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Ethical
Considerations
When Conducting
Research on Children in
the Worst Forms of Child
Labour

International
Programme on
the Elimination
of Child Labour



International Labour Organization (ILO)
International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)

Ethical Considerations
When Conducting Research on Children in
the Worst Forms of Child Labour

By
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Geneva, October 2003

Foreword

The idea of this paper grew out of the work to combat the worst forms of child labour in Nepal. Special thanks to Jamie J. Cross, Rachel Baker, Rachel Hinton, Uddhav Raj Poudyal, Yadav Kumar Amatya and Tine Staermose.

This paper would not have seen the light of the day had it not been for the encouragement and support of Jennifer Fee and Angela Martins-Oliveira. I am also grateful for the comments and assistance of Carolina Vizcaino, Nadia Taher, Caren Levy, Geir Myrstad as well as to the invaluable support of ILO-IPEC/SIMPOC. Finally, I wish to thank Margaret Mottaz for her editorial assistance.

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Preface

Unacceptable forms of exploitation of girls and boys at work exist and persist, but they are particularly difficult to research due to their hidden, sometimes illegal or even criminal nature. Although there is a body of knowledge, data, and documentation on child labour, there are also still considerable gaps in understanding the variety of forms and conditions in which children work. This is especially true of the worst forms of child labour, which by their very nature are often hidden from public view and scrutiny.

Slavery, debt bondage, trafficking, sexual exploitation, the use of children in the drug trade and in armed conflict, as well as hazardous work are all defined as Worst Forms of Child Labour. Promoting the Convention concerning the Prohibition and immediate action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (No. 182, 1999), is a high priority for the International Labour Organization (ILO). Paragraph 5 of Recommendation No. 190 accompanying ILO Convention No. 182 states that “detailed information and statistical data on the nature and extent of child labour should be compiled and kept up to date to serve as a basis for determining priorities for national action for the abolition of child labour, in particular for the prohibition and elimination of its worst forms, as a matter of urgency.”

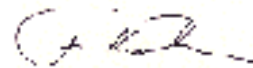
Against this background the ILO, through IPEC/SIMPOC (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour/Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour), has carried out 38 rapid assessments of the worst forms of child labour in 19 countries and one border area. The investigations have been made using a new rapid assessment methodology on child labour, elaborated jointly by the ILO and UNICEF¹. The programme was funded by the United States Department of Labor.

¹ ILO/UNICEF, Investigating Child Labour: Guidelines for Rapid Assessment - A Field Manual, January 2000, a draft to be finalized further to field tests, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipec/simpoc/guides/index.htm>

The investigations on the worst forms of child labour have explored very sensitive areas including illegal, criminal or immoral activities. The forms of child labour and research locations were carefully chosen by IPEC staff in consultation with IPEC partners. The rapid assessment investigations focused on the following categories of worst forms of child labour: children in bondage; child domestic workers; child soldiers; child trafficking; drug trafficking; hazardous work in commercial agriculture, fishing, garbage dumps, mining and the urban environment; commercial sexual exploitation; and children working in the streets.

To the partners and IPEC colleagues who have contributed to the realization of this paper I should like to express our gratitude. The responsibility for opinions expressed in this publication rests solely with the author - though it was built on the experiences and guidelines of many partner organizations - and does not imply endorsement by the ILO.

I am convinced that the important ethical considerations when conducting research on children engaged in the worst forms of child labour contained in this document will contribute to a well-planned and meaningful research process.



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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON CHILDREN IN THE WORST FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR IN NEPAL

Introduction

In the wake of an increasing number of projects and programmes alleviating the plight of children and combating child labour, research on girls and boys who work, and who are vulnerable to child labour, has flourished¹.

It is increasingly recognized that girls and boys themselves have valuable perspectives on and authentic insights into their situations and lives, and can offer valid recommendations and suggestions for improvement². Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child 1989 clearly stipulates that children have a right to be involved in decisions which affect them. Consequently, both female and male researchers have begun working with girls and boys as direct informants and as active research partners in a variety of research activities undertaken throughout the world.

It is encouraging to witness how donors, United Nations (UN) Agencies, and international and national non-government organizations (NGOs) alike have stepped up their efforts to explore in detail the complex causes

¹ The historical origins of current ethical principles for conducting research with children arise from the Nuremberg Trials, which took place after the Second World War, and the Nuremberg Code, which emerged from these. Later the World Medical Assembly adopted the Declaration of Helsinki, which was amended in 1989 and 1996, and now includes an examination of the use of children as research subjects in relation to informed consent. For a brief and accurate introduction please see: www.qualidata.essex.ac.uk/creatingdata/guidelineschildren.asp. Accessed on 14/10/2003.

