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Hope to Despair: Children and Young People's Lived Experiences of Trafficking Abuse

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Abstract

Despite the increasing awareness of child trafficking and modern slavery as a growing societal issue, little is known about the direct experiences of children and young people in trafficking situations. This paper contributes to this gap by reporting findings from a qualitative study that was conducted in England with young people who had lived experiences of child trafficking. Drawing on personal testimonies through in-depth interviews, this paper reports how children's journeys of hope turned into despair. Children realised they were deceived when promises made did not materialise, they were subjected to multiple and severe forms of abuse and became aware they were used, sold and resold for traffickers' gain. This paper considers how in seemingly powerless situations, some degree of children's agency was exercised. Various coping mechanisms and tactics were developed as children tried to gain some knowledge and power to survive. This research provides valuable insight into the lived experiences of trafficking abuse, enabling practitioners to understand the dynamics, processes and acts children and young people are exposed to. The findings emphasise the importance of recognising the critical role that connected peers play in the trafficking process in helping others to cope, survive and ultimately escape.

Keywords: child abuse, child trafficking, coping, exploitation, lived experience, peer support

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Introduction

Child trafficking is defined as abuse in the internationally recognised UN Trafficking Protocol (United Nations [UN], 2000) with traffickers use of means of threats, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of position of vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation (such as sexual exploitation, forced labour or slavery) (Liempt, 2006, cited by Gearon, 2016). Policy and guidance for practitioners working with vulnerable children define child abuse in main categories as physical, sexual or emotional abuse and neglect, in addition to sexual and criminal exploitation (Department for Education [DfE], 2018). Long checklists of behavioural 'indicators' are provided in identifying child trafficking abuse (DfE, 2011). Globally, child welfare practice is grappling with trafficking screening tools and indicators. The USA, for example, has focused attention on child sexual exploitation, negating other forms such as labour exploitation or how trafficking intersects with migration (Pate *et al.*, 2021). Absent from these broad categories of abuse, and the screening tools and checklists that have been developed are children's own perspectives.

Most child trafficking research to date has been conducted with practitioners working with trafficked children or analysis of case files (Pearce, 2011; Westwood, 2012; Melgar *et al.*, 2021), researchers favouring the less ethically challenging route of drawing solely on professional's views. Despite children's right to participation, and to have their voices heard, research conducted with children addressing their lived experiences of trafficking remains scarce, reflected in anti-trafficking work more generally. To date, UK child trafficking policy and practice have been shaped without knowledge directly from children (Gearon, 2016) which has fundamentally limited the development of child-rights-based anti-trafficking efforts. Listening to trafficked children and how practitioners respond to them, findings reported elsewhere (Gearon, 2019) has revealed the consequential *additional* harm caused to children through policies and practices that lack a child-centred approach. Thus, listening to children's lived experiences of how they experience trafficking abuse is an important first step in understanding the problems they face, to assist the development of anti-trafficking efforts grounded in children needs, not those assumed and determined solely by adults. Emerging studies with young people affected by trafficking and exploitation have begun to illustrate how young people view transactional 'exchange' processes in sexual exploitation (Hallet, 2017), or neutralised their experiences of gang related violence in criminal exploitation (Robinson *et al.*, 2019). Despite this, there are no known peer-reviewed studies that detail children's experiences how they understood that they were trapped in trafficking and abusive situations, the extent and nature of abuse

experienced, or the *in situ* coping mechanisms or survival strategies they developed. This paper fills that important gap in our knowledge.

This unique qualitative study aimed to privilege young people's voices, through listening to their testimonies and lived experiences of child trafficking and exploitation. Working alongside young people, all of whom had been trafficked from abroad to the UK as children, this research shows how journeys of hope, fuelled by promises turned into abuse and exploitation. The findings provide a deeper insight into how being deceived and subjected to multiple and severe forms of trafficking abuse, children became aware they were manipulated and commodified as 'products' for traffickers' gain. These findings are used to extend our knowledge about how the trafficking process is experienced from children's perspectives. Coping strategies such as compliance, avoidance tactics and adaptation provide valuable insights into peritraumatic responses to trafficking abuse, critical to children's survival. The unexpected findings of the role of *other* children in trafficking situations demonstrate how peers mobilised limited resources and provided vital assistance to children in need of protection, including escape. Implications for practice are considered in relation to how practitioners can reach and support these connected peers, with recognition of the protective roles they can play in responding to trafficking abuse.

