

# Organizational and service support for boys' pathways out of commercial sexual exploitation in Nepal: Key learning for an under-recognized population

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## Abstract

Boys are a group who experience commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) but are often less visible than girls with the same experience. There is limited evidence regarding the experiences of organizational support from the perspectives of boys with CSE experience. This study, conducted in Kathmandu, Nepal, adopted a mixed-method approach, combining data from actor mapping, survey, and in-depth case studies. It explores (1) what services are available for boys with CSE experience; (2) how services help boys to exit the commercial sex sector; and (3) what the future service needs are for boys with CSE experience. In our sample, most of the boys who had been involved in the CSE industry as minors, identified themselves as sexual minorities. The findings suggest that despite the inadequacy of the services available for boys with CSE experience, around half of the boys who successfully exited the industry reported that support from non-governmental organization (NGOs) was crucial to their pathways out. The findings indicate the continuity of follow-up services is needed. This study underscores the importance of organizational and service support. It highlights ongoing needs regarding economic determinants. This study sheds light on future NGO service programme development and policy initiatives on protecting boys with CSE experience.

## KEYWORDS

boy, CSE, LGBTI, Nepal, organizational support

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a concerning problem globally. CSEC is a form of sexual violence that contravenes human and child rights whilst also being an illegal activity that is often part of a broader criminal network. It is estimated that CSEC impacts 1.7 million children globally, of whom 80% are female (ILO, 2022). The global CSEC estimates should be interpreted with caution, as the exact numbers of children with commercial sexual exploitation

(CSE) experience are unknown in part due to under-reporting and the clandestine nature of the exploitation (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016). Nepal is no exception to this exploitation, with a thriving adult entertainment sector in which CSEC is known to occur. Such exploitation in Nepal is complex due to multifaceted predisposing factors including poverty, quests to escape family violence, and social disadvantage resulting from discrimination and inequalities (Dank et al., 2019). The existence of males with CSE experience is less recognized and under-researched, creating a significant knowledge gap in how best to

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respond to the specific needs of boys who have experienced exploitation.

In Kathmandu, Nepal, the adult entertainment sector (where CSE is known to occur) is recognized as a high-risk environment for children. The sector includes venues such as khaja restaurants, dohori bars, dance bars, massage parlours and guest houses. Although not all these venues are exploitative or engage children in sexual services, working in the adult entertainment sector is a risk factor for many girls and young women to experience gradual or forced familiarization with and immersion in the sex industry. In addition to venue-based CSE, street-based CSE is a more recently recognized phenomenon in Kathmandu. There are also links to the CSE industry through other forms of labour exploitation such as bonded labour in Nepal's brick kilns (Lamar et al., 2017).

Females make up the majority of visible commercial sexual activity in Kathmandu, Nepal and are primarily venue-based (Dank et al., 2019), whereas male sex workers are often more clandestine in their activities (Lynch, 2017). Males in CSE tend to be street-based, where customers access them in public areas or are referred to male sex workers via their peers or pimps who informally organize the commercial sexual activities. The World Bank (2012) estimated the sex industry in Nepal to involve between 65 864 and 82 330 men and transgender people,<sup>1</sup> and the client base to be comprised mostly of transport workers, members of the police or military, and migrant workers. It is not possible to estimate how many children are involved, but given the bias towards recruiting young people into CSE, the number of children and young boys is likely to be significant.

Children are vulnerable because they have limited knowledge of their rights and the mechanisms and processes through which they can achieve support and justice. Children with CSE experience face risks to their safety, development and well-being as well as fundamental violations of their human rights. Prior research indicates that many children may have experienced family dysfunction (for instance, loss of parent and domestic violence) before their exposure to CSE, and identification as a sexual minority is also associated with exposure to CSE (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017). A more recent nationally representative study from Haiti suggested that childhood sexual abuse is significantly associated with CSEC for both boys and girls (Silverman et al., 2022). A national study in the United States indicated that both male and female adolescents exposed to CSE had damaged physical and psychological health, and that exposure to CSE in adolescence increases the likelihood of functional limitations in females and depression in males (Barnert et al., 2022).

Intervening with children who have experienced CSE requires comprehensive efforts from different social-ecological levels, including individual determination, community services support and societal awareness and legislation (Finigan-Carr et al., 2019). Successful withdrawal of children from CSE requires cooperation among service providers in offering comprehensive wrap-around supports to address their diverse needs. There is a growing movement to protect girls and women from sexual exploitation (Volgin et al., 2019) but less of one for young men and boys. Non-governmental organization (NGO) programs which assist in the withdrawal of children from CSE and aid rehabilitation and reintegration are integral to addressing CSE in Nepal. For

years, international organizations such as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund and the International Labor Organization have supported local NGOs in Nepal in developing training manuals, strengthening programs, and building human capacity to serve the needs of abused and exploited children (Frederick et al., 2010). More recently, survivor-led programs (Bruhns et al., 2018) and victim-centred programmes (Walker & Quraishi, 2015) have been proposed to address the needs of children who have experienced CSE. To achieve this, engaging the target population to understand the need for the services and identifying the strengths and needs of the survivors is vital (Walker & Quraishi, 2015). However, there remains scant rigorous research documenting the provision and effects of NGO services assisting children to leave CSE. There is very little research devoted to this topic worldwide, especially studying aftercare services for children with trafficking experience (Muraya & Fry, 2016).

## 1.1 | The current study

Boys are an often-invisible group of those who experience CSE, as their exploitation often occurs in the informal commercial sex market in public spaces, and therefore they are not targeted by most of the prevention programs that focus on venues. The fact that boys are subjected to CSE often goes unnoticed and unaddressed: gender and power-related cultural norms may deter boys from acknowledging or reporting such instances of exploitation (Hawke & Raphael, 2016). Simultaneously, CSE of boys is not well-understood by the authorities and the public (Lynch, 2017): for instance, in Nepal, most governmental services targeting sexual crimes only focus on female victims (Yevsyukova & Varadan, 2017).