² The paradigm shift in research methods away from viewing children as passive objects of research to recognizing that children are social actors in their own rights is discussed in Butler and Shaw (1996), Hill et al. (1996), James and Prout (1990), and Morrow and Richards (1996).

and consequences of the precarious situations in which millions of children live and work. It is also encouraging to note that the International Labour Organization (ILO) has taken a lead role in researching the worst forms of child labour and in bringing to our attention the inhuman and intolerable circumstances in which millions of children work, often in illegitimate activities hidden from public view and scrutiny.

The rapid increase in child-centred, participatory research activities, however, has also made it necessary to re-examine the methods applied³. This is particularly the case when interviewing children in the worst forms of child labour, but also when children participate as enumerators and as active research partners in more generalised research on child labour⁴:

- On the one hand, the small groups of children that were actively involved in an exercise of identifying households where children work — as part of the ILO Rapid Assessment on bonded child labour in Nepal (Sharma et al., 2001) — are examples of how children frequently take part in research in innovative and meaningful ways.
- On the other hand, the children working in the streets of Nepal (Kumar et al., 2001) express scepticism and anger when asked to provide information again and again, but without experiencing any resulting positive changes in their lives. Researchers are frequently

³ Three influential sources for the development of participatory research methods and approaches can be identified as Paulo Freire (1972), the development of participatory rural appraisal techniques, as well as the research methods used in applied social anthropology.

⁴ Priscilla Alderson (2000) explores the numerous ways children are being involved in the research process, including the pitfalls and positive outcomes of child participation. In line with this paper, she points out how research with and by marginalized children in developing countries are likely to promote more respectful and realistic appreciation of the abilities of girls and boys as social actors in their own right.

met with the blunt remark — “*Why don’t you give us your research dollars?*”

Generally speaking, children have much less power than adults, a fact that compounds the inherent power relations whenever a researcher sets out to do research on individual members of any society and of any target group. Thus, utmost care must be taken to ensure that the girls and boys in question are participating of their own free will and that the rights of the child are fully respected in the research process. The children trapped in the worst forms of child labour are victims of unfortunate situations, but their integrity, morals and safety must never be compromised in the name of research.

Participatory methods and languages, and the ideas expressed therein, are intended to make research a two-way learning process, with an emphasis on empowering the participants⁵. Reflexive and gender sensitive approaches to participatory, child-centred research further recognise the role and influence of the female or male researcher in this process. For instance, by asking, prompting or facilitating, a researcher demonstrates a personal interest in a child’s life and thus also draws attention to the issue being researched.

It follows that research into the lives and work of children can alter the way girls and boys perceive their situation, which can in turn affect the decisions they make, the opportunities they seek and the attitudes that they form. An ethical approach suggests researchers should recognise how personal interaction and the nature of gender relations with informants can be influential, and should strive for positive rather than negative impacts. It can be a rewarding exercise for all parties if a Code of Conduct is drafted prior to the research activity, in which the

⁵ See Pretty et al. 1995 for a discussion of how participation does not simply imply the mechanical application of a predefined tool or theory, but how participation can be seen as a process including dialogue, analysis, action, reflection and change.

acceptable role and responsibility of the researcher when interacting with girls and boys is discussed and determined.

The following paper explores in some detail the ethical dilemmas that confront the researcher when conducting research on and with children. It addresses three categories of issues, namely i) pre-research issues, ii) issues during research and iii) post-research issues. Through the use of illustrative examples from research conducted on the worst forms of child labour by the ILO in Nepal (Kumar et al., 2001 and Sharma et al., 2001), the paper touches upon concrete dilemmas to be considered when planning research as well as on situations to avoid when going into the field and when making research results public.

Although the examples presented in this document are from Nepal, based on the experiences of the ILO-IPEC global project to investigate the worst forms of child labour it can be stated that similar situations face researchers worldwide. This was clearly brought out in the “Technical Seminar on Investigating the Worst Forms of Child Labour Using the ILO/UNICEF Rapid Assessment Methodology” where a preliminary draft of this paper was circulated and commented upon by researchers who had been involved in the IPEC/SIMPOC project “Investigating the worst forms of child labour” funded by the USDOL.

In recent years, a number of publications, guides and handbooks on doing research with children and on the worst forms of child labour have been produced. While focussing on theory, methodology and good research practice — as well as on the critical steps involved in successful research projects — most of these guides contain sections or check lists on research ethics⁶.

It must be noted, however, that ethical guidelines for research activities cannot replace contingent ethics: decisions that are made in specific

⁶ ILO/IPEC –TICW Project, 2003 and Boyden, J. and Ennew, J., 1997.

contexts, in the unplanned and creative spaces of gender relations and social interaction. Rather, the ethical considerations outlined below should inform the decisions of the researcher throughout the research process.