Study design

The scarcity of research with trafficked children as direct informants is in part attributable to methodological challenges of gaining access to a 'hard-to-reach' and vulnerable population (Goździak, 2008, cited by Gearon, 2016, p. 110). This study negotiated access to young people within existing trafficking assistance services, the only likely sites where trafficked persons can be accessed for interviews in an ethical and safe manner (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2010, cited by Gearon, 2016). Previous research indicates young people's lack of trust in adults due to traffickers and groomers methods of gaining trust and then abusing their power (Lefevre *et al.*, 2017) posing challenges for researchers. Compounding this, Hallett (2017) found young people experience a further erosion of trust in child protection professionals and carers due to relationships driven more by surveillance than building trust. Due to this, recruitment to the study required regular contact with young people to build relationships and trust, facilitated by the researcher conducting fortnightly groupwork with peer groups over a period of 4 months. Working closely with trafficking services, groupwork served young people's needs (to promote social bonding between peers and facilitate empowering ways for young people to express themselves) coupled with the objective to engage young people and seek participation in the study. To not further

marginalise an already vulnerable group, the choice of improvised dance as groupwork method was driven by young people's preferences and agreed collaboratively. Improvised dance took the form of physical circles with one person performing dance moves as an individual creative expression, copied by others, and rhythmically repeated into a collective dance, until a new set of dance moves was offered by another. The dynamic 'embodied circles' (Gearon, 2016) supported individual self-expression without judgement, with others validating each contribution through incorporating the moves into the group dance (p. 116). This encouraged group collaboration and built trust with one another as creative expressions were received openly, valued and affirmed by others, and became a shared experience.

Participants were subsequently invited to take part in an in-depth interview to share their personal journeys. The criteria for inclusion included having been separated from parents/primary caregivers, aged between 14 and 21 years, trafficked whilst under 18 years of age and were no longer experiencing abuse or exploitation. Criteria for exclusion to the study were also defined to include young people at continued risk from traffickers, involved in child protection investigations, or providing evidence in criminal prosecutions. The total number of young people who participated in the study was 20; eighteen identified as female and two male (Gearon, 2016). At the time of participation, young people were aged between 15 and 21 years old, all participants had migrated to the UK as minors, the majority arriving by illegal means, instructed by traffickers to travel on false documents or to hide in vehicles (Gearon, 2016). Participants' country of origin is detailed in Table 1.

Of the total sample of twenty young people, ten provided in-depth interviews about their lived experiences of trafficking, which this paper draws on. A further ten young people participated in focus groups about their experiences of professional services, reported elsewhere (Gearon, 2019). Qualitative semi-structured interviews used open guiding questions to allow participants to answer in their own way and at their preferred pace. A total of twelve interviews were held with ten young people. Despite all interviewees not speaking English as their first language, young people consented to interviews being conducted in English, having self-determined English language proficiency to convey their experiences in rich detail. Pseudonyms have been used to protect identities.

This study was guided by international ethical principles for social work research (IFSW, 2018) and anti-oppressive research (Strier, 2006) with primacy for the welfare of participants. Ethical concerns were discussed with participants in open dialogue on potential risks arising from identification, re-traumatisation and to manage expectations of the research relationship. This allowed young people to take an informed decision and gauge their readiness in participation. Mitigating the risk of

Table 1. Participants' country of origin

Country of origin	Number of participants
Nigeria	10
Somalia	2
Ivory Coast	2
Guinea	1
Uganda	1
Ethiopia	1
Eritrea	1
Syria	1
China	1
Total participants	20

identification required full anonymity in all processes: recruitment and fieldwork notes, mobile phone contacts, transcription and presentation of data. Young people's preferred emergency contacts and key professionals involved were identified prior to interviews providing swift access to specialist support if required. A clear distinction was made in researcher's role differing from usual 'helping' relationships to not raise unrealistic expectations. All interactions were guided by young people's preparedness to convey their experiences. Creating an 'emotionally safe space' (Gearon, 2016, p. 104) in interviews to listen to personal accounts required relational practice, skills of empathy and the ability of the researcher 'to sit with' (ibid.) distressing accounts of abuse. During interviews, at times young people became upset recalling abuse, but after an option to pause was offered, in all cases, young people wanted to continue and did so without further distress. The offer to contact the researcher afterwards was made, if the need arose to discuss any aspect of the research. Bearing witness to multiple accounts of child abuse and deep immersion into a difficult subject also required an active self-care plan as recommended by Middleton *et al.* (2021), to prevent vicarious trauma. The study received ethical approval of the University of Bath Social Sciences Ethics Committee, conformed to social work research ethical standards (IFSW, 2018) and participants gave informed written consent.