Focusing on the perspectives of young men who have withdrawn from or continue to work in CSE, the current paper aims to uncover key findings from boys with CSE experience, who have been under-recognized both in prior literature and in governmental and non-governmental support. Taking Kathmandu as a case, this study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of what helps boys to leave the sector and what helps them remain safe within the sector, and how to support their overall well-being. Their perspectives will help identify the services they currently receive, the services they need from NGOs, and service gaps, all of which will guide future NGO service development.

This study addresses three main research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What services are available for boys with CSE experience?
- RQ2: How do services facilitate boys to exit the commercial sex sector?
- RQ3: What are the future service needs for boys with CSE experience?

In the coming sections, first, we will introduce the research project and the different data components that we included in the analysis. Second, we will present the findings following the logic of the three research questions. Third, we will engage a discussion with the findings of the current study and prior literature, and also address

the primarily contributions, implications, and limitations of the present study.

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | The project and data

Due to the target population and the sensitivity of the topic, it is challenging to locate potential participants. To account for this, the study design draws on three primary methodological approaches to provide an overarching picture of the service provision and utility from the perspective of both service providers and recipients. The design combines data from three components: actor mapping, a survey with young men, and in-depth case studies with a sub-sample of the survey respondents.

The project was conducted in Kathmandu Valley, Nepal in 2017. The research project was implemented by an in-country NGO partner. The actor mapping component mainly addresses the first research question on the availability of organizational services in Kathmandu, and 68 NGO service providers were screened for this (Zug et al., 2017). A snowballing methodology was used starting with the two key partners in Nepal. Information was gathered through a structured questionnaire with the management staff in each organization's service centre. This approach allowed us to verify given information through observation and to take coordinates for geographical mapping. Each organization was contacted to verify the information provided in the questionnaire and to receive consent for publication.

The survey and in-depth case study analyses mainly address the second and third research questions on the benefits and future needs of organizational support for boys with CSE experience. Eligibility for the survey and in-depth case studies was based on participants identifying as male, being aged between 18 and 25, and having a history of CSE as a minor (i.e., when under the age of 18).

A standardized survey was conducted with 53 young men. The research and implementation team made the decision to include only those over 18, as the research protocol did not allow for active intervention with research participants. Had the research team recruited boys under 18 who were currently being commercially sexually exploited, this would have created a serious ethical dilemma regarding child protection. Some, but not all, of the young men had already exited the commercial sexual market. The respondents were recruited with the assistance of grassroots partner agencies with knowledge of the target population, in collaboration with the implementing NGO.

The questionnaire focused on the retrospective experience of participants who had worked in the CSE sector as children. The survey design included questions on participants' demographics, education, experiences of access to and effectiveness of services, barriers experienced in seeking assistance, and employment histories. The questionnaire also generated limited information on the profile of customers by exploring with participants the typology of men soliciting the sexual services of minors. The survey included a small number of targeted, open-ended questions to obtain more nuanced information of the lived experience of the respondents.

Three in-depth case studies were purposively selected from the survey participants, including two participants who had exited the industry and one who was continuing to work in the sector. These comprehensive case histories were highlighted to better understand the participants' nuanced and lived experiences as well as the longer-term trajectories of the respondents. This included an exploration of the pathways into commercial sex as well as exit pathways for respondents who no longer wished to be engaged in the sector. The in-depth interviews were facilitated by a member of the research team. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated for data synthesis and analysis.

The research project was reviewed and approved by Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC) and Griffith University ethics review committees. This is a sensitive research topic, and at all times the safety of respondents and staff were prioritized in the research. The implementing NGO has a child protection policy that informed the conduct of the research. Strategies were employed and considerations taken within the research design and implementation to minimize any negative impact of the research and prevent traumatization. Young people identified as being at greater risk of harm were provided with a referral to partner service providers to ensure that they received ongoing support. Informed consent was sought and obtained from all research participants. Participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time without penalty.

## 3 | RESULTS

In this section, we present the results from different data components in the order of the three research questions. First, drawing the data from actor mapping, we present an overview of the service providers that were available to support boys with CSE in Kathmandu. Second, applying data from the survey and case report, we illustrate findings from the service recipients' (i.e., boys with CSE experience) perspective. Within this subsection, we first present the sample characteristics from both the quantitative and qualitative components. Second, to answer the second and third research questions, we then address the benefits of NGO support in facilitating boys' exit from the industry, followed by the future service needs raised by boys with CSE experience.

### 3.1 | Service providers: the availability of services for boys with CSE experience

Our first research question is primarily descriptive, aiming to provide context regarding the service landscape in Kathmandu for boys who have experienced CSE. We analysed and summarized the actor mapping information as follows. First, we screened the list of organizations by their mission and service focus to identify organizations specifically targeting children with CSE experience. Second, we selected organizations that provide services for boys in the industry. The analysis highlights that 20 of the 68 (29.41%) service providers included in the project had services targeting children in CSE. Among

these, the majority work solely with girls and women with CSE experience, with only 10.29% ( $n = 7$ ) providing any services for boys. Notably, only one organization specifically works with boys in CSE.

Table 1 provides more detail about the NGOs that provide services for boys with CSE experience. Most of the service providers specified the age group of their target clients, and mostly focused on minors and young adults. The services were categorized into the following eight classifications: outreach, shelter, psycho-social counselling, medical services, vocational training, family reintegration, education, and legal support. All seven NGOs provided multiple types of services, and a few had multiple sites. For those with multiple sites, we only present information on the sites that provide services for boys with CSE experience. Among the service categories, psychological counselling, education, and legal support were the most available for boys (provided by six NGOs), while vocational training and medical services were the least available (provided by three NGOs). A map marking the locations of the organization listed in Table 1 is presented in Figure S1.

## 3.2 | Service recipients

### 3.2.1 | The characteristics of the sample

To explore how NGOs support boys' pathways out of CSE and their needs for future service support, we draw on both quantitative data from the survey and qualitative data from in-depth case studies.

