

Bhutanese Refugee Children's Research



Supported by
The National Lottery[®]
through the Big Lottery Fund



Refugee Youth Project

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1. Research Project

This child research project was implemented by Refugee Youth Project (RYP), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Bhutanese Refugee Children Forum (BRCF). It was funded by a grant from the Big Lottery Fund. 29 Bhutanese refugee children worked in groups of four or five, with the support of an adult assistant, to conduct research on issues affecting children in their own camp. In total, seven different research topics were explored in the various camps. In January 2008 young project participants presented research findings to refugee community members in their camps and to humanitarian agency staff in Kathmandu. The final part of the project involved children planning, conducting and evaluating pilot activities to help refugee children experiencing problems.

The research methods included interviews, focus group discussions, drawing activities, essay writing, observation and photograph discussions. All children received training on ethical issues. Research informants' details were kept confidential and all names were changed when reporting findings.

2. Refugee Situation

Following a political crisis in Bhutan in 1990, many southern Bhutanese of Nepali origin were evicted from their homeland and arrived in Nepal where, with the help of local people, they settled on the banks of the river Maidhar. Due to a lack of health services, sanitation, proper food and water, many children and adults died by the river, before the refugees moved to seven camps which are administered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Nepal government. It has now been over one and a half decades since political crisis in Bhutan resulted in the deportation of over 100,000 Bhutanese citizens, many of whom suffered arrest, torture and imprisonment before fleeing their country. The refugees live in seven UNHCR-administered refugee camps in Jhapa and Morang districts in eastern Nepal. There are 109,311 registered Bhutanese refugees in Nepal (Refugee Co-ordination Unit November 2007). Amongst the total refugee population there are 37,241 children (BRCF Central Office Report, December 2006). There are many different agencies, which help with camp maintenance, ration distribution, health, education and other programmes.

3. Services and Support for Bhutanese refugee children

Bhutanese refugee children have access to valuable support and facilities which are free of charge and widely used. These services are implemented and managed by members of the refugee community with funding and assistance from international agencies. Services for Bhutanese refugee children include:

- Education (from kindergarten to class 10)
- Healthcare
- Disability support
- Daily pre-school services (CPC) for 3 – 5 year olds
- Bhutanese Refugee Children Forum (BRCF)

**Bamboo Huts in Beldangi 2
Bhutanese Refugee Camp**



Child Researchers enjoying an end of project picnic



4. Research Overview

Challenges Experienced by Refugee Children

Despite the above support, certain refugee children experience difficulties. These include children living in single parent families, children living without their parents, children living in families where there are economic problems (e.g. due to sickness or disability in the family) or children living with alcoholic parents. Although services are provided in the camps, it is still necessary for each household to have a cash income to meet basic needs, such as sufficient vegetables, clothing and school uniform, which are not provided in rations. In families where parents are ill, disabled, or absent, it can be difficult to manage financially.

Work and Time Constraints

Many children living in such situations have to spend large amounts of time on domestic work and/or income generating activities. This leaves them with less time to spend on their studies or on other play and leisure activities. Children living in adverse circumstances explained that they face problems with time management (trying to do domestic, income generating and school work) and are often in trouble for being late to school or may fail school exams due to lack of time to study.

Insecurity

Children living without their parents or with only one parent who may be absent working for long hours also face a lack of security in their homes as there may be no adults present, leaving young people (especially girls) feeling vulnerable to attack or exploitation. Some children experience problems when they become sick and there is no adult to look after them or take them to hospital.

Discrimination

Some child participants in our research shared their experiences of discrimination and humiliation with child researchers. Differently able children¹, children living in single parent families or without their parents (who are often referred to as orphans - *tuhuro/tuhuri*) and working children have all faced discrimination, such as name-calling, chasing, teasing, being excluded by others, and feeling that people from their society consider them to be inferior. Our research also found that girls face particular forms of discrimination, especially in domestic work, where they are usually required to do more work than their male peers. Girls are also more likely to drop out of school than boys, following early marriage.

5. Vulnerable children's coping strategies and community assistance

Despite the above problems experienced by some refugee children, our research found that not all children living in potentially adverse conditions experienced such difficulties. For example, despite having many responsibilities, some children felt able to manage their time to allow them to contribute to domestic work, income generating work and also to do well in school. Further, children living in single parent families or without their parents explained that they often receive help, support and encouragement from neighbours, teachers and friends (e.g. assistance with domestic tasks).