A social constructivist framework guided the study attending to unique personal experiences whilst acknowledging that individuals interact with a socially constituted context (Rodwell, 1998), shaped by contemporary constructions of childhood and adolescence. Thematic analysis was adopted for 'identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79) as an inductive process, strongly linked to data. Reflexivity was required to acknowledge the differences in characteristics between researcher and participants, as sources of power differentials and how this could influence interpreting findings. Participants experienced a range of adverse childhood experiences, separation from families, a lack of stability in immigration status,

were mostly black and had little education, all starkly contrasting with the privileged position of the researcher. Attention was paid to redress power imbalances through relational and egalitarian practice, collaboration and active participation of young people at all stages, to privilege their voice, aligned with anti-oppressive research practice (Strier, 2006). Seeking participants' input on representations of their personal journeys and themes was essential to address the intersubjective nature of the process and to ensure fairness in interpretation. Despite vast personal differences, there were no disagreements in representations of data, young people provided validation that their experiences were 'captured excellently' (Gearon, 2016, p. 128) and accurately.

Journeys from hope to despair

Poverty, a lack of education and economic opportunities, and political upheaval or war, were features of children's experiences prior to migration (Gearon, 2016, p. 147). An opportunity to leave behind adverse circumstances and seek alternatives were presented to children and their families when they encountered adults who promised them education, work, somewhere to live or a safe passage abroad (ibid., p. 148),

> She asked me if I can come, if I can come to her daughter to be helping her kids and the housework for her. While she's working. And there, she was going to send me to school… to be learning stuff like, do her … and she will pay me some money every month and send me to school (Isabella).
>
> … she promised me that she is taking me to city to continue my study (Jessie).

Several participants recalled how these promises of education, work and better life opportunities generated excitement and hope,

> …when I heard of all the good things, the education and all that. I was really excited, yeah. I go back to school, you know like stuff that I wanted to do and think it's going to happen (Maya) (Gearon, 2016, p. 142).
>
> I never had someone that tells me before that she's going to send me to school, in my life, I haven't been to school, so excited because she promised me to come over here to go to school (Isabella) (ibid., p. 147).

Traffickers raised children's expectations, fuelled by these promises, to gain their trust and manufacture a willingness to travel. Coupled with adults and family members telling them should go, children left their homes with these adults with high hopes of the future.

All young people described how traffickers they had come to trust, after promises of education, work or a safe migration route, started to abuse their power over them and mistreat them (Gearon, 2016).

Children then found themselves in situations where the promises made by adults did not materialise (ibid., p. 149) as they hoped,

> I now notice that I was just sleeping, sleeping, eating, so I ask her that, 'when am I going to the school like you promise me?', because that's what she promised me before I left my village (Jessie) (ibid., p. 147).

Young people recalled how they realised they faced a situation completely different to what they had been promised, when mistreatment began. For some, this occurred as soon as they left their villages,

> I never knew until I, until I get there you know… When I get to [city in Nigeria] they put me in the house with other guests. There are some boys amongst us, you know. They was using us, they bring other boys, other men to the house, to use us (Kayla) (Gearon, 2016, p. 149).

For others, journeys of a safe migration passage had turned into despair during dangerous migration routes at the hands of people traffickers. Participants described long journeys without food or water and crossing seas in overladen boats, experienced worse than the war at home 'like we were dying… complete disaster' (Ammar). Young people experienced financial extortion, physical assaults, threats by armed gangs and being drugged to keep quiet,

> they give us like one medicine, make the children sleep. They push mummies to give this medicine to children. Even when children is going to start to woke up, they give again. To sleep again (Ammar) (ibid., p. 327).