The two keywords of this paper are training and awareness. A knowledgeable and reflective researcher can avoid prejudicial behaviour; will know when the assistance of psychologists or child development specialists is called for; and will know how physical contact and affection during research with girls and boys is a double-edged sword. A set of specific recommendations and suggestions addressing the ethical issues and concerns that arise during any research project that includes children as direct informants or as research partners can be found in four text boxes in the following three sections.

Pre-research Issues

1. Research risks

When conducting research on children's lives and work, there is always a danger that the girls and boys that participate in the research may be put at risk due to their marginalized position in society and their vulnerability. Having filled in a questionnaire, for instance, a child porter may be scolded for not bringing her load to some appointed location in due time.

Thus, before embarking on interviews or on related research activities, the researcher has a responsibility to ensure that no harm will befall children as a result of their participation in the research process. One way of doing so is to solicit views and consent from adults concerned, i.e. parents, guardians or employers, wherever this is an appropriate and safe thing to do.

The hidden and illegal activities in which children in the worst forms of child labour are forced to participate will at times put the researcher at great risk. In Nepal, researchers were threatened by traffickers carrying knives when investigating how the process of trafficking Nepalese girls and boys across the border to India takes place (Kumar et al., 2001). If it is known that such situations will occur during the research process, it cannot be recommended that the research takes place as initially planned.

A great risk for researchers and children alike is that of local conflict and unstable security situations in the areas where research on children is undertaken. Female and male researchers face different risks. As outsiders in local settings, and on account of their often ad-hoc interaction with children in local communities, male researchers have at times been suspected of being agents of the state, the local militia, or even of the armed forces. Female researchers face threats such as sexual harassment or even rape.

The nature of research work thus increases the risk of becoming involved in — or even becoming a victim of — the various kinds of conflict that characterise many of the countries in which a large proportion of children work. It certainly is a concrete risk factor, for researchers and children alike, when researching the plight of the thousands of girls and boys forcibly enlisted in armed conflicts around the globe.

Experience from Nepal shows that the recruitment of persons from affected communities as local researchers and as research guides can greatly reduce the risks involved. Working with local NGOs or community based organizations (CBO) can help researchers avoid high-risk areas in the first place. Resource persons from local communities will often know when a researcher is taking the investigation too far, or asking questions that should not be raised in a given situation.

Still, it is essential that security and risk management plans be established prior to the undertaking of any research activity. It is also

recommended that all researchers involved in investigating the worst forms of child labour be covered by a life-insurance scheme or a similar arrangement during the time of research. At a minimum, the security and risk-management plan must include:

- i) well-established channels of communication so that no researcher or child is left out of reach;
- ii) training in crisis management for field-based enumerators;
- iii) evacuation procedures;
- iv) plans for counselling and/or treatment in the unlikely event that researchers or children are hurt in the course of research.

2. Informed consent

‘Informed consent’ is a vital aspect of research with children. There may be times when researchers are forced to conceal certain parts of the full research agenda from employers or gang leaders, who would otherwise not allow a given child to participate in the research project. Nevertheless, the children who participate in the project have a right to know what they will be involved in during the research and to be told of all of the anticipated and possible outcomes of the research.

It is essential to ensure that the child understands the negative as well as positive consequences of consenting to participation in the research process, be it an interview, a focus group discussion or any other activity related to doing research on children. There are unfortunate cases in which researchers have tracked down Nepalese girls in local communities in order to inquire about how they were trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation and about how they managed to escape. The girls participated in the research, but unfortunately the project resulted in unprecedented and unintended community attention to their past experiences, and subsequently undermined the girls’ attempts to regain the trust and acceptance of their families and friends.

To avoid such situations, before embarking on research with children, the researcher must carefully explain to the child the aim and methods, as well as the intended and possible outcomes, of the research. The researcher must take the time necessary and be prepared to explain in a straightforward way the basic ideas and framework of the research.

As the participatory research process unfolds, however, it is at times difficult to obtain informed consent from children. Child-centered research is often conducted in an informal and unstructured manner, where the lines between research, informal conversation and social engagement are blurred.

In order to ensure a full understanding amongst potential participants, the researchers will often need to supplement verbal explanations with diagrams and/or appropriately written short texts. Time should be allowed for children to reflect on the consequences of joining the research and to consult guardians, other adults or friends should they wish.

Unfortunately, it is not often that children in the worst forms of child labour have access to trustworthy adults (e.g. community leaders, teachers, guardians, etc.) as these children might not have adults in their lives whom they can trust. As part of gaining access to research locations, however, it is essential that researchers take every measure to identify ‘trusted adults’ and to solicit their views on the feasibility of the research and on obtaining their consent. In some cases, the identification of ‘trusted adults’ could be done through children themselves, in other cases through focus group discussions and key informant interviews prior to engaging in research with children⁷.