The following summaries present the findings from research teams in each camp:

Beldangi II: The Impact of Child Playing Centres (CPCs)²

Research Objective: to assess the impact of CPCs on children's development, raising awareness of children's needs and encouraging the community to demonstrate greater responsibility towards children in the camps.

Research Participants: Parents of children attending CPCs, school-age children, school teachers, BRCF members, Bhutanese Refugee Women Forum (BRWF) members, wider community members.

Key findings:

The impact of CPCs

- 1) CPCs are a valuable learning and development experience for the majority of children. Positive impacts on children include good discipline, good manners, basic language skills, and an ability to make friends easily.
- 2) CPC attendance makes beginning school easier. Children tend to interact with peers confidently, succeed better academically and participate more in class.
- 3) CPC attendance tends to make children better behaved and more cooperative and active within the family and community.
- 4) However there are two noted negative impacts of attending CPCs. First, at three years old, children may need more attention and care than CPCs can offer; and parents would be better placed to provide this. Second, it can be challenging for escorts to accompany children to CPCs safely and easily.

Reasons for not attending CPCs

- 1) Illiteracy: parents do not realise the value of sending their children to CPCs.

Recommendations:

- 1) **Community members need to be made more aware of the benefits of their children attending CPCs. Their concerns about the CPCs' benefits must be addressed.**
- 2) **The agencies should make CPC attendance more attractive by introducing benefits such as school uniform, food and bigger buildings.**
- 3) **Those who escort children to and from CPCs must be paid more and take greater responsibility so that the community does not consider the children en route to CPCs a nuisance.**

Pilot activities undertaken:

- Coordination meeting for CPC staff and for camp sub-sector heads, to advise them of report findings.
- Workshop for adults who escort children to CPCs, to make them better informed of children's psychological development to improve care and support.
- Sports activities for children who attend CPCs.
- ID cards for children who attend CPCs to make them more visible.



Child Playing Centre

² Pre-school centres for 3-6 year olds, first established in 1996 and currently maintained by Caritas Nepal.

Sanischare: ‘Differently Able Children’³

Research Objective: to identify the needs, concerns and expectations of differently able children, to assess how the community responds to differently able children, and to identify and assess the support currently available.

Research Participants: differently able children and their parents, neighbours and other community members, school counsellors, teachers, BRCF members, BRWF staff, Disability Programme Centre staff (run by Caritas Nepal)

Key findings:

Needs, concerns and expectations of differently able children

- 1) Differently able children face extra difficulties in school, expressing their feelings, travelling, and participating in community events.

Attitudes towards differently able children

- 1) Attitudes vary towards differently able children.
- 2) Some able people behave positively towards differently able children by: caring for them, encouraging them to use their skills and trying to understand their situation.
- 3) Some able people behave negatively towards differently able children by: calling them names, not playing with them, telling stories about them to frighten people and humiliating them in front of others.

Existing support provided by the Disability Programme centre

- 1) Sports and basic exercises
- 2) Vocational training e.g. cycle and radio maintenance, flower garland making
- 3) Sign language classes
- 4) Provision of basic equipment
- 5) Referrals for medical treatment

Recommendations:

- 1) **Disability day should be celebrated in the camps every year to help people understand disability and change negative attitudes.**
- 2) **There should be more assistance for differently able children, including: increasing facilities at the Disability Programme centre; increasing vocational training; providing better medical treatment; increased employment opportunities to suit their abilities; provision of basic equipment such as shoes and clothing.**

Pilot activities undertaken:

- Message board and tour to inform camp of research findings.
- Street drama to raise awareness of differently able children’s needs.
- Theatre performance for differently able children.
- New facilities at the Disability Programme centre.



Focus Group Discussion on Differently Able Children

Beldangi I: Single Parent Children

Research Objective: to identify and collect data about single parent children, to explore the issues affecting these children, and to analyse the attitudes of other community members towards them.

Research Participants: children with one parent, BRWF members, school counsellors and teachers, agency staff, other community members.

Key findings:

Number of single parent children in the camp

- 1) 419 children in the camp are single parent children. Reasons include the death or long-term absence of one parent, the mental illness of one parent ('Parents at Risk') or second marriages.

Needs, concerns and expectation of single parent children

- 1) Single parent children face particular difficulties: insufficient time for study, creative activities and socialising with friends due to household duties, financial difficulties, and, for girls in particular, a feeling of being less secure.
- 2) Single parent children often have to work to earn money after school and at weekends, but most still find time to go to school.
- 3) Single parent children all struggle with the loss of their parent, often without channels of support.

Attitudes of other community members towards single parent children

- 1) Single parent children are often considered more responsible, obedient and hard working than children living with both parents.
- 2) But many community members do not understand the difficulties they face.

Recommendations:

- 1) **Encourage other children to be more cooperative and helpful to single parent children.**
- 2) **Ensure that single parent children are given sufficient opportunities to participate at school.**
- 3) **Ensure that single parent children have access to basic necessities such as food.**

Pilot activities undertaken:

- Street dramas and a message board to raise awareness.
- Distribution of school uniforms to vulnerable single parent children (allocated by a selection board).

Differently able children below the age of 18

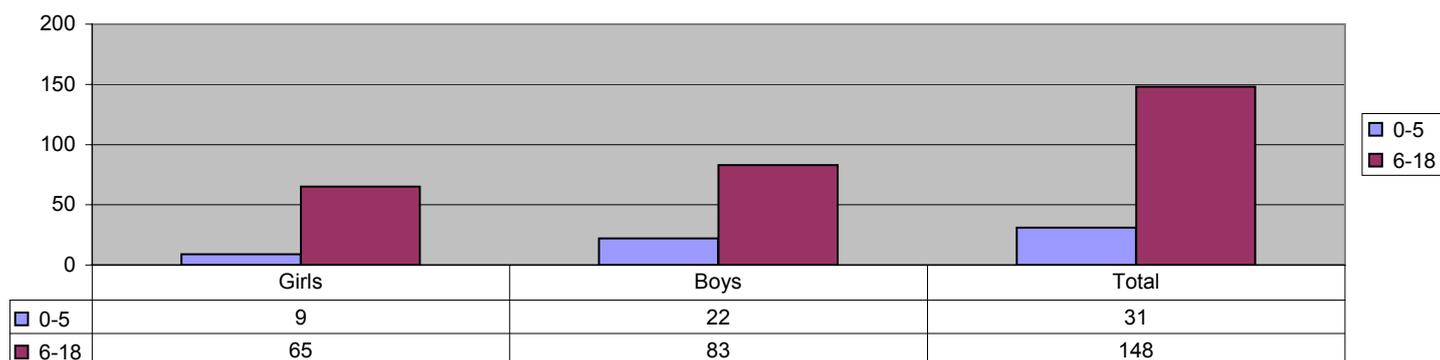


Table 1 (Source: Disability Programme Centre, 2007)

Three categories of single parent children

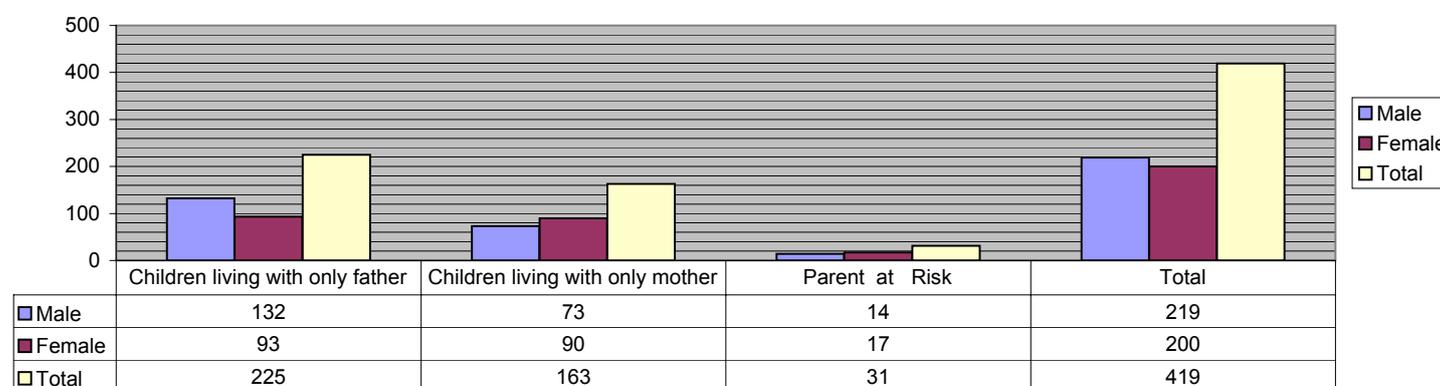


Table 2 (Source: Field Research, December 2007)



Child Researcher Presenting Findings on Child Labour in Beldangi 2 Extension Camp

"I do not face problems at school even though I have been late for assembly many times. My teachers understand that this is because I have to send my brothers and sisters to school before I go myself."

17 year old girl from single parent family explaining how looking after her siblings affects her school attendance.

"I have never been involved in anti-social activities, but many of my friends are experienced in fighting, love affairs, quarrels and bunking class."

16 year old girl from single parent family.

Khudunabari: Children without Parents

Research Objective: to collect data on the number of children living without parents, to identify particular problems faced by these children and to determine whether these differ from other children's problems, to find out what work they do, and to identify the support available.

Research Participants: children without parents, their friends and relatives, BRWF members, teachers, school counsellors, agency staff and other community members.

Key findings:

Number of children without parents

- 1) The research revealed 105 children in the camp without parents. Their parents had died, gone missing or remarried.

Needs, concerns and expectations of children without parents

- 1) Children without parents suffer difficulties: discrimination, increased vulnerability to abuse by children and adults, problems finding time to attend school due to household duties, lack of care when they become ill, financial hardship, inadequate food, clothing and shelter.
- 2) Children without parents are obliged to find work outside of school, including carrying stones, weaving, spinning and driving rickshaws.

Attitudes of community members towards children without parents

- 1) Some display positive behaviour: treating children without parents as equals and helping them out with difficulties.
- 2) Some display negative behaviour: other relatives give children without parents excessive domestic duties, speak harshly to them and discriminate against them.
- 3) Agency staff provide some special care for children without parents, such as providing clothing and establishing a support group where these children can meet.

Recommendations:

- 1) **Increase support for children without parents (e.g. clothing, food, light).**
- 2) **Keep accurate data of the number and location of children without parents.**
- 3) **Launch awareness programmes to reduce discrimination towards children without parents and to raise awareness of their rights.**
- 4) **Provide vocational training programmes for children without parents.**
- 5) **Involve children without parents in activities run by agencies and BRCF.**

Pilot activities undertaken:

- Message board to raise awareness.
- Distribution of school bags to children without parents.
- ID cards to help identify children without parents.
- Orientation with camp leaders to raise awareness about the needs of children without parents.

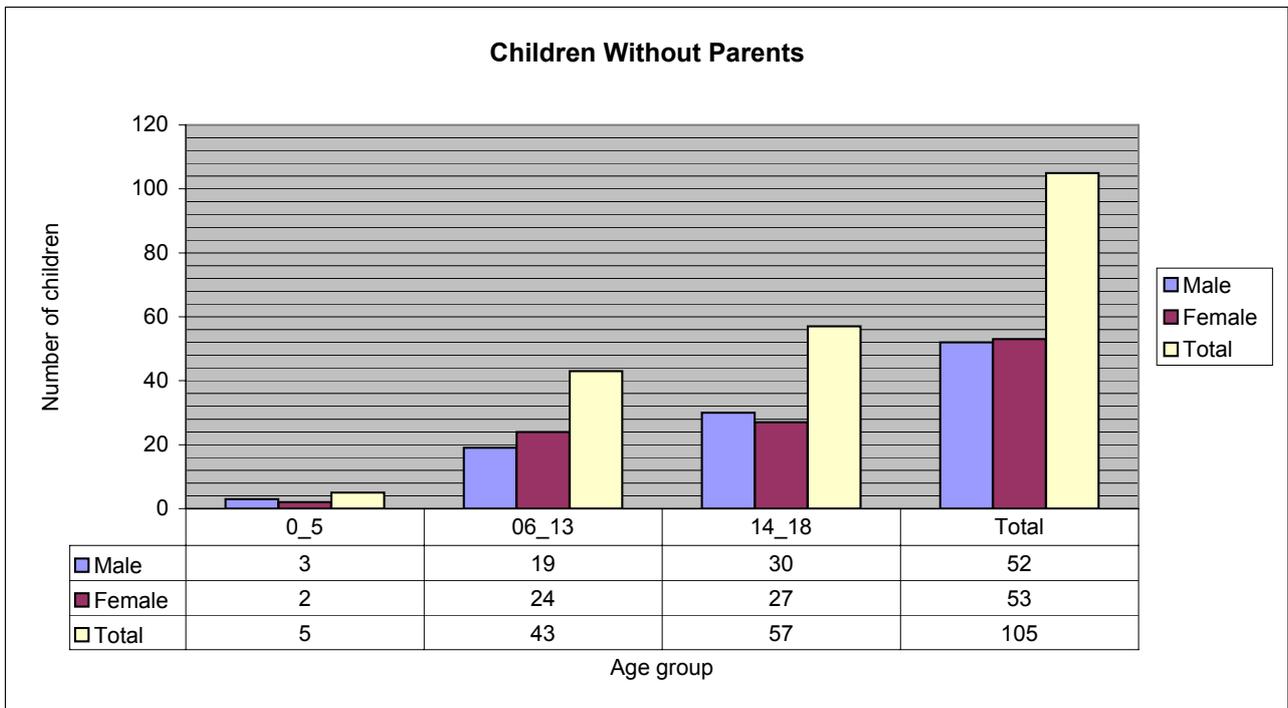


Table 3 (Source: Field Research)



Children in the Child Playing Centre

"I generally wake up at 5:00am and start doing household work. Because of this I don't get time to read and do my homework. At night I generally sleep at 10:00pm."

"Sometimes I become very late to go to school and generally on Wednesdays, I don't go school as there is ration distribution for us."

"In exam time, we cannot manage time to read."

"When we go to school late, our teacher scolds us and gives us punishment."

"There are problems in maintaining school time as there are lots of household work to do."

Quotes from children without parents.

Goldhap: Elopement

Research Objective: to collect qualitative and quantitative data on elopement, to gather information about the effects of elopement, and to raise awareness about elopement.

Research Participants: children who have eloped, teachers, parents, mothers-in-law, agency staff and wider community members.

Key findings:

Number of eloped children

- 1) In the camp, there are 17 boys and 17 girls who have eloped.

Reasons for elopement

- 1) Reasons listed for elopement include: economic necessity, failure in school, following national Bhutanese tradition, being in love with someone with whom no marriage is arranged (fear of people finding out about this), girls becoming pregnant before marriage, ignorance about contraception and family problems.

Advantages and disadvantages of elopement

- 1) Advantages: enjoyment, fulfilling sexual desires and love affairs, extra domestic support for the boy's family, ability to have children early.
- 2) Disadvantages: dropping out of school (especially girls), increased domestic work (especially for girls), resulting family feuds, economic difficulties and threats from the eloping partners' parents.

Recommendations:

- 1) **Introduce an awareness programme about the effects of elopement.**
- 2) **Introduce training programmes for children (in school, if possible) about family planning and the impact and effects of elopement.**
- 3) **Give vocational training to eloped girls.**
- 4) **Allow children who drop out of school after elopement to complete studies later.**

Pilot activities undertaken:

- The children planned pilot activities to raise awareness of elopement. However, a serious fire in March 2008 destroyed much of the camp infrastructure and almost all refugees' huts were burned. Therefore it was not possible to complete pilot activities in this camp.

Beldangi II Extension: Child Labour

Research Objective: to identify the causes of child labour, to explore different types of child labour, to identify the problems faced by child labourers in their studies, and to assess the impact of child labour on their activities.

Research Participants: child labourers, other children, parents, teachers and school counsellors, BRWF members, BRCF members, wider community members.

Key findings:

Causes of child labour

- 1) Causes identified: poor economic conditions, parents who are disabled, old or otherwise unable to work, large families with many children to support, and polygamous marriages resulting in mothers needing extra support.

Types of child labour

- 1) Types of child labour include: household work, spinning, weaving, bus-conducting, breaking stones, building construction and working outside the camp as domestic workers.

Impact of child labour

- 1) Child labour has several negative impacts: children dropping out of school or achieving poor results in school, increase in the illiteracy rate, damage to children's health, possibilities of physical and mental abuse of children.
- 2) Child labourers tend to receive lower wages than their adult counterparts.

Recommendations:

- 1) **Child labour should be added to the school curriculum.**
- 2) **Agencies should organise training and orientation about child labour.**
- 3) **Programmes should raise community awareness about child labour and child rights.**

Pilot activities undertaken:

- Message board, pamphlets, training and street dramas to inform camp residents about the needs of child labourers and its effects.



Young researchers present their findings in Kathmandu

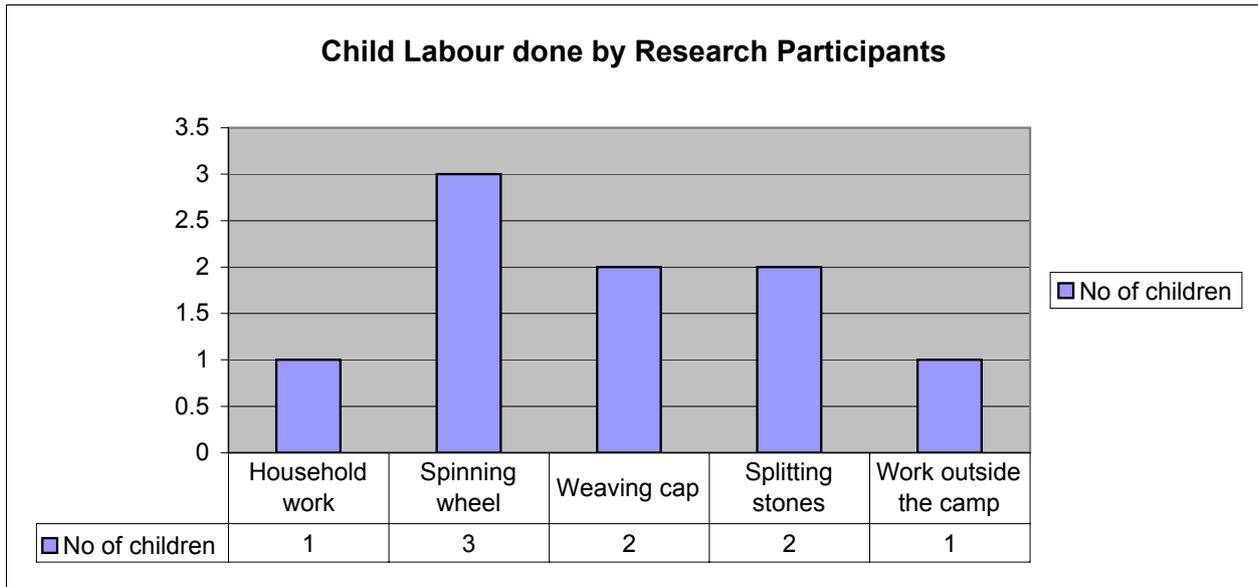


Table 4 (Source: Field Research, December 2007)

"I go to do daily work near Ratwa River to collect stones. I earn 10 Rupees daily by giving stones to elder workers and I give this money to mother because our family is in a poor economic condition. My father does not work as he is old so he cannot go outside the camp for work."

10 year old male, school going child.

"I am 12 years old. I go to the local village and bring sugar cane and other things to sell in the camp and give the money to my mother. But my mother drinks and comes home late at night and punishes me by keeping me outside the house without food."

12 year old boy.

"When I receive money from the wool factory I go to Damak to buy Kerosene to study at night."

"My father is deaf and my mother is old so I work everyday spinning wool so that I can buy vegetables for my family."

"There are 8 family members in my hut so I work everyday spinning wool and my two sisters do this also."

Quotes from working children.

Timai: Domestic Work

Research Objective: to gain an in-depth knowledge about the extent and types of domestic work undertaken by children and to understand its impact on the children.

Research Participants: children, parents, teachers, agency staff, BRWF members.

Key findings:

Types of domestic work

- 1) Types of domestic work undertaken by children include: cooking, collecting cow dung and firewood, cleaning, unloading rations, fetching water, construction, looking after younger siblings and washing clothes.
- 2) Girls do more domestic work than boys.

Causes of domestic work

- 1) Girls do more domestic work for the following reasons: to prepare for responsibilities after marriage, to be hospitable to guests, to abide by traditional rules, to meet social obligations and expectations, to assist their parents, to supplement their husbands' incomes and to be considerate to their parents.
- 2) Children state that they do domestic work because: their parents are alcoholics, old, disabled, missing or dead; they do not have many siblings or they are the eldest sibling; or parents, especially step mothers, force them.

Views on domestic work

- 1) Most adult community members consider domestic work a selfless service for the community and family, which is good training for children's adult lives. It keeps children busy, deterring them from involvement in dangerous or undesirable activities.
- 2) Many children state that their parents force them to do domestic work.

Impact of domestic work

- 1) Domestic work has negative impacts: being late for school and struggling to keep up with studies, less time to socialise with friends, tiredness and difficulties concentrating, lack of confidence and increasing tendency towards early marriage.

Recommendations:

- 1) **Awareness programme and training on the negative effects of domestic work, particularly for girls.**
- 2) **Make students more aware that studies should not be neglected.**
- 3) **Avoid punishing children because of the problems they face due to their domestic work obligations.**

Pilot activities undertaken:

- Identify children worst affected by domestic work, through home visits.
- Launch an awareness programme for parents and the wider camp.
- Street dramas to raise awareness of the impact of domestic work, and in particular to reduce gender discrimination.



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