How did your early research motivate you; how did you start getting hints of the question about how stress effects the lives of teenagers?

In 1999, Inga Dóra and I started working together and at the time she was starting the Youth in Iceland project, doing surveys among young people in Iceland, understanding substance abuse and risk behaviors and predictors of those behaviors. Just a little later we were asked to do a study in Iceland on prostitution. It was the Ministry of Justice that wanted some information about the issue for policy making. At that time there had been a lot of discussions about prostitution as a possible new issue in Iceland and people thought that it was a new issue relating to strip clubs that had been opening; quite a few of them in a very short period of time, bringing people from Europe to work in these clubs for a short time.

It was a challenge -- something that had not been looked into much before in Iceland but we knew that we would probably discover some interesting things. We decided to also include and look into not only prostitution related to the strip clubs, but also among young people and older people, so a wider range of the population. I interviewed many people who had been involved in prostitution, both young people and older people, people working in strip clubs, young people who had run from home, older women who had been using substances for a long time and had apartments for prostitution, etc.

So we were looking into the social situations of these people, and I also interviewed people in institutions like police, health care institutes, and rehabilitation centers for example, asking them whether they saw this in the history of the people who were seeking their services. Usually people knew about this issue happening but told us that they never put it on paper. So it was like a taboo in society. And looking more into it regarding both young and older people, we saw some common background information in the lives of these people. A primary factor was sexual abuse. Many of the people that I talked with had experienced sexual abuse in childhood, and often again and repeatedly later as young people and even adults.
So I became very interested in the histories of these people and how their lives had led them down this pathway. After doing qualitative interviewing using snowball methods of finding another person to talk to etc., we started including more questions about sexual abuse in the Youth in Iceland project. We had already been asking about family conflict and family violence; now we asked questions about prostitution or exchange of sex for money and drugs, which we had seen was happening among groups of young people who were using substances and a lot of alcohol and some of them were running away from home. This shed some light on this topic and I became very interested in further studying sexual abuse and childhood trauma and risk and protective factors relating to that.

**What did you learn about the relationship between sexual abuse and childhood trauma that was connected with prostitution or other kinds of really dangerous behaviors?**

It's clear from the literature and from our studies that sexual abuse can be a very traumatic event for children. Common consequences are emotional problems of depression, anxiety, and anger, and behavioral problems like drug use, suicidal behavior, self-injurious behavior and delinquency. So these things are linked and by looking at the individuals’ stories you can see that it's not always the same exact path, but often very similar factors that are involved.

**Did you have any sense of how prevalent sexual abuse was in the late 90s in Iceland or of how prevalent it would become?**

Official prevalence rates have been getting higher and higher since people are more aware that these kinds of things are occurring. Of course as we know with sexual abuse, often it takes years and years for sexual abuse victims to come forward and be believed which I think is changing year by year. It’s becoming more recognized that this does indeed happen. So regarding the prevalence rates that we have seen in Iceland throughout Youth in Iceland studies, we have seen among 16-19 year olds approximately one third of female and one fifth of male high school students had experienced some kind of sexually abusive behavior or harassment before the age of 18. It ranges from less severe abuse to more severe abuse. So it is something that very many young people face at one time, especially if they're girls because sexual abuse is more common among girls than boys. Until quite recently boys as a group have not been recognized as victims of sexual abuse as much as girls. However they are certainly at risk too, although not as much as girls. So it is clear that this is a quite common issue.

**Can you talk about definitions of sexual abuse or unwanted sexual contact?**

Yes, the thing about the understanding of it is quite complicated because it's related to the language and definitions you use. Just ten years ago when we started doing more studies on this topic we had a concept you would use to generally describe sexual abuse. But when you start to look into it you can see that it was really understood as incest, but not unwanted sexual experiences, which is a much wider term. So the term really defines your outcome, of course, when you're researching this topic. What we have intended to do is to
look at it in a more broad way than a more narrow way because in older studies, for example, often it was used as a criteria that the perpetrator needed to be five years older than the victim. However, what we know today is that with a same-aged perpetrator the consequences for the victim can be just as severe, even more severe depending on the relationships and other factors. So the age as such should not really be used to define the action because it is the same thing happening. So things like that have been shifting a bit regarding the definition, looking at it from a broader perspective of unwanted sexual experiences.

You obviously gained some in-depth insight about the prevalence and severity of some of these events in the lives of children, girls, and now increasingly looking at how boys are affected by different types of abuse. What kinds of things have happened as a result of this understanding in terms of social policy, in terms of how we can support youth? What have you seen in Iceland and what kind of conversations have you participated in?

I think that the evidence base is very important in this topic. And this of course was a taboo in society not long ago, but today it's more recognized as something that exists and I think research helped a lot with that. So the discussion is becoming more evidence based. People know about the consequences of these types of violence in the lives of children and I think we have come quite far in Iceland regarding the processes around it when these cases come up in the system.

Now we, for example, are running a research project in collaboration with The Government Agency for Child Protection at the Children's House (Barnahús). The Children's House works on the investigation of suspected child sexual abuse cases and provide assessment and therapy to child victims. We are doing a study there on the support of parents of sexually abused children because one of the things that we know from the research is that social support and parental support following such experiences is very important. Hopefully, in the future those results will be used to guide the therapeutic work with the children connecting it more to the family environment and increasing the support network that the child and its parents and family have.