⁷ There is a fine balance to strike between obtaining informed consent of adults and children. In a reflection over why children are often ignored when deciding whether or not they should take part, Cole et al. (1997) points out how the participation of children in their research “[...] was negotiated largely with those who exercise power over them” (p. 48).

Furthermore, the child should be provided with the name and contact details of the research institute and of the researcher in order that he or she can ask follow-up questions, and should also be informed of other key partners involved in the research process. Too many children in the worst forms of child labour do not know how to read or write, or do not have access to a telephone. The researcher should preferably use oral explanations when explaining to a child interviewee how he or she can get in touch with the researcher once the interview is over.

In turn, researchers and children need to agree on whom is to have access to the information produced. This is important because children may disclose personal information that should be treated confidentially (see point 9 ‘The Right to Privacy’ below).

3. The right to say no

It is equally important that children understand that they have the right to say "No", and that they can exercise this right at any time in the course of the research process.

For some children this is easier said than done. In most societies there is a difference between the ability of girls and boys to say “No”. In Nepal, a boy raggicker would probably say “No” as a starting point for negotiating a price for the information he is asked to provide. A girl raggicker would first of all be harder to make contact with as she would most likely be working in a larger group of children or with her family. Rather than engaging in a dialogue, she would perhaps turn her back on the researcher and start walking away. Whether the girl or the boy raggicker would say “No” or “Yes” would also be influenced by whether the offer to participate is posed by a female or male researcher.

It is still imperative that the child be made fully aware of his or her right to abstain from participating in research with adults or with other children. Due to the sudden increase in donor agency attention to the problem of girl trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, the demand for the stories of girls trafficked from Nepal to India has accelerated. Unfortunately, this has made it difficult for some rehabilitation centres to abstain from asking girls who have recently returned from brothels in India to tell their stories again and again — to journalists, foreign visitors, researchers, and representatives of donor agencies, often at the cost of Rupees 200-300 (USD \$2.50-3.80) per interview.

Generally speaking, children are very willing participants in research. Yet, they may also be easily persuaded and at times naïve, which is why the researcher should provide them with real options to pull out at each distinct stage of the research. Additionally, the researcher should avoid at all costs contributing to such situations as the one described above, where the misery and stories of vulnerable children are staged and put on public display, due to pressure from media officials and donor representatives.

Finally, the right to say “No” applies to researchers as well. It is critical that the research process is structured in such a way that researchers can exercise their right to pull out of the research project without repercussions and in full accordance with their basic rights and needs. Especially if the researchers in question find themselves in situations that endanger their health, morals or life, or those of the children that take part.

Pre-research checklist

- ❑ Incorporate clauses on ethical concerns or, alternatively, codes of conduct for researchers in all research proposals and contracts that are signed prior to the research project;
- ❑ Obtain advice from child psychologists on how best to avoid attitudes, questions or activities that would further traumatise victims of the worst forms of child labour;
- ❑ Consult with key research stakeholders on the level and kinds of remuneration and on whether participating children should receive compensation or not;
- ❑ Establish guidelines for the distribution of medicine and first-aid during the research process;
- ❑ Clearly outline how the various groups of girls and boys are involved in the research process and consider the special needs and rights pertaining to each of the target groups;
- ❑ Integrate special training modules on children's rights, as well as on the specific target groups of children, into training sessions for researchers;
- ❑ Explore the option of involving women and men as well as girls and boys from local communities in the research process;
- ❑ Establish security and risk-management plans for researchers as well as for participating children;
- ❑ Prepare contingency plans for the immediate withdrawal of children found to be in inhuman and intolerable circumstances;
- ❑ Draft lists of referral agencies for children in need of post-research support;
- ❑ Prepare identity cards for researchers as well as documents that clearly state the nature and objectives of the research;
- ❑ Print visiting cards with the researcher's name and contact information, including details about the responsible research institution as well as information about other key stakeholders in the project; and
- ❑ Draft notes, or draw sketches, with which the researchers may clearly convey to participating children the objectives, the time frame, the risks involved, and the anticipated outcomes of the research.

Issues During Research

4. Language and logic

“A small child who is asked the question: ‘What is a Prime Minister?’ may offer the correct answer, an inventive one such as ‘somebody who marries people’ or a comic one which has no logical relation to the question like ‘a blue thing you put in the oven’. The inability to predict the answer of a child will give is a fact which [...] demonstrates that children’s minds are special” (Greig and Taylor, 1994:64).

The researcher must acknowledge the fact that most technical terms, abbreviations, and abstractions employed by researchers and development agencies alike are not part of the vocabulary used by children. Moreover, an explanation that works for one child may not work for a child of another sex, caste, ethnicity, age group or background.

Creativity and flexibility in language and approach are required as well as patience and an understanding of the local context in which the target groups of girls and boys live and interact. Using language and logic that the children will comprehend is not only essential for producing the desired results; it also ensures that each child grasps the purpose and content of the research activity in which they have consented to participate⁸.