En route to the UK, Grace reported helplessness, in being mistreated in the 'jungle' migrant camp in Calais waiting to cross the Channel (Gearon, 2016),

> you are in the hands of the…what they called… yeah with the agent, so you can't do nothing…otherwise I was going to be in trouble (Grace) (p. 150).

For other young people, the shock of journeys of hope turning into despair occurred upon arrival in the UK, when mistreatment began,

> So, I met another life entirely, that was horrible…they were selling me to men. Men. I started facing horrible lifetime, sleeping with the man, beating me, asking me to sleep on the floor, you know, I can't stand the life anymore (Jessie) (Gearon, 2016, p. 336).

Three of the young people interviewed were tasked with domestic work immediately upon arrival to the UK, set long hours of work, cooking, cleaning, childcare and looking after elderly people in private homes (Gearon, 2016). Isabella described how from the first day of arrival she was required to start work at 5 AM every day and subjected to physical mistreatment,

> No matter how tidy, no matter how hard job you did at it, she come start fighting, slapping, and pulling your head, every day, fighting, fight every time' (Isabella) (ibid., p. 334).

After a week of 'working' in the house, Hayley realised she was in a different situation to that she had expected and asked her trafficker,

> What's happening? Is that the main reason why I am here?...that's not what you told me. That's not what they told me, that's not what my uncle told me I should, I will come and do. She was like, 'listen, I didn't pay £2,000 for you to come and sleep and for you to have free reins'... (Hayley) (ibid., p. 150).

Children and young people hence came to realise that promises were not upheld, their dreams did not materialise and journeys of hope turned into something else entirely. These turning points of realisation came as they started to be subjected to mistreatment through sexual assaults, rape, physical abuse, labour exploitation and financial extortion.

Experiences of trafficking abuse

Young people described how they experienced trafficking abuse as various and repeated combinations of sexual abuse, physical abuse, labour exploitation, emotional abuse and severe forms of neglect (Gearon, 2016). Several young people interviewed described experiencing multiple forms of abuse including sexual abuse, use of threats and physical abuse,

> he tried to sleep with me, then I said no... Then the man beat me, bang...then he banged my head onto a wall (Olana) (ibid., p. 330)

with abusers taking advantage of young people being dislocated and isolated,

> 'if you don't cooperate with me, I will kill you here. Because I've paid money'...
>
> I don't have anyone in my life... using that advantage to threaten me. The fact you don't have anyone, 'we will kill you and nothing will happen' (Jessie) (ibid., p. 152).

The language young people used to describe these assaults included being 'being hit' or 'beatings', which were often regular and for no reason (Gearon, 2016),

> He, I think it make him feel like a man any time he touched me. So he felt like, because, like, because like being beaten for no reason? (Maya) (p. 151).

Young people reported how many times, the physical assaults were severe in nature with young people sustaining facial and head injuries (ibid.),

> she came from nowhere, just punched me in the eye, really hard that my eyes just ache. For now my vein pop, there was blood all inside my eye, it was swollen like and, and she continue hitting me… (Hayley).
>
> I was being beaten..my whole face was all big, by my madame's husband…he mashed his hand with my face, my face was so huge! (Maya) (p. 151).
>
> …fighting and the pinching and the cutting me with her nails, and using my head like, pulling my hair…oven and the fridge together, using my head to be banging on those two things (Isabella) (ibid., p. 334).

Several young people experienced the use of implements in physical assaults causing significant injuries or use of weapons (Gearon, 2016). Young people had scars from such abuse; Hayley was burned by a cooking pot when her trafficker's food did not turn out as she hoped (ibid., p. 151),

> she just took the pot and she threw it on me and I had a burn, a scar… She just threw it on my, on my tummy and I don't mind telling you, the burn, I couldn't go to the hospital because I didn't have any GP, so I had to kind of treat it at home (Hayley).

Isabella was whipped regularly with a long cable, with wires exposed,

> So that's what she used to beat me with, I don't know if you can see it from back here, to here [showing long scars across her body] (Isabella) (ibid., p.152).

The use of weapons by people traffickers terrified Ammar and his younger brother,

> they say again, again and again who open his mouth we will kill him… they have it like automatic guns… Yeah, and I say 'oh my god, we are really in problem, if they kill me, don't speak, that mean don't speak' (Ammar) (p. 152).

