they are earning and coping in their own ways; they do not want our help (IG 43).

A former entertainment worker (also an executive director of an NGO), added how girls manage their daily lives/work:

In many cases the same girls initially work in the cabins and are transferred to dance bars... Girls working in dance bars are smarter in the sense they work at night from 5 pm to 12am. They have flexible working hours in dance bars and they have no concern with the bar owners. They are free to roam during the daytime, roam around with friends, and their mobility is high (N 29).

These narratives illustrate that children display resilience through negotiating, managing their roles and coping in different ways. They show that children are capable of influencing the outcomes of their

situations. In other words, they exercise agency. Another children's rights officer noted:

Children are making money a lot of money working in the entertainment sector... So firstly, they do not complain about their situation, and even if the policemen try to convince them they do not see it necessary to complain because they think that even if they are out of the entertainment industry following some life skill training like sewing or plumbing which the NGOs are likely to offer to them, they will be earning less than what they earned working in the entertainment sector. They are convinced that it is better to continue working in the entertainment sector where they can easily earn money Rs. 4000–5000 per month, and do not see the harm in doing this (G7).

Similarly, when a police officer was asked whether the girls want to be rescued, he stated: *'Girls do not want to be rescued. In fact, they blame the officer for rescuing them. If we get information, we have to act ... to carry out a raid or rescue them'* (G 10). Other factors contribute to girls resisting rescue, as explained by an NGO officer:

One of our major factors motivating the girls to withdraw is money. For them the most important thing is to earn money. There is a lot of effort and investment put on them but the return is limited. A lot of peer pressure exists in such working environment and even if the girls chose to leave the profession it is very difficult for them to get accepted in other job markets. The challenge to withdraw is also the relationship they have with the owner as a guardian (N 18).

He further added:

Girls working in the entertainment sector consider the employer as a godfather. This is because they provide them with material support such as food, clothing, place to live, mobile phones and even outings. This makes them convinced that they are not directly exploited. After a certain period of time, they will realise that they have been trapped into it and that it is difficult for them to return to the community. By that time, they have already had the taste of the material world and even if they want to return to the community the stigma associated with this will stop them (N 18).

These narratives also highlight how government agencies and NGOs/INGOs overlook the complexities of children's lived experiences (both social and economic). If the aim is to foster resilience and mitigate the risks faced by children engaged in the entertainment sector, then these complexities need to be understood.

Some interviewees also highlighted the different types of support claimed to be more effective in preventing children to return to trafficking and in protecting them from other forms of exploitation but that in fact may reinforce. For example, an independent consultant who has over more than 15 years' experience working in various anti-trafficking organisations mentioned the significance of risk-assessment of children's situation before family reunification:

Our law enforces family reunification of survivors – which implies sending them back to the family. I do not agree with this as reintegration should be wherever she gets to live her life with dignity, rather than family reunification. In many situation children are already in abusive situations in their household, and to put them in the same situation is not right. If the household protection system was strong then she would not be vulnerable in first place. In many instances, the NGOs keep the victims without undertaking risk-assessment, and once the funding is over, they send the victims back home. As a result, they are re-victimised (I60).

She further added:

It is really important to understand what the child really wants in life after being rescued. Some of them may wish to go back to family and settle down, but some may wish to be on their own... most girls who

have stayed in that situation for many years, once rescued, they would rather prefer to do something independently. Therefore, we need to be more focused on individual needs (I60).

The importance of constructing environments help children reintegrate into their communities and thrive was particularly highlighted. For instance, an NGO officer remarked:

For children below 14 years old we support their parents to run a business or vocational training. In doing so, their siblings will also be protected and do not end up in the entertainment sector. They will be empowered to create an environment for their children either to continue school or go for vocational training and at the same time the family will have an income generation source (N26).

6. Discussion and conclusion

Drawing on the risk and resilience framework (see for e.g., Coleman & Hagell, 2007; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Knight, Xin & Mengo, 2021; Ungar, 2013), the study contributes to extending our understanding of current responses to child trafficking in Nepal's entertainment sector. The entertainment sector has been in the ascendancy in recent years, creating employment opportunities for young girls and children, who have migrated to urban areas in search of jobs and better life opportunities.

The study presents evidence showing that ambiguities and tensions exist between government agencies, NGOs and INGOs in establishing the victim status of girls involved in the entertainment sector in Nepal. A lack of consensus between them has made the support systems available to these girls largely ineffective. Central to the debate are stakeholders' concerns about how to determine whether children involved in entertainment work should be treated as economic migrants, capable of exercising their own agency, given the scarce employment opportunities available in the country.

A key argument presented by this paper is that the analysis of risk and resilience should be central to the child trafficking discourse in Nepal. In relation to this, the paper has identified various risk and protective factors affecting children engaged in the entertainment sector, as well as the types of support that they need to foster resilience in adverse circumstances. The study adds to our understanding of the risks relating to adolescents, such as regarding to their developmental needs and the extent that these are influenced by socio-economic dimensions. For instance, the socio-economic factors that drive girls to work in the entertainment sector include escaping abusive situations, poverty, and aspirations for a better life, many of which can be seen as risk factors. Adolescence is envisaged as a period in life in which young people tend to take substantial risks (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Giedd, 2008; Lamb & Sim, 2013).