When researching the plight of Nepalese children trapped in the *Kamaiya*-system of bonded labour (Sharma et al., 2001), the research institution teamed up experienced enumerators with members of the

⁸ For an overview of the importance of asking questions, and the classical as well as special techniques for doing research with children, please see Greig and Taylor (1999: chapters 5-7). For a detailed presentation of participatory research techniques used in research with children in England and Wales, please see O’Kane (2000) and Christensen and James (2000).

local *Tharu* community. Given language barriers and their marginalized position in Nepalese society, *Tharu* respondents found it easier to participate in a research project in which people of their caste were taking part. This proved to be a valuable and timesaving way of generating reliable information on such sensitive issues as the lack of education or the discrimination faced by thousands of children in the far-western districts of Nepal.

When researching child labour in the Nepalese carpet sector (Kumar et al., forthcoming), a team of male and female researchers would enter the factory or shed. As expected in Nepalese society, the male researchers and any international member of the research team would be invited to the employers' office, where they would be offered tea or warm soda while discussing the economic downturn of the economy and declining sales. The tone and content of the conversation would depend on whether the employer is of Tibetan origin or not, or whether he would be of the same caste as that of the male researcher. Meanwhile, female and sometimes other male researchers would interact with parents and children, and would interview girls and boys working behind the looms.

5. A matter of trust

Research takes time, and high quality research is dependent on good relationships between informants and researchers. Small talk, play, recurrent visits, patience and time are some of the major ingredients needed when obtaining reliable data from children on such delicate issues as family background or illegitimate child labour activities.

During the ILO Rapid Assessment on child porters in Nepal (Kumar et al., 2001), for instance, one of the research teams decided to follow a group of child porters for two days. By helping them to carry their loads, the researchers were able to obtain detailed information about the lives and work of children along the portering routes of Nepal.

Too many girls and boys in this world have painful stories to tell. Yet, the standard setting for doing research with children, classrooms or work sites, may not be the optimum one to obtain such stories. To the extent possible, in-depth interviews with children should be conducted in a neutral setting and preferably in a place where children feel safe and comfortable. It is therefore vital that researchers ask children where they would prefer to talk and whether they would like anyone else to be present, for example a sibling or friend.

In the process of interviewing 172 girls and 206 boys engaged in domestic work, for instance, it quickly became clear that these children could not, under any circumstances, be asked to participate in interviews in the presence of their employers. As a result, the research institution that carried out the ILO Rapid Assessment on child domestic labour in Nepal (Sharma et al., 2001) allocated one female and one male researcher for each participating household — one researcher would approach the employer and at the same time the other would interview the child domestic in a separate part of the household.

In research on child labour in the Nepalese carpet sector (Kumar et al., forthcoming), it was often the case that adults, friends and family would gather around the child and the interviewer. The child was often grateful for the attention and for the help that parents or other adults could provide in response to questions about the child's family that the child could not recall the answer to. There were questions, however, concerning their lack of education or lack of control over income, where the child clearly wished that the parents or friends were not present. It is therefore essential that both girls and boys be given the choice to decide upon the terms, place and conditions of the interview and to have the support of the interviewers as necessary.

Furthermore, if a child appears bored or distracted at any point during the interview, a switch in conversation to a topic more familiar to them can be an effective way to take a timely break instead of ending the

interview completely. Conversations about music, films, athletes, and pop stars can be helpful subjects to introduce in such instances. Still, if the child remains uncomfortable due to the venue or the line of questioning, the researcher must end the research activity immediately.

6. Conditions of listening

It cannot be taken for granted that more listening means more hearing (Roberts, 2000). There seems to be a tendency among adults to ignore or misinterpret views and perceptions expressed by children, both girls and boys, especially in situations where the researcher feels that the views and perceptions put forward by the child worker are not directly relevant to the research activity. According to Pole et al., there is a “[...] reluctance of some researchers to take children’s accounts of aspects of their own lives seriously and see them as legitimate sources of data” (1999, p. 50).

With regard to research on the worst forms of child labour, it will often be the case that children’s answers and comments cannot easily be ticked off on a ready-made, pre-coded questionnaire⁹. Rather, the researcher should listen to the concerns and issues raised, even when these may not seem immediately pertinent to the initial research objectives. Both male and female researchers should therefore be encouraged to combine a set of open-ended and closed questions when interviewing children in intolerable and inhuman circumstances.