In addition to violent acts committed against young people and regular emotional abuse, young people's basic needs were also severely neglected (Gearon, 2016) with a lack of food, shelter and clothing. Young people reported how they were denied access to education or healthcare for injuries. Several participants reported they were malnourished with little time to eat due to the level of work they were expected to do in people's homes (ibid., p. 154). Isabella described how she was 'so skinny', allowed only a thin porridge to eat and sometimes given permission to 'pick' at leftovers from meals that she had cooked for rest of the household (ibid.). This was experienced as inhumane,

> I wasn't treated as a human when I was in that situation, I was like a dog, because the food the children spat on, they said I should take that (Maya) (ibid.).

Young people experienced abasements, being left outside to sleep with no shelter or adequate clothing (Gearon, 2016). Three young people interviewed reported being neglected in this way as a form of punishment for objecting to abusive treatment (ibid., p. 334),

> ...she pushed me in the garden and told me to sleep in the garden. So I am always, like four or five times a month, I am always there because she is always sending me inside the garden. When it's winter, when it's cold, sometime I would empty the bin bag, I use it to cover myself, and when she came and seen that bin bag on me, then she come and throw everything, tea everything... (Isabella).

Another young person was treated similarly when she tried to resist further rape,

> he pour water on my clothes, do want he want to do... I was crying and crying and crying... Yeah wintertime. Yeah he pulled me outside, at midnight. I was very chilled me, I don't even have clothes...the clothes I have was what I bought from Nigeria like summer clothes... I was shivering with cold, I was crying, lie down the floor, with my small wrapper... you know I was crying, trying to get to sleep... I was crying, crying where he put me, no heater... And then he leave me there and bring other men to use me, you know (Kayla) (ibid., p. 154).

Participants reported how being subjected to such abuse was humiliating and degrading,

> she always say that I animal anyway, she always call me animal. She always say animal, I animal. But in this country, when I left her ...they look after animal better than the way she treat me (Isabella) (ibid., p. 154–155).

In addition to trafficking abuse experienced as acts of violence, and severe forms of neglect, many participants provided accounts of trafficking processes they experienced, how they were bought, sold and resold by traffickers (Gearon, 2016, p. 156). Several young people reported how they were constantly reminded that they had been 'paid for',

> 'it's my money that I used to bring you here, and you're going to do anything...It's my, my money'. That thing was very powerful in her mouth, 'my £3,000'...
>
> ...all the time she always talking about £3,000... Yeah, that it's her money that she used. Even when her friend was telling her to take me to school, she say 'It's my £3,000, it's not your money that I used to bring her here. So whatever I do, it's my time', you know? (Maya) (ibid., p. 157).

Young people explained how they were made to feel indebted for 'fees' paid by traffickers (ibid., pp. 156–157), without end in sight of paying off debts owed,

> all the money is spent, you haven't did the job. You haven't do the job you supposed to be do, so, you have to stay (Isabella).
>
> doing the house girl work and everything that I was always thinking that my job would finish very soon, and it never finished, you know? (Maya) (ibid., p. 169).

Young people's testimonies revealed how traffickers sold them for sex to other adults or exploited children's labour for additional profit, from cleaning work and child-care (Gearon, 2016). Three participants reported how they were aware that they were to be re-sold, and plans were in place for them to be re-trafficked abroad from the UK (ibid., p. 157). One young person witnessed a trafficker receive a 'down payment' of expensive designer goods from a future exploiter in the USA and overheard the arrangements,

> telling him that I'm being well trained, that I know how to cook, know how take care of children, I'm very respectful, so they describing me to him (Maya) (ibid., p. 157).

Young people interviewed were treated as commodities, owned and used as objects of value to traffickers, for profitable gain,

> I felt like I was, like a, like a product. A product… she owned me, so I have to do everything she said (Maya) (ibid., p. 158).

Coping strategies

Young people reported how their attempts at resistance through defiance or objection to abusive treatment were often responded to with harsher 'punishment' (Gearon, 2016, p. 160). However, several young people described how they managed some degree of agency within their constraints (ibid.). They developed and used certain strategies whilst experiencing abuse, finding ways of lessening the harm or adapted and sought ways to gain some knowledge and power (ibid., p. 161).