The survey collected information from 53 young men who had experienced CSE as minors. Of these, 37 young men (69.81%) were continuing to work in the industry and 16 (30.19%) had exited the industry. Table 2 presents the sample characteristics of the young men in the survey. The average age of the young men was around 21 years old. The overwhelming majority, almost 90%, identified themselves as a sexual minority (straight: 11.32%; gay: 49.09%; bisexual: 11.32%; transsexual: 7.55%; transgender: 20.75%). The majority (87.50%) of the boys were currently single, 67.92% were not currently in education, and 77.36% had been involved in paid work in the past 30 days. Among those engaged in paid work, those still in the sex industry had a significantly higher level of income compared to those who had left ( $t = -2.637, p = .012$ ). Regarding living arrangements, the proportion living alone was much higher among those who had left the CSE industry (37.50%), while young men still in the CSE industry had a higher proportion (45.95%) living with parents ( $\chi^2 = 6.118, p = .047$ ).

The case studies included three respondents, all of whom who were 23 years old and currently employed. Case studies Rupen and Bijesh had exited the CSE industry, while Mark was still working in the industry.<sup>2</sup> Data from the case report was analysed by thematic analysis through a coding system to identify predominant emerging themes associated with each boy's experience of CSE. The data derived from the case studies was triangulated with the data drawn from the survey to assist in the development of a comprehensive insight into the various factors impacting pathways into and out of CSE.

### 3.2.2 | Benefits from organizational services provided to boys with CSE experience

Due to the nature of the recruitment in this project which relied on the grassroots organizations to facilitate access to the respondents, it is not surprising that around 96.15% of respondents had some prior experience of organizational services. As shown in Figure 1, organizational support was helpful to the development of skills including networking and self-improvement (communication skills, confidence, self-esteem, and dealing with personal problems and conflict). However, the contribution of material benefits (accommodation, income, vocational training, and education) from the organizations was perceived as insufficient. Less than 30% of the young men indicated that organizational support had contributed to their income (27.45%), vocational training (23.53%) or further education (19.61%).

To deepen the understanding of the role of organizational support in facilitating pathways out of CSE for boys, we specifically asked those who had left the industry to rate the factors helpful in facilitating their departure. As shown in Figure 2, of the 16 participants who had exited the commercial sex industry, half of them indicated that support from NGOs was crucial to their pathways out, while self-determination (75.00%), health concerns (50.00%), and discrimination from others (50.00%) were also important factors.

The case studies corroborate the results from the survey, in particular elaborating on the importance of health education, free condoms, and blood tests provided by organizations, which were helpful to the boys, as before receiving services from organizations they lacked safe sex knowledge and service accessibility. Here is an excerpt from the case summary of Bijesh (23, exited CSE).

Bijesh used to go to Blue Diamond Society (BDS; a leading organization targeting LGBTI people in Nepal) during the night. There he received counselling, services related to HIV/AIDS testing, other health-related treatment and life skills and personality development training as well. He also attended meetings and programs. He reflected that before visiting BDS he had never practiced safe sex with customers; it had always been without protection such as condoms and lubricants for anal sex. He had never known about safe sex practices until he visited BDS, who also informed him about HIV/AIDS. Nowadays, he visits BDS whenever necessary.

Services including shelter, referral to transit homes, health check-ups, counselling, social support, self-help, peer support, workplace visits, financial or material aid, life-skill training, and job placements were rated by over three quarters of the young men as helpful or very helpful in facilitating their leaving the CSE industry (see Figure 3).

Findings from the case study echo Figure 3 in highlighting the importance of support from NGOs for enhancing the well-being of the young men. The case of Rupen (23, exited CSE) illustrates this:

**TABLE 1** Services details of NGOs that provide services for boys with CSE experience.

| No. | NGOs                                           | Working Focus                                                                                                                                                                              | Details of Beneficiary Boys |                  |          |          |          |          | Shelter | Psycho-Social Counselling | Medical Services | Vocational Training | Family Re-integration | Education | Legal Support |
|-----|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---------|---------------------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------|---------------|
|     |                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                            | Age group                   | Service duration | Outreach | Outreach | Outreach | Outreach |         |                           |                  |                     |                       |           |               |
| 1   | Association Bhavisya                           | Provide handicraft training for three continuous years to young people                                                                                                                     | 14–20                       | 3 Years          | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓       | ✓                         | ✓                | ✓                   | ✓                     | ✓         |               |
| 2   | CWIN (Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Centre) | Child labour, street children, child marriage, bonded labour, trafficking of children, children in conflict with laws and commercial-sexual exploitation of children.                      | Any to 18                   | Varies           | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓       | ✓                         | ✓                | ✓                   | ✓                     | ✓         |               |
| 3   | Opportunity Village Nepal                      | Advocate for the rights of women and children, abolishment of child labour and child marriage, prevention of human trafficking, promotion of girl child education and empowerment of women | 13–25                       | Varies           | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓       | ✓                         | ✓                | ✓                   | ✓                     | ✓         |               |
| 4   | Saathi                                         | Address contemporary challenges being faced by Nepali women and empower women and children                                                                                                 | Any                         | 5 Months         | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓       | ✓                         | ✓                | ✓                   | ✓                     | ✓         |               |
|     |                                                | Drop-in Centre 1                                                                                                                                                                           | Any                         | 7 Months         | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓       | ✓                         | ✓                | ✓                   | ✓                     | ✓         |               |
|     |                                                | Children Home (Senior Boys)                                                                                                                                                                | 4–20                        | Varies           | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓       | ✓                         | ✓                | ✓                   | ✓                     | ✓         |               |
|     |                                                | Children Home (Junior Boys)                                                                                                                                                                | 4–20                        | Varies           | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓        | ✓       | ✓                         | ✓                | ✓                   | ✓                     | ✓         |               |