In other instances as well, the opinions and experiences of children may not easily be framed in one answer or a single statement but may be of great importance to the research. If children are silent, there are likely to be very good reasons for this. Issues of shyness, or maturity, or ability to communicate emotions might be different amongst girls and boys and amongst children from different caste, class and communities. Keeping in mind the children’s right to say “No”, the researcher must

Interview checklist

- Avoid technical terms, abbreviations, and abstractions — use local languages and a logic in line with local contexts that the child will comprehend;**
- Change topic or switch conversation if a child appears bored or distracted at any point during the interview;**
- Respect the right of a child to remain silent on issues too sensitive to talk about;**
- Do not ignore concerns and issues raised by the child — even when these may not be pertinent to the research objectives or relevant to filling in the questionnaire;**
- Combine open-ended and closed questions — do not repeatedly ask questions of a nature — or in a way — that the child does not grasp or understand;**
- Do not express disappointment if children do not tell the truth during the interview;**
- Resist expressions of shock, sadness, frustration or any other emotions listening to the information that a child has to offer; and**
- Maintain a positive attitude and a neutral expression when interacting with the child.**

⁹ Jacqueline Scott (1995) elaborates how large-scale quantitative research tends to treat children as invisible at worst or as auxiliary household members at best, and how the social and economic questions that such research addresses are often framed in ways where the adult bias is unacknowledged and inappropriate.

also rely on observation as an important but frequently neglected tool for generating information about children's lives.

In addition, an important point to bear in mind is the researcher's attitude during the interview. Researchers should generally maintain a positive attitude and a neutral expression when interacting with the child, resisting expressions of shock, sadness, frustration or any other emotions they may have on hearing the information that a child has to offer.

Again, however, there is a fine balance to be struck. Children in the worst forms of child labour are often abused or exploited and perhaps their perception of adults is that they are mostly uncaring, if not cruel. If the researcher does not at least show a level of sympathy and support, he or she would risk confirming the girl or boy's image of adults.

When doing research on a selection of seven of the worst forms of child labour in Nepal, even the most experienced researchers found themselves in situations where a child would start crying. One eleven-year-old girl, for instance, one of three hundred children participating in an ILO Rapid Assessment on child labour in the Nepalese carpet sector (Kumar et al., forthcoming), had lost her parents and was working under exploitative conditions in a carpet factory. She burst into tears when she told her interviewer how she had come to hate her employer and her life — a natural, inevitable reaction, even with no overt encouragement from the interviewer.

In situations where girls and boys are found to be in dire straits — either physically or psychologically — the researcher and research institute must have well-established contingency plans in place for withdrawing a child from work and for offering counselling, treatment and care. It is not an ethical practice to interview a child who is in dangerous and unsafe circumstances and to leave them there in this same state without taking any remedial action.

As, in general, the researcher cannot provide such necessary assistance while carrying out a research project, it is suggested that the researcher be equipped with an information card of referral agencies and services. This list of national institutes, NGOs, medical services, and other agencies specialising in services to children should be prepared prior to the undertaking of research and include contact information and names that children can turn to for help. Furthermore, future research projects should include funds for the compilation and duplication of these referral lists, and these should become a standard ingredient in child labour research activities in any given country. Researchers working with the ILO in a number of countries have successfully undertaken these initiatives.

7. Misinformation as a coping strategy

When doing research on vulnerable children, such as working children, children working in the streets or trafficked children, it must be recognised that not telling the truth is but one of many coping strategies that girls and boys rely on for survival in precarious situations.

It is only symptomatic of the precarious situation of the children working in the streets of Nepal, for instance, that the researchers of the ILO Rapid Assessment on child ragpickers frequently had to meet with a child two or three times to solicit accurate and reliable information about their lives and work. Similarly, given the politically sensitive nature of very young children working in the Nepalese carpet sector, it is not surprising that a large number of children reported that they were two or three years older than what was actually and visibly the case.

A less serious issue arises from the interaction between the researcher and the child, for whom the research activity is often a new and interesting event in their day-to-day life. The presence of outsiders, and the detailed questions asked about the socioeconomic characteristics of the child's household, has frequently caused the interviewee to respond

in ways he or she thinks the researcher would like to hear. To avoid such outcomes, as well as any bitterness in the aftermath of the research project, every possible step should be taken to avoid children embarking on the research with false expectations about how the research project or subsequent programmes will benefit them or their families in the short or long term.

Disappointment on the part of the researcher in reaction to children not telling the truth is to be avoided at all costs. When planning research on such children, it is necessary to consider why girls or boys might be willing to tell the truth to a researcher engaged in a research activity that may or may not influence their day-to-day survival, and may even cause increased burdens.

Encouraging another person to tell the truth requires trust. In order to build up trust with children – as mentioned earlier – it is wise to conduct interviews in neutral settings and, if possible, in the absence of parents, employers, guardians, or other persons whose presence may cause children to avoid telling the truth. Depending on the issues discussed, e.g. sexual abuse or trafficking, it is also essential to ensure the right match between girl and boy respondents and male and female researchers.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the fact that structures of power and fear exist among girls and boys and within groups of marginalized children on the streets and in society at large. As in all societies, power structures are manifested in all social relations, such as gender, age, class, caste and ethnicity. Against this background, it is necessary to consider the dynamics and survival strategies of girls and boys of local sub-cultures and working communities in assessing the veracity of statements in this kind of research.