Young people experiencing sexual exploitation reported how doing exactly as you were told, subjugated into compliance, was a form of coping, as a matter of survival (Gearon, 2016),

> All I know is just that it's child abuse. Even I know that is child abuse because I'm thinking 'oh I don't mind for me to survive', that because, that person say 'if you don't allow us to sleep with you, you will be, you will be killed. You will be thrown away'. Your corpse, you know my dead body…corpse will be thrown in the water, so I'm just doing the sex because I want to survive (Jessie) (p. 168).

Another interviewee reported mistreatment at the hands of her trafficker during migration, also experiencing that compliance was a choice between life or death,

> So I was like 'ok I have to do that one'. So when he says something I have to say 'ok' to everything. So otherwise, maybe I would not be here today… (Grace) (ibid.).

Maya, who remained in her exploitative situation for six years, explained that it took her time to develop some coping strategies (Gearon, 2016) such as snatching some time to herself,

> I go into the toilet, and say I am pooing, but I'm not pooing. I just using that to sit down because I hadn't sit all morning (Maya) (p. 162).

To avoid certain tasks, Maya learnt to,

> say I'm on my period. Because they always saw me like when I'm on my period don't touch my things, don't touch this one, like I will spoil it. So, I like to tell them I was on my period (Maya) (ibid.).

Maya adapted to the trafficker's perception of her that she was dirty during her period and used this tactic as a coping method, for example, when she did not want to perform juju (Gearon, 2016) on other children when told to by her trafficker.

Other ways children adapted to their situation took the form of trying to educate themselves to take some action to end their abuse. Hayley tried to speak to adults to ask for help but could not make herself understood. Held in domestic servitude with no access to education, she had to learn English from watching programmes on TV (Gearon, 2016),

> Like when everyone was watching a movie, they would tell me to work like drying, washing, folding, so I used to sneak on the stairs, like stealing [time] to watch movie what they're watching. And when they called me I would run back upstairs… (Hayley) (p. 162).

In addition to taking a short break, this adaptation enabled her to learn some words in English and ask for help later. Similarly, another young person reported how she learnt how to call the police from television programmes, although when she had the courage to do so, she dialled the wrong number not getting through (Gearon, 2016),

> Yeah and I called the wrong police! [laughing] I called the American one! (Maya) (p. 162).

Participants reported how they adapted through learning how to eavesdrop on traffickers' telephone calls and conversations. Learning how to eavesdrop using another telephone handset out of view, young people overheard plans to re-traffick them abroad. The little knowledge they had gained through these actions was enough to act as impetus for escape (Gearon, 2016, p. 161), as they feared continuation of abuse in others' hands.

Help from other children

A significant theme emerged of children receiving support from *other* children and young people (Gearon, 2016 p. 162). Several participants were trafficked with other children or had contact with others in private homes, trafficker's own children, visitors or were tasked to look after strangers' children. These other children and young people mobilised support for those who were trafficked and subjected to abuse and exploitation (ibid., p. 163).

Acts of kindness were reported from other young people,

> the sister was really nice to me, she used to buy a lot of chocolate a lot of biscuits... I like chocolate biscuits ... She gave me a lot. So I used to hide it where I sleep under... I used to eat that (Maya) (ibid., p. 163).

One young person reported how the only person showing her kindness was the trafficker's daughter aged 17 years, a frequent visitor to the home. In absence of these children being allowed to form friendships, interacting with peers in the community or attending school, these kind gestures were 'the only pleasant interpersonal interactions children had, in otherwise very difficult circumstances' (Gearon, 2016, p. 163).

Other children and young people also played a critical role in enabling children to leave their abusers (Gearon, 2016, p. 163). Several participants reported how other children and young people facilitated escape directly or indirectly (ibid.). Children in Maya's household taught her to read and write, secretly. They also passed on vital information about plans of re-trafficking Maya, informing her decision to escape her abusers. Jiao's escape was made possible as another girl she was trafficked with formulated a plan (ibid.), and between them, tricked their captors to escape. Jessie was able to escape after a young person attending the house recognised Jessie's abuse and aided Jessie to run away (ibid., p. 164). She was shown how the door latch worked, given a note to find the 'office home' (Home Office) with some cash and advised on the right time to escape (ibid.),

> if not for her, I would still be dead...with [name], enslaving me (Jessie).