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

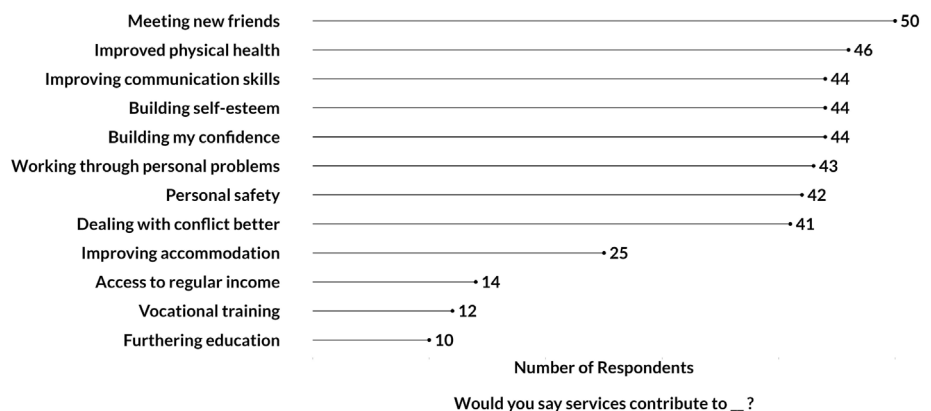
| No. | NGOs          | Working Focus                                                                                                              | Details of Beneficiary Boys |                    | Outreach | Shelter | Psycho-Social Counselling | Medical Services | Vocational Training | Family Re-integration | Education | Legal Support |
|-----|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|----------|---------|---------------------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------|---------------|
|     |               |                                                                                                                            | Age group                   | Service duration   |          |         |                           |                  |                     |                       |           |               |
| 5   | SathSath      | Work against commercial sexual abuse and exploitation of boys                                                              | 14-18<br>9-25               | 1 Month<br>20 Days | ✓<br>✓   | ✓<br>✓  | ✓<br>✓                    | ✓<br>✓           | ✓                   | ✓                     | ✓<br>✓    | ✓             |
| 6   | WONDER Work's | Provide skills, knowledge, funds and resources to help women and children who work in the adult entertainment sector       | Any to 18                   | Varies             | ✓        | ✓       | ✓                         | ✓                | ✓                   | ✓                     | ✓         | ✓             |
| 7   | YST Nepal     | Prevent and reduce the number of minors in commercial sexual activity in the adult entertainment sector and other sectors. | 12-18                       | 1 Year             | ✓        | ✓       | ✓                         | ✓                | ✓                   | ✓                     | ✓         | ✓             |

**TABLE 2** Sample characteristics of the quantitative survey (N = 53).

|                                           | Exited CSE<br>Mean (SD)/n (%) | In CSE<br>Mean (SD)/n (%) | Total<br>Mean (SD)/n (%) | $\chi^2/t$ |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|------------|
| Age                                       | 21.94 (2.02)                  | 21.16 (2.11)              | 21.40 (2.10)             | 1.242      |
| Religion                                  |                               |                           |                          | 1.873      |
| Hindu                                     | 11 (68.75%)                   | 26 (70.27%)               | 37 (69.81%)              |            |
| Buddhist                                  | 4 (25.00%)                    | 7 (18.92%)                | 11 (20.75%)              |            |
| Christian                                 | 1 (6.25%)                     | 1 (2.70%)                 | 2 (3.77%)                |            |
| Others                                    | 0 (0%)                        | 3 (8.11%)                 | 3 (5.66%)                |            |
| Sexual identity                           |                               |                           |                          | 4.716      |
| Gay                                       | 7 (43.75%)                    | 19 (51.35%)               | 26 (49.06%)              |            |
| Bi-sexual                                 | 3 (18.75%)                    | 3 (8.11%)                 | 6 (11.32%)               |            |
| Straight                                  | 1 (6.25%)                     | 5 (13.51%)                | 6 (11.32%)               |            |
| Trans-sexual                              | 0 (0%)                        | 4 (10.81%)                | 4 (7.55%)                |            |
| Trans-gender                              | 5 (31.25%)                    | 6 (16.22%)                | 11 (20.75%)              |            |
| Relationship/marital status               |                               |                           |                          | 0.462      |
| Unmarried/single                          | 14 (87.50%)                   | 32 (86.49%)               | 46 (86.79%)              |            |
| Partnered (boy/girlfriend)                | 2 (12.50%)                    | 4 (10.81%)                | 6 (11.32%)               |            |
| Living together as couple                 | 0 (0%)                        | 1 (2.70%)                 | 1 (1.89%)                |            |
| Current living arrangement                |                               |                           |                          | 6.118*     |
| Living alone                              | 6 (37.50%)                    | 6 (16.22%)                | 12 (22.64%)              |            |
| Living with parent                        | 2 (12.50%)                    | 17 (45.95%)               | 19 (35.85%)              |            |
| Living with others                        | 8 (50.00%)                    | 14 (37.84%)               | 22 (41.51%)              |            |
| Currently in education                    |                               |                           |                          | 0.007      |
| Yes                                       | 5 (31.25%)                    | 12 (32.43%)               | 17 (32.08%)              |            |
| No                                        | 11 (68.75%)                   | 25 (67.57%)               | 36 (67.92%)              |            |
| Involved in paid work in the past 30 days |                               |                           |                          | 0.073      |
| Yes                                       | 12 (75.00%)                   | 29 (78.38%)               | 41 (77.36%)              |            |
| No                                        | 4 (25.00%)                    | 8 (21.62%)                | 12 (22.64%)              |            |
| Income in the past 30 days (NPR)          | 11,750 (13191.77)             | 25589.29 (16038.18)       | 21437.50 (16383.30)      | -2.627*    |
| Ever received any organizational services |                               |                           |                          | 0.361      |
| Yes                                       | 15 (93.75%)                   | 35 (97.22%)               | 50 (96.15%)              |            |
| No                                        | 1 (6.25%)                     | 1 (2.78%)                 | 2 (3.85%)                |            |
| Total                                     | 16                            | 37                        | 53                       |            |