8. Pay and promises

Remuneration, be it in cash or in kind, must be carefully considered when doing research with children. In a country such as Nepal it is estimated that thousands of girls and boys have spent tens of thousands of hours responding to research questionnaires or participating in research activities. Is it reasonable to assume that children should participate on such a scale — and so intensively — but receive nothing in immediate return?

In some cases, children and their parents have gratefully accepted awareness-raising items (i.e. programme-related T-shirts, calendars, school-bags, etc.) or health-related items (i.e. toothpaste, band-aids, bandages, etc.) in recognition of their participation in research activities. In other cases, girls and boys have asked for meals, cigarettes or cash. Yet when is it acceptable to provide a meal, or pay the children a small amount of money for their time and knowledge?

For some researchers it may be tempting to pay the child in order to ensure participation and to meet tight research deadlines. Others are inclined to donate money or food out of concern for children living in acute poverty. Or, in the case of research on the commercial sexual exploitation of children where access may only be gained through the researcher initially presenting him/herself as a client, some researchers have paid the going rate, so as not to negatively affect the child's expected earnings.

It must be recognised, however, that all such reasons for giving the children money or things are highly questionable. And, as mentioned above, when interacting with children for the sake of research, it is imperative to avoid raising expectations of dramatic lifestyle changes as an outcome of the research activity.

Checklist during research

- ❑ **Ensure that the research activity takes place in a neutral setting and a secure environment;**
- ❑ **Take the time necessary to carefully explain to the child in a straightforward way the basic ideas and framework of the research, including the aim and methods as well as the intended and possible outcomes of the research;**
- ❑ **If possible, seek the consent of parents, guardians, employers, etc., for the child to participate in the research process, and allow the child the time to do the same;**
- ❑ **Clearly state the names and contact details of the researcher, research institutes and of other stakeholders in the research project so that children and parents may subsequently contact these research partners;**
- ❑ **Ask the child if his or her participation will conflict with other engagements or responsibilities;**
- ❑ **Take every possible step to avoid the child embarking on the research with false expectations about how the research project or subsequent programmes will benefit them or their families;**
- ❑ **Ask the child whether he or she would like anyone else to be present during an interview, a friend, family member, teacher, etc.;**
- ❑ **Similarly, find ways of limiting the interference of other persons, should the child prefer to speak of selected issues in privacy — let the child decide on the terms, place and conditions of the interview;**
- ❑ **Allow the child the time to understand that he or she can exercise the right to say "No" at any time in the course of the research process; and**
- ❑ **Identify and provide real options for children to pull out at each distinct stage of the research.**

In a recent ILO research seminar on building a national knowledge base on child labour in Nepal¹⁰, 21 national research experts discussed the growing trend of providing medicine and first-aid treatment as compensation and as part of doing research on children. It turned out

¹⁰ ILO/IPEC, *Building a National Knowledge Base on Child Labour in Nepal*, 13-14 June 2002, Nagarkot, Nepal.

that most researchers in Nepal carry first-aid kits with them when they embark on research projects in remote areas of the country, and sometimes offer treatment to children and adults in dire need.

Citing examples of how the distribution of de-worming medicine and pills against tuberculosis has cost high-altitude child porters their lives, the seminar participants agreed that such interventions should be limited to an absolute minimum. Although there are cases where the first-aid treatment of children has saved lives, researchers are first and foremost researchers — not health-care providers.

Based on the discussions and conclusions of the seminar, it is believed that national-level deliberations such as the one above should determine the nature of pay and compensation in any specific research activity. Given the experience and expertise of national research experts, and the specific research contexts in any given country, it is believed that selected stakeholders involved should provide guidelines on the issues of pay and promises.

Post-Research Issues

9. The right to privacy

As in research with adult informants, information that is provided to researchers by children should be treated as confidential. Anonymisation in the form of removing names and other identifying information must be strictly adhered to, and should be explained to children participating in the research process. Except under special circumstances, it should be revealed to others outside the research team only with the children's permission. The special circumstances when researchers might feel it necessary to break confidentiality would include those in which children are considered to be in danger.

Whenever a research project is focused on a very specific target group, such as research on sexual abuse of girl and boy working in the streets, or research on HIV/AIDS prevalence among girls and boys in commercial sexual exploitation, it can be very difficult to protect the anonymity of children participating in the research. In such cases, it is recommended that the sample size be enlarged to include a wider target population with a variety of girls and boys, where relevant questions can be asked to specific segments of the research target groups.

