

Small Hands, Big Responsibilities: Girl Child Labor in Domestic Services

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Abstract

Child labour in domestic service is a bitter truth of our society. The practice of child labour deprives children of their childhood and is harmful to their physical and mental development. Among girls, domestic work is by far the most common form of informal employment, whether paid or unpaid. This paper attempts to study looks into the problem of girl child labour under the age of 18 years of age in paid domestic services in Jammu. The paper probes on impact of poverty, schooling problems, uneducated parents, easy employment of girl children on employment girl child in domestic labour. Girl child mostly from poor families in rural areas are found working at other's house. The respondents have to regularly do almost all household chores with no clear rest hours. Domestic work is among the lowest paid occupations in the world. Being a part of informal economy it does not have any set norm for deciding wages. Working in the privacy of individual homes these girls are often vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse.

KEYWORDS: child labour, domestic service, informal employment, paid, unpaid, poverty, exploitation.

Introduction:

Child labour in domestic service is a bitter truth of our society, hidden but known to all. The International Labour Office reports that children work the longest hours and are the worst paid of all labourers (Bequele and Boyden, 1988). Child is the future of a nation and its strength in reserve. The practice of child labour deprives children of their childhood and is harmful to their physical and mental development. This in turn affects a nation's human resource in long term. Girls are found to prefer domestic work as employment worldwide. ILO estimates that more girls under the age of 16 work in domestic service than in any other category of child labour. This paper attempts