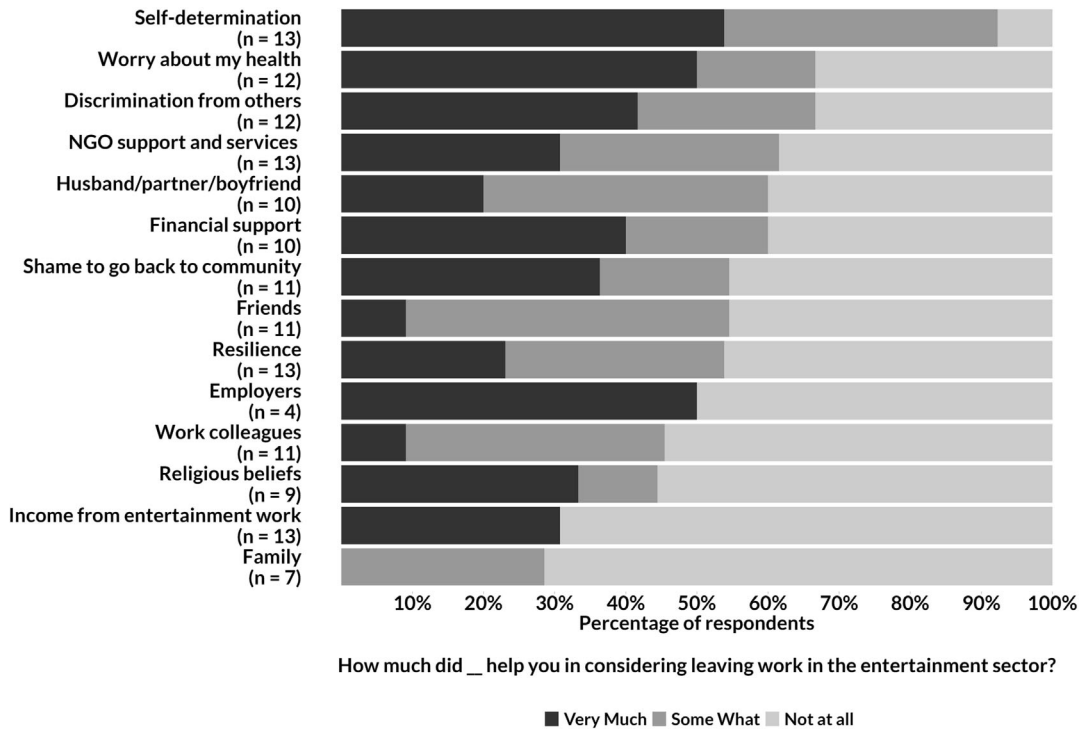
Note: Among the 41 participants who were involved in paid work, there is one missing observation in the variable *Income*. There is one missing observation in the variable *ever received any organizational services*.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

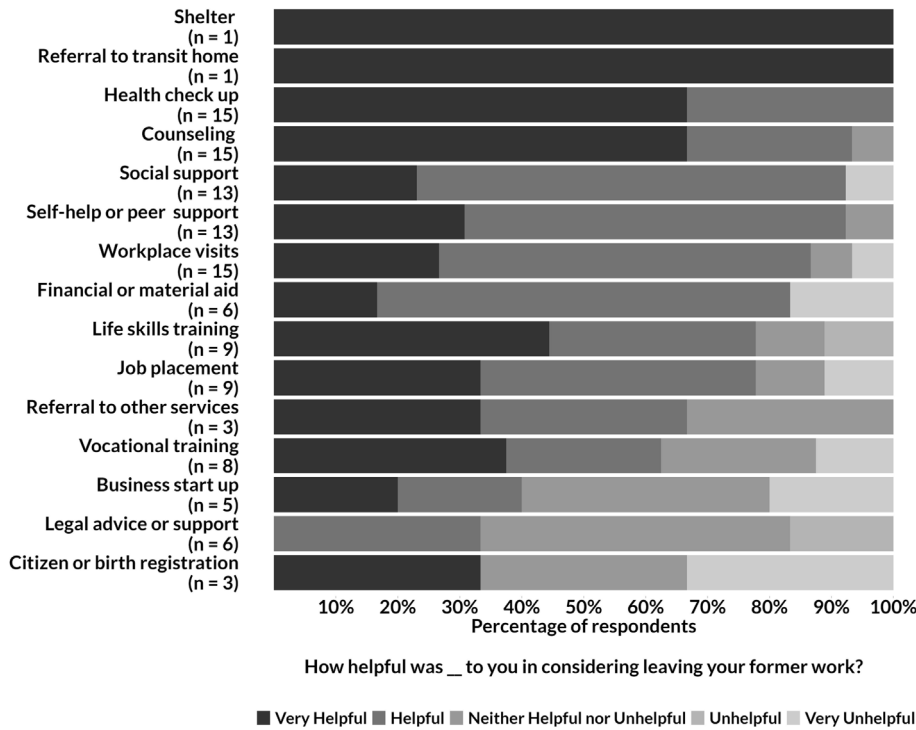


**FIGURE 1** Overview of the benefits of organizational services (n = 51).





**FIGURE 2** Factors that help boys with commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) experience in considering leaving the entertainment sector. Note: not every item is applicable to all participants, so the sample size varies across items. The sample sizes are marked under each item in the figure.



**FIGURE 3** Services that are helpful for boys with commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) experience in considering leaving the entertainment sector. Note: not every item is applicable to all participants, so the sample size varies across items. The sample sizes are marked under each item in the figure.

Rupen had made a few friends during college, who were of the same sexual identity as him and were working with an organization named SathSath that worked against the commercial sexual exploitation of children in Nepal. Taking his friends' advice, he visited SathSath,

where he got an opportunity to express his feelings and received some support. Besides singing, Rupen was also interested in beautician work as he loved to do makeup. His dream came true as SathSath supported him in taking a beautician course for three months.