Adolescents' agency is impacted by developmental factors (such as cognitive development, peer influence, and puberty), and their ability to critically evaluate risks/benefits and control impulsivity (Lamb & Sim, 2013). This study's findings highlight the fact that certain subgroups (migrant children) aspired to by peer groups are driven by the desire to explore new cities, pursue educational opportunities that could lead to a better career and obtain material possessions. However, children are often unaware of the long-term consequences associated with such risks. They continue to believe that they are more in control of their lives than is actually the case. The fact that their stage of brain development results in them prioritising immediate rewards over long-term consequences and an inability to fully understand both the circumstances and consequences of their actions has been outlined in prior work (Steinberg et al., 2009; Lamb & Sim, 2013). Accepting that developmental differences compounded by socio-economic factors have a significant influence on children working in the entertainment sector is therefore crucial to engendering comprehensive insights into children's agency. As this study illustrates, interventions made at different levels have so far failed

to prevent children from working in the entertainment sector, partly because they do not take into account the interdependent relationship between the children and the socio-economic and developmental factors affecting them.

This study highlights the fact that interventions at the organisational level have been inadequate in terms of protecting the rights of child victims and those at risk. Although they have been implemented with the best of intentions, current interventions/protective measures (rescue and rehabilitation) in Nepal have done more harm than good to the victims, and have in fact contributed to the reproduction of risk factors. For instance, as the study demonstrates, the likelihood of potential young migrants returning to the same line of work even if they are rescued and reunited with their families tends to be higher once they enter the entertainment sector. Socio-economic factors such as money, peer pressure, and social stigma, all encourage them to return to the entertainment sector.

In recent years, alternative approaches adopted by some NGOs such as voluntary withdrawal have to some extent acknowledged the importance of considering children's agency. Such approaches emphasise the need to empower children to leave the entertainment sector by providing them with the required assistance. However, what these approaches lack is perhaps a sustainable pathway, as envisaged by the UNCRC, mainly due to the funding constraints within which NGOs have to operate. In reality, as mentioned above, children frequently return to the same precarious circumstances that they were attempting to escape. Furthermore, few attempts have been made to evaluate the impact of these approaches and therefore the extent to which such programmes 'empower' children in any meaningful way remains questionable.

Rethinking policy and practice interventions holistically, underpinned by a better understanding of children, their motivations and family circumstances are paramount. Interventions in Nepal which are driven by the dominant child trafficking discourses and the embedding of emotive terms such as '*bichara*' and '*katthai*' (commonly used expressions to sympathise with someone who is helpless), have therefore proved to be largely insufficient. In this regard, the study has illustrated the importance of building children's resilience and empowering them to manage, negotiate and cope with adverse circumstances. As argued by some scholars (e.g. Coleman and Hagell, 2007; Pearce, 2009), risk cannot be seen in isolation from resilience. Instead, there is a need to consider more nuanced approaches that combine both risk and resilience (Coleman & Hagell, 2007) and that focus on developing assets and resources for those exposed to risk (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Resilience-based interventions often challenge the dominant narratives of victimhood that marginalise the agency of victims (Knight, Xin & Mengo, 2021). To foster resilience among child victims a conducive environment should be created that can help them successfully reintegrate into their communities. Prior work has shown that resilience is achieved when individuals (through formal and informal social networks) gain the capacity to provide resources in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2013). For this to happen, the programmes developed and implemented for the victims should focus more on protective factors, such as supporting victims' families with income-generating activities and making them financially viable. This could help to empower parents/guardians and in turn prevent re-trafficking by providing a conducive environment for children either to continue their schooling or pursue vocational training.

Furthermore, as this study has shown, the victims tend to face rejection, stigma and discrimination from their own family and community members during the process of reintegration. Conducting risk assessment of children's situations is therefore of paramount importance before family reunification takes place. Thus, it can be argued that the community engagement programmes could provide an effective tool with which to empower children, families and communities with the required knowledge and skills, and reduce the likelihood of experiencing revictimisation. In this regard, an integrated approach incorporating local-level mechanisms such as Child Protection Committees, and

Children's Clubs in coordination with the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development (MoFALD) and the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare (MoWCSW) could be adopted in order to make resilience-based interventions more effective.

In light of the factors discussed above, in broader terms, policy-makers and practitioners should reflect on and engage with debates about: How to approach children/youth who choose to take up employment opportunities that pose a certain level of risk? How do these children engage with or negotiate as part of their agency? What can be learnt from the mistakes of previous strategies? How can risks be better managed? And in what ways can interventions be linked to resilience?

The strategies that the Nepali government and NGOs have put forward as part of attempts to control trafficking, will continue to be ineffective unless the risks that children are facing and the resilience that they need to cope with these are assessed by taking into account the underlying socio-economic and development factors. It is therefore important for stakeholders to think beyond rescuing children from exploitative circumstances. What is more important for them is to adapt their work in a way that considers the broader challenges that children working in the entertainment sector are facing, including regulatory limitations, widespread corruption, a lack of awareness and insufficient state-level policies. Equally important is analysing the evolving post-pandemic consequences such as school dropout rates, child labour, child abuse and other forms of exploitation in Nepal. A more holistic approach should therefore be considered that emphasises social protection schemes targeting poor and marginalised communities, as part of mitigating the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable children and women in Nepal.

Despite incorporating the views of government, NGO and INGO representatives, the voices and views of child victims are missing from the study. That said, the inclusion of two NGOs led by a former entertainment worker and a trafficking survivor have highlighted some of the lived experiences of those working in Nepal's entertainment sector. Further evidence-based research is therefore warranted with a view to extending our understanding of the lived experiences of those engaged in the entertainment sector. Research should be conducted that considers their aspirations and the socio-economic contexts in which they live, the challenges they face in everyday life and the coping mechanisms they adopt to survive in a precarious working environment.

7. Author's statement

Informed consent was obtained with research participants. The privacy and confidentiality of the research participants was maintained.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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