When you do the Youth in Iceland survey and you ask questions about these kinds of things, what kind of protections do the kids have of confidentiality and what kind of things do you have to do if they do report anything like this?

The Youth in Iceland surveys are administered among children from 10 to 19 year old, so children up to young adults. And they are all anonymous. So they cannot be traced back to the individuals participating in the surveys. Of course the topic of each survey is decided depending on the age and the maturity of the group who is answering the questions. So among high school students, aged 16 to 19 year olds, we are asking more questions about, for example, drug use, sexual abuse, things like that. While among the younger age groups we are focusing more on school, family and friends, etc.

Can you lead us into how some of this Youth in Iceland data and information may have progressed into the Youth in Europe project and then into the Lifecourse project?
I think that the *Youth in Iceland* project was always meant to be the first step. I think in Inga Dóra's mind that was very clear. And in the old days when we were in a very small house, running this little research center, the aim was for the project to start in Iceland, have this evidence based program and see, you know, how it would work out. If it would work out fine we would take the next step to Europe and that's what has been done. The same applies to the *Lifecourse* project. I think it was like the third step that had been in the back of Inga Dóra's mind from the beginning almost. So it was like the first and second and the third step. Of course the third step involves so many different methods which helps us to answer all the questions that we have been putting forward with not as sophisticated methodology. It will open up a new way of understanding the processes that relate to risk and resilience in the lives of children at risk, i.e., to discover ways to help children cope with difficult experiences, and also to prevent these experiences from happening. To be able to do that we need the sophisticated methodology that *Lifecourse* offers.

A lot of the success of the *Youth in Iceland* project and now *Youth in Europe* is based on the community context. It's not about discovering an average of the entire society, rather it is about looking into each individual community. Could you comment about the relationship between the data and individual communities?

That's a very critical part, and having visited these communities and talked about results for each community what you can see are the different risk factors in the lives of young people. In general there can be very many risk factors, but maybe in one community one risk factor is particularly prevalent. For example, with drug use, in one community we saw that it was very common that the children were having parties on their own with no parents at the home. And this was in a community that was quite well off, the houses were very big, the parents were travelling a lot. So working with that was obviously important for that community while for another community the problems might have been a lack of participation in sports activities because some parents couldn't afford paying the fees. So that could be then something that could be worked with in that community. So it is very important to look at the individual community or societal level to guide the practice of developing effective remedies.

*Have you seen a decrease in sexual abuse since the implementation of our projects?*

The substance abuse prevention program has focused on changing the social environment of young people. It is likely that these societal changes that we see in the lives of children may have changed other things, particularly since drug use can be a risk factor for other behaviors or experiences. It's interesting, in our data, that recently we've seen some decrease in reported sexual abuse for example. Of course we know that drug use can be a consequence of sexual abuse; but we also know that being in an environment of alcohol use and drug use is also a risky situation or a risk situation for being sexually abused. So this is something that we are looking into at the moment and waiting for more data to better understand the links between these issues.
So it seems like the confluence of reduction of risk and improved resiliency translates into better outcomes in the question of sexual and physical abuse as well.

Yes, for the moment at least we have some indications of that but we need to get more information to better understand what's going on. Of course, at the same time society has been recognizing these cases of sexual abuse much more, so we have other possible influential factors. We have also been looking into mental health and anxiety for example and the trend there seems to be somewhat different, so for sure these are complicated issues and the Lifecourse project will hopefully help us to better understand how they all go together.

How is sexual abuse defined?

The question we explore in the Youth in Iceland studies is: Have you ever been exposed to any of the following against your will? Then it lists: “Somebody exposed him/herself indecently towards you”, “Somebody touched your body, excluding genitals, in an indecent way”, “Somebody touched your genitals”, “Somebody persuaded, pressed or forced you to touch his/her genitals”, “Somebody persuaded you, pressed or forced you to have intercourse”. We then use this measure to evaluate three degrees of severity of sexual abuse where the least severe type consists of indecent exposure and indecent touching of body excluding genitals, severe abuse is defined as genital touching against will, and very severe abuse defined as intercourse or penetration against will (rape). Our results have indicated that all types of sexual abuse increase the risk of mental health and behavioural problems. However, the relationship is linear, so with higher severity the risk for such problems increases linearly. These include depressed mood, anger, anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal behaviour and delinquency.

And is it part of your work as well to lift this topic out of the taboo area?

Oh yes. And I think research is a key there. Because people can talk about these things and of course then it's 'Oh it's just this individual.' But with research we can present material that media can talk about and people can read about which is based on generalizable data which puts the topic in a place where it can be discussed and better understood in a global context.

How does the Youth in Iceland information raise awareness of sexual abuse and other problems in the country, and how does it inform the culture about how to improve some of these conditions?

I think the Youth in Iceland studies have helped us a great deal to shine a spotlight onto important topics in the lives of children. For example, the sexual abuse research has revealed it to be much more common than people thought, has highlighted the consequences that some children are suffering, as well as the protective factors that we can work with to increase the quality of life of children who have been abused or have had some difficult experiences or traumas in their childhood.