### 3.2.3 | Future needs of organizational services for boys with CSE experience

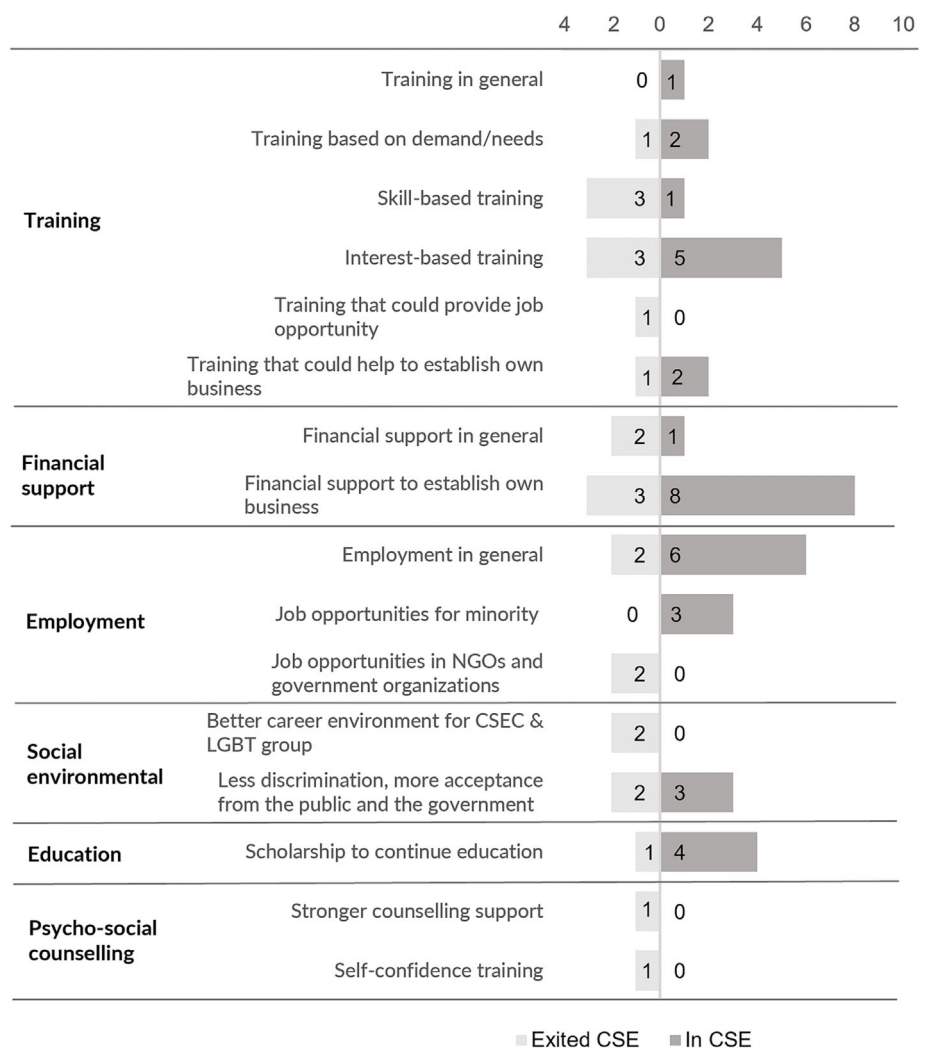
The survey included an open-ended question regarding potential services currently unavailable that could be helpful for boys leaving the CSE industry. This question was answered by 40 of the respondents, of whom 12 (30.00%) had left CSE and 28 (70.00%) were still in the industry. We conducted a thematic analysis of the answers from the respondents. Figure 4<sup>3</sup> presents six main themes identified from the open-ended question on future needs; we presented this question by asking whether the boys were still in the CSE industry and asking them to identify any differences in service needs for boys in different CSE situations. The themes identified include training, financial support, employment opportunities, social environment, education and psycho-social counselling. The second column identifies the sub-themes under each main theme.

Firstly, among all the future service needs, vocational training was clearly identified as the one most needed. Regardless of their having left the industry or not, all the young men called for more vocational training based on their needs and interests. Of the 12 respondents who had left CSE, nine mentioned the need for vocational training,

and those still in the industry also indicated the importance of this aspect (11 out of 28).

Second, economic determinants including financial support ( $n = 14$ ) and employment opportunity ( $n = 13$ ) services were also not sufficient for the boys. Most respondents (especially those still in CSE) needed support to help establish their own businesses or job opportunities that could facilitate a viable and sustainable livelihood. A few boys in our sample specifically brought up the need for job opportunities for minorities ( $n = 3$ ) such as themselves; jobs in governmental and non-governmental organizations ( $n = 2$ ) also seem to be great opportunities for boys with CSE experience. Similar findings were seen in the case studies, in that sustainable job opportunities outside the industry were critical to securing boys' ways out of CSE. Bijesh (23, exited CSE) described this:

When Bijesh started to feel a lack of interest in night-life, he was not able to quit instantly. He tried many times to quit commercial sexual activity but was trapped by having no alternatives. Then he found an organization in Kathmandu working for LGBTI rights and looking for LGBTI applicants. He applied and got



**FIGURE 4** Summary from thematic analysis of the open question on future service needs ( $n = 40$ , 12 exited commercial sexual exploitation [CSE], and 28 in CSE).

the job. From the first day of working in a new organization, Bijesh left his work as a sex worker in the threatening streets of Kathmandu.

Thirdly, in addition to economic determinants, the respondents called for a better societal environment with less discrimination and more acceptance from the public and the government for boys with CSE experience ( $n = 5$ ). They also called for a better career environment for boys with CSE as well as sexual minority groups ( $n = 2$ ). Similar needs were also identified from the case study of Mark (23, in CSE), who said he ‘... would like to draw attention to the need for a more open and friendly social environment’.

In addition, Bijesh's (23, exited CSE) interview suggested that:

LGBTI, MSM (men who have sex with men), and MSWs (male sex workers) are rejected by their families and are not supported by them. They might suffer more after the age of 40 when they cannot sell themselves for sex and have to live with family ignorance and rejection. Bijesh said that old age homes need to be established to address such problems.

Fourthly, educational opportunities or scholarships are needed to facilitate the further development of boys with CSE experience ( $n = 5$ ). This need particularly stands out among the boys who were still in CSE ( $n = 4$ ). Bijesh (23, exited CSE) mentioned that

*‘There are plenty of talented MSMs who are leaving their studies due to not having adequate funding for study. A scholarship program needs to be brought into practice targeting such groups. If I get a funding opportunity or support, I would wish to complete my degree’.*

This finding highlights how facilitating human capital development and enhancing the competitiveness of sexual minorities in the labour market is essential as it will not only improve the employability of these sexual minority young men, but will also decrease their risk of returning to the industry after having successfully exited. For instance, Bijesh (23, exited CSE), revealed a *high possibility of returning to commercial sexual activity if he loses his job and cannot find the next one immediately. As a backup plan, he has recently rented two rooms that can be used later for customers if he fails to find a new job.*

Lastly, two respondents mentioned they would need more psycho-social counselling services, and both were out of CSE. This may indicate insufficient counselling services were provided to boys who were no longer engaged with the commercial sexual industry.