10. Sharing research

When sharing research findings, special care must be taken not to put child informants at risk. Although case studies and photographs are powerful tools with which to convey a desired message to a specific group of readers, it is the ethical responsibility of researchers to ensure that the child depicted will not be put at risk. Consent should be sought from individual children whose photographs or case studies are to be used, and an agreement made between children and the researcher as to the use of pseudonyms.

Post-research checklist

- Treat all information obtained from children as confidential information;**
- Seek agreement with the child on who will have access to the information produced and on what information should be kept confidential;**
- Ask the child for specific consent if photographs are to be used or individual case-studies are to be published; and**
- Find appropriate ways of sharing the research results with the children involved in the research process.**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) describes how children have a right to participate in all steps of a research process.

Accordingly, the outcome of any child-centred research exercise should be shared with all child participants.

Sharing results with children is often a very challenging task due to barriers of language, literacy, and accessibility. However, the benefits for the children involved — and not least for the research results — are so important that a determined effort must be made to include such an activity within the overall framework of the research process. Hence, every effort should be made to publish the findings in ways accessible to children, whether in written or pictorial forms.

Addressing ethical concerns when doing research with children

As is evident from the above, the challenges faced and the lessons learned from doing research with children are such that we need to rethink the way this research is normally conducted, as well as what use we typically make of research results. This may seem an arduous task, but it is also what makes working with children imperative and worthwhile.

Ethical research can help children gain access to the channels of communication from which they are often excluded. It will shed new insights on the deplorable situations in which future generations grow up. Such research is a first step towards changing the world for children who are denied access to education and exploited at work.

To address key ethical issues and concerns is common sense for most researchers involved in research activities around the world. Nevertheless, the lessons learned by the ILO from researching the worst forms of child labour in 19 countries and one border area clearly show how even the most professional and experienced researchers at times end up in situations where the risk of causing a child unnecessary harm is unavoidable.

Although ethical guidelines and codes do not give us the answers to address all possible challenges or risks that occur when doing research with children, they can lead to asking the right kinds of questions (Roberts, 2000). The checklists included in this paper have been prepared to counteract and pre-empt violations of the rights enjoyed by all girls and boys or situations that expose children to harm's way. In another useful checklist, Alderson (1995) in her work for Britain's largest childcare organization, Barnado's, has suggested a list of similar topics that research with children should address:

- 1 **The purpose of the research:** If the research findings are meant to benefit certain children, who are they, and how might they benefit?
- 2 **Researching with children – costs and hoped for benefits:** Might there be risks or costs such as time, inconvenience, embarrassment, intrusion of privacy, sense of failure or coercion, fear of admitting anxiety?
- 3 **Privacy and confidentiality:** When significant extracts from interviews are quoted in reports, should researchers first check the quotation and commentary with the child (or parent) concerned?
- 4 **Selection, inclusion and exclusion:** Have some children been excluded because, for instance, they have speech or learning difficulties? Can the exclusion be justified?
- 5 **Funding:** Should the research funds be raised only from agencies which avoid activities that can harm children?
- 6 **Review and revision of the research aims and methods:** Have children or their carers helped to plan or commented on the research?
- 7 **Information for children, parents and other carers:** Are the children and adults concerned given details about the purpose and nature of the research, the methods and timing, and the possible benefits, harms and outcomes?
- 8 **Consent:** Do children know that if they refuse or withdraw from the research, this will not be held against them in any way? How do the researchers help children to know these things?

- 9 **Dissemination:** Will the children and adults involved be sent short reports of the main findings?
- 10 **Impact on children:** Besides the effects of the research on the children involved, how might the conclusions affect larger groups of children?

As stipulated in the ILO Minimum Age Convention 1973 (No. 138) and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 1999 (No. 182), the ILO promotes research that can provide us with a better understanding of the causes and consequences of child labour worldwide. At the same time, as a standard-setting agency under the United Nations, the ILO is committed to promoting and protecting the rights of children, especially the girls and boys who are exploited at work, including those who participate in research activities.

The present paper has specifically been prepared to ameliorate the situation and to safeguard the rights of girls and boys in child labour research and in research on the worst forms of child labour. It promotes the generation of new knowledge on the often hidden and illegitimate exploitation of millions of working children, while at the same time highlighting the importance of a well-planned and meaningful research process, where children can contribute of their own free will, providing us with authentic insights and valid recommendations for change, without getting hurt.

“In his book ‘The Little Prince’ (1945) Antoine de Saint-Exupery writes that grown ups cannot on their own understand the world from the child's point of view and therefore they need children to explain it to them. This is wise advice [...]. Only through listening and hearing what children say and paying attention to the ways in which they communicate with us will progress be made towards conducting research with, rather than on, children” (Christensen and James, 2000:7).

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