Discussion

Having set off with journeys of hope for better life opportunities, education, work or a safe passage abroad, children experienced a point of realisation that the adults they travelled with, deceived them (Gearon, 2016, p. 170). When promises made by traffickers did not materialise, coupled with being subjected to various and multiple forms of abuse,

children became aware that traffickers had manipulated their desires for their own purposes (ibid.),

> trafficking means, you know, people make a wish, wish for things, I mean dream about some things that they [traffickers] know is not going to be real. And that's exactly what happened (Hayley) (p. 171).

The findings sadly and unequivocally revealed how young people who experienced being trafficked for sexual exploitation had a clear understanding they were being 'used' and 'mistreated' by being sold for sex (ibid., p. 168). These journeys quickly turned from hope to despair with sexual assaults, rapes and physical abuse viewed as clear transgression of their bodies. For those children held in domestic servitude, initially, as hard as the labour was, children carried out their 'work' with ongoing hopes of benefiting in the future. To some extent, children's socio-economic and cultural backgrounds normalised labour exploitation at the beginning of their journeys, given experiences of reproductive and productive work at home. However, young people were clear that being tasked excessive work, being beaten for no reason, sustaining injuries and inhumane treatment was for many, a turning point and clear departure from previous experience, acting as catalyst for seeking help. A key feature highlighted by young people as a vulnerability factor was a culturally specific notion of childhood obedience. Being raised as obedient children referent to *all* adult authority, a form of 'age patriarchy' (Hendrick, 2005), facilitated an easier abuse of adult/child power relations. As Boyden and Mann (2005) suggest, children's own understanding of risk and resilience in extreme situations, across different cultures brings new understanding, and further illuminates how different constructions of childhood across the globe impact power relations in children's lives (Hendrick, 2005).

The findings revealed how all participants experienced adult abuse of power; emotionally, psychologically, physically and financially. These findings extend our knowledge how trafficking abuse is experienced from children's perspectives, as multiple, repeated and severe in nature. Multiple rapes and sexual assaults were often experienced alongside psychological and physical methods of coercion; young people were threatened and controlled by fear of more violence. Violence took the form of beatings, use of implements or weapons resulting in significant injuries. Previous studies have addressed the prevalence of domestic slavery-like conditions in different parts of the world; 'petites bonnes' (young housemaids) in Spain and Morocco (Melgar *et al.*, 2021), 'restavèks' (live-in servants) in Haiti (Haydocy *et al.*, 2015) to 'Omo-Odo' (child domestic slaves) in Nigeria (ECPAT UK, 2016). The findings reported in this study contribute to this body of research by illuminating from children's direct experience not only that labour exploitation was experienced (as domestic servitude or 'sex' work), but also *how* this occurred. Under-

reported in such detail elsewhere, children's experiences reveal how trafficking abuse was experienced as acts of cruelty, violence and neglect and processes of exploitation. The acute experiences of multiple abuse, severe neglect and degradation were coupled with young people becoming aware of the processes of deceit, manipulation, isolation and commodification of being bought, sold and re-sold.

Peritraumatic knowledge of children's responses to abuse has been limited, as studies have relied on retrospective reports from adults on familial child sexual abuse (Katz and Barnetz, 2014; Katz *et al.*, 2021). Extending our understanding of children's responses to multiple forms of abuse, the findings in this study revealed coping strategies adopted within child trafficking situations termed by Katz *et al.* (2021) as submission, avoidance, and adaptation. Submission or coerced 'compliance' was detailed as a matter of life and death, a choice of survival. Avoidance strategies developed by children included snatching some time to take a short rest, manoeuvring to find a little space, on the stairs or in the toilet. Other tactics reported were making excuses, such as using menstruation to avoid tasks. Adaptation as a coping mechanism was instrumental as a survival strategy. Children adapted by navigating around abusive adults, hidden from their view, learnt a foreign language and how to call the police or ask for help. With little knowledge of what was happening around them, children adapted to their environment by learning to eavesdrop and gather information from other children, sometimes vital, informing their motivation to escape. Thus, these findings uniquely contribute to understanding peritraumatic responses to child trafficking abuse, the types of coping mechanisms developed 'whilst' experiencing abuse and how adaptation was key to survival.

The unexpected finding of the role other children and young people played in helping children in trafficking situations illuminated how they tried to alleviate suffering of their peers (Gearon, 2016, p. 255). The significance of this 'is how children and young people managed to mobilise support and resources within oppressive adult power relations' (ibid.). Other young people encountering participants in this study took positive action, taught English to others and passed on critical information, demonstrating capacities to act on their own initiative and instigate change, in the absence of trusted adults (ibid.). The findings further revealed how these connected peers facilitated escape for children, directly or indirectly, not without increased risk to themselves, 'a critical expression of self-determinacy and agency' (ibid., p. 256). This draws our attention to recognising the value of the role that other children and young people play in helping, befriending and providing critical assistance to children in need of protection. Peer-to-peer interventions developed within bystander approaches that address intimate partner violence and sexual assaults on campuses in the USA (Sprang, 2020) and the UK (Fenton and Mott, 2017; Gainsbury, 2020) have valuable insights to offer in

mobilising peer support in hidden populations. Peer learning models emerging to address gender-based violence (Williams and Neville, 2017) and sexual exploitation (Buck *et al.* 2017) indicate positive outcomes. Buck *et al.*'s (2017) evaluation of a female peer mentoring programme found that mentors provided a protective point of connection, mentees felt supported and critically, young people at risk became visible (p. 2). The findings in this paper provide further evidence that connected peers have a valuable role in supporting those experiencing abuse, and bystander interventions focusing on child trafficking and exploitation could be developed further to reach both those experiencing trafficking abuse and connected peers.

Conclusion and implications for practice

Young people's testimonies have provided a deeper insight into how journeys of hope can turn into abusive and exploitative situations. Trafficking abuse was experienced as severe acts of cruelty, violence and neglect and processes of deceit, manipulation and commodification. Children developed coping strategies such as avoidance tactics, befriending other children and learning to adapt to improve their situation. The findings support how children and young people can be agential, even in abusive and oppressive situations. Accounts of adaptation and survival strategies led to proactive manoeuvring to avoid abuse and in many cases, escape. Knowledge of these coping behaviours and strategies extend our understanding of peritraumatic responses to child trafficking abuse.

The study revealed the significance of connected peers in the critical role they play in helping children to escape, but also acts of kindness (Gearon, 2016, p. 262), helping children to cope in extremely difficult circumstances. This has two important implications for practice. Firstly, for child welfare practitioners conducting assessments the mapping of extended social networks of children and young people is recommended. Similar to peer mapping recommended to disrupt peer-on-peer abuse (Firmin, 2019), connected peers who are protective and 'safe' could be mapped. Identification of connected peers and seeking opportunities to hear from them as to what is happening in their worlds could provide valuable information to identify trafficking and abusive situations. Developing safety plans to include these peers could mobilise or sustain peer support to those experiencing abuse whilst addressing risks to connected peers. Secondly, much like previously hidden issues harming children such as bullying, 'sexting', online abuse and intimate partner violence have come to the fore, there is a compelling case for trafficking and exploitation abuse to be made more visible and exposed as a major issue children and young people face in modern society. Bystander

approaches are a promising vehicle to assist hidden populations and mobilising peer-to-peer networks could serve an important function in mainstreaming the harms and risks of child trafficking and exploitation. Peer support interventions within bystander approaches could play a vital role in reaching hidden children who may already be subjected to trafficking abuse and different forms of exploitation, but also to educate other peers as a valuable form of preventative work. Peer mentoring models that address trafficking and exploitation also have potential to reach connected peers. As the findings in this study indicate, peers who may be confidantes and aids to other young people who are subjected to trafficking abuse, already provide vital assistance. Supporting and reaching these connected peers through peer-to-peer interventions could facilitate earlier identification and escape of children experiencing trafficking and exploitation abuse.

Further research is required how bystander and peer mentoring approaches can be developed with, and for young people and expanded to address multiple forms of exploitation and trafficking abuse. Furthermore, males are notably under-represented in child trafficking research. Limitations to the findings and practice implications are acknowledged, as based on a small-scale study of a heterogeneous sample of young people (Gearon, 2016). That said, this study has made important steps in listening to children and young people's experiences of child trafficking abuse and exploitation, coping mechanisms and peer support, enhancing our understanding of agency and resilience in very difficult circumstances.

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