In addition to collecting the service needs of boys with CSE experience, understanding the factors that hinder them from accessing NGO services is also crucial for future service programme design and implementation. In total, there were 51 boys who answered the question about barriers to accessing NGO support: 36 were still in CSE, while 15 already exited. As illustrated in Figure 5, shame was the most prevalent barrier to accessing organizational support for boys (exited

CSE:  $8/15 = 53.33\%$ ; in CSE:  $14/36 = 38.89\%$ ). The next one was service types offered by NGOs (exited CSE:  $5/15 = 33.33\%$ ; in CSE:  $13/36 = 36.11\%$ ). It echoes the findings above regarding future service needs from the boys with CSE experience, and it suggests that if services were provided that better met the needs of the boys, they might engage more with service programs. Furthermore, the location of the services (exited CSE:  $6/15 = 40.00\%$ ; in CSE:  $11/36 = 30.56\%$ ) and boys' fear about the consequences (exited CSE:  $5/15 = 33.33\%$ ; in CSE:  $10/36 = 27.78\%$ ) were also significant factors that delayed their access to NGO services.

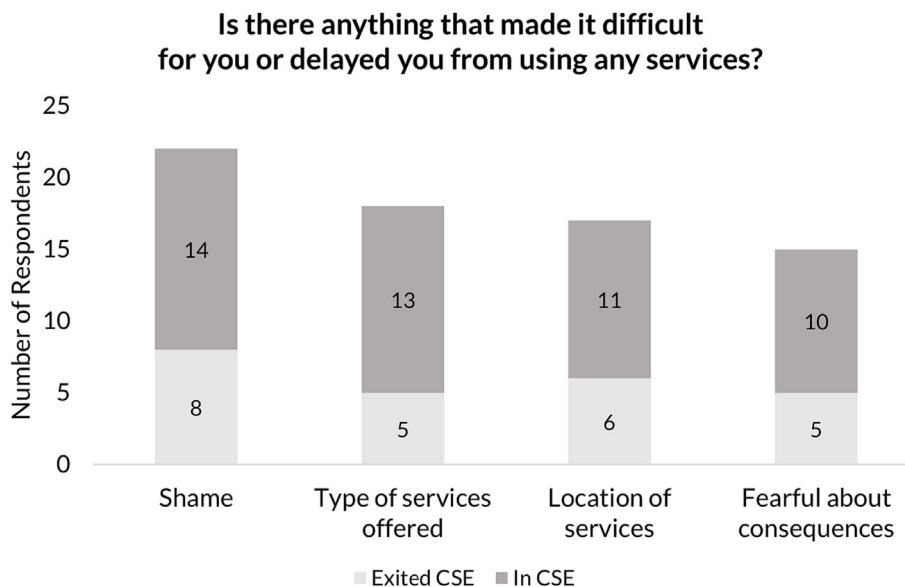
## 4 | DISCUSSION

This paper is one of the few focusing on understanding the practices of organizational support for boys with CSE experience in Nepal. There are several strengths to this study. By applying data from three components including actor mapping, a quantitative survey, and qualitative in-depth case studies, this study provides rich information from both the service providers and the recipients. It offers a comprehensive understanding of the availability, accessibility, and future needs for NGO support in facilitating boys with CSE experience to exit the industry. In addition, combining both the quantitative survey and qualitative case report data further facilitates a nuanced understanding of the life experience of boys with CSE experience. The analyses from quantitative and qualitative data can validate the results from both sides and increase the reliability and validity of the findings. Prioritizing the voice of boys with CSE experience is essential in building survivor-centred service systems (Walker & Quraishi, 2015). Therefore, this study makes a unique contribution by uncovering important factors related to how boys who entered the commercial sex industry as minors successfully and sustainably navigate their exits from the industry by young adulthood, as well as by highlighting the ongoing needs of boys with CSE experience and underscoring the importance of social and organizational support.

To be more specific, first, the study highlights an overall lack of support for boys with CSE experience as minors, especially for those in their 20s and older. There is a necessity for a continuity of service to support the lives of young men who have exited the industry, as leaving the industry to establish a new life is challenging and stressful. Prior evidence among girls suggests that the CSE experience may have long-term impacts on individuals' psychological well-being, as around 16% of the girls who exited showed high levels of depressive symptoms (Jordan et al., 2018). Findings from this study indicate the importance of taking a life-course perspective whereby men in different stages of their lives may still feel lingering impacts of CSE and social exclusion related to their sexual minority status, reinforcing the need for longer-term service planning.

Second, this study suggests that although service providers specifically targeting boys with CSE experience are limited, the existing services were beneficial in enhancing the well-being of boys with CSE experience as well as facilitating their paths out of CSE. Comprehensive coordinated services, including psychosocial support services and

**FIGURE 5** Barriers to accessing non-governmental organization (NGO) support ( $n = 51$ , 15 exited commercial sexual exploitation [CSE], and 36 in CSE).



educational/vocational training functions that enable viable livelihood options, are most beneficial for boys who have exited CSE. These were also identified as strong predictors in promoting pathways out of CSE and sustaining the exit from the sector. The qualitative case report findings indicate that in addition to NGOs that target CSEC, boys may also seek and receive services from NGOs targeting other related populations, particularly LGBTI communities. Therefore, for NGOs targeting boys with CSE experience, it is essential for there to be more liaisons with other key stakeholders in the development and implementation of advocacy-focused strategies to increase awareness of their unique needs. Greater cooperation among the network of service providers and stronger coordination of services to enhance service provision would be beneficial in meeting the needs of this population in the future.

Third, regarding future service needs, this study highlights the importance of economic determinants (especially training, financial support, and employment opportunity) that could increase access to sustainable livelihoods for young men who have recently exited or plan to exit the CSE industry. Unless their economic situation is significantly improved and has stability, individuals with CSE experience may easily fail in their efforts to achieve a free life (Wilson & Butler, 2014).

Moreover, understanding the barriers faced by boys with CSE experience to using organizational services helps service providers to target their services effectively. Previous research on girls' exits from CSE suggests that despite the range of NGO service programs operating in Kathmandu, it is crucial to ensure the accessibility of the services (Jordan et al., 2018). In our sample, the feeling of shame was the most significant barrier delaying boys' access to NGO services (exited CSE: 53%; in CSE: 39%). Boys with CSE experience appear to experience a higher level of self-stigmatization than girls—the proportion feeling shame was much higher than their female counterparts in related research by Jordan et al., 2018 in 2018 (exited CSE: 5%; in CSE: 11%). This might be related to certain common characteristics

of boys with CSE experience (e.g., sexual minority status) and the negative public perception of or discrimination towards boys with CSE experience. The feeling of shame could be exacerbated due to sexually transmitted diseases or LGBTI identity. The LGBTI population in Nepal may experience discrimination, stigma and social exclusion in all aspects of their lives, including employment, health care and family (Regmi & van Teijlingen, 2015). The young male participants in our study could be exposed to dual exploitation due to their sexual identity as well as their CSE experience, including a predominant lack of knowledge about sexual health that was clearly identified in this study. Dealing with shame is an important step for both children with CSE experience and the service professionals due to the embedded conservative cultural norms in Nepal (Volgin et al., 2019; Wilson & Butler, 2014). In relation to this, the intersectional disadvantage of being both a sexual minority and an individual with history in the commercial sex industry from a young age influences these young men to call for a more open social environment.

There is no doubt that all children with CSE experience need support and attention. However, boys' experiences have tended to be more hidden than girls', and many dominant social customs protect and monitor girls more closely—assuming, in part, that boys are better able to protect themselves (Lynch, 2017). Such gender stereotypes about masculinity may underestimate the vulnerability of males with CSE experience (Hill & Diaz, 2021). This study clearly identifies how young men are calling for a more accepting environment so that they can establish new lives, underscoring the importance of providing non-judgmental services and building a non-judgmental community environment for boys and young men with CSE experience (Bruhns et al., 2018).

The practical implications of this study are multiple and intersectional. First, understanding the needs of young people themselves is crucial in developing targeted survivor-led programs (Bruhns et al., 2018) and child-sensitive social protection (Frederick et al., 2010). Such an approach is suited to facilitating an exit from

CSE, building new lives, and maximizing the developmental outcomes of these boys. Mentorship programs organized by young men who have exited the industry with those working in the industry could be mutually beneficial. Second, this study reveals the need for a more open and accepting social environment for boys with CSE experience. In the meantime, public and media campaigns could be helpful in shifting attitudes towards CSEC (Jordan et al., 2021). Third, the study highlights the need for gender-specific programs, as the experience of boys subjected to CSE is often different from that of girls. There are also some policy implications from the current study. First, more policy reinforcement to protect underage children from CSE is fundamental. Boys are neglected by most of the legislation in South Asia (Wallin, 2016), which focuses more on girls regarding sexual exploitation, while law enforcement views males more as aggressors than as potential sexual victims (Lynch, 2017). Findings from this study provide further evidence for policymakers to consider more inclusive service schemes covering the invisible group of boys who battle with CSE. Second, the benefits of NGO service support in helping boys exit from the CSE industry may provide evidence for policymakers to support initiatives from service providers that target boys in need. This may include funding for research and programme development, subsidies for service delivery or assistance with integrating these service programs focusing on boys with CSE experience into the existing landscape of child welfare protection. In addition to the bottom-up service initiatives from NGOs, a national referral system might also be beneficial to protect boys with CSE experience (Yevsyukova & Varadan, 2017).

There are some limitations to this study. First, the actor mapping results can only be considered as a snapshot of the time in which they were completed (2017), and service providers are constantly changing, especially in donor-dependent, low-income contexts such as Nepal. NGOs or their projects may have been newly established or closed down, offices and staff may have moved, and the strategies of providers and their services might have changed. Furthermore, there may have been significant changes due to the global pandemic of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown (Sharma et al., 2020). Future studies may explore the impact of the pandemic on the landscape of organizational services in Kathmandu. The pandemic, the lockdown, and their consequences led to increases in violence, including sexual violence towards women and young girls (e.g., Dahal et al., 2020; Idris, 2020). However, due to the relative invisibility of boys with CSE experience, their situation remains unclear. Second, the participants of the survey and case studies were recruited by NGO partners, and therefore tended to have a certain level of organizational service exposure. Although a few participants in the survey indicated that they had not received any NGO service support, hidden children (likely to be the most vulnerable group) are clearly under-represented in this study. There is a challenge for service providers in the field to broaden their reach to boys with CSE experience. Future studies and NGO programs may need to devote more effort in approaching this hidden population. Finally, due to the sensitivity of the topic, the research was limited to providing a descriptive picture of service provision, benefits, and future needs. A more in-depth study exploring

the effectiveness of organizational services for boys with CSE experience should be a priority for future research. In relation to the limitations of our data collection approach and sample size, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to a larger population, but should be interpreted as an extended case study in the context of the timing and social context of the research project in 2017. Future study may consider a more rigorous longitudinal and comparative data collection approach to extend the implications more broadly.

Despite these limitations, this study has a unique strength: it is one of the few to look at organizational support specifically focusing on boys with CSE experience. We applied data from actor mapping of the service providers, in-depth case studies, and a quantitative survey of young men with CSE experience to address the important factors needed to facilitate the exit of boys from the industry.

Continuity in provision of follow-up services for CSE survivors is a challenging issue for service providers, and poverty, trauma effects, and the social stigma of individual with CSE experience (Volgin et al., 2019; Wilson & Butler, 2014) were identified as negatively impactful on boys' futures. From their perspective, to break the cycle of poverty and exploitation, the young men need more comprehensive service programs to develop their human capital and enhance their competitiveness in the labour market, especially given their gender identity and sexual minority status.

There is an urgent need for advocacy regarding boys who are trapped and relatively hidden in CSE in Nepal. This has relevance to the global issue of CSE. Clearly this is both a human and child rights issue requiring international attention and greater mobilization of resources, first to prevent its occurrence but also to enable evidence-based service provisions for a sustainable pathway out of CSEC, taking into account the unique needs of male survivors and sexual minorities.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data of this study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

#### ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was obtained from Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC) for the data collection and Griffith University for analysis of the data. Informed consent was sought from all research participants who were aged 18 years or older at the time of data collection.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This high number also includes customers.

<sup>2</sup> All the names used here are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> A detailed theme summary table with respondent IDs is presented in Table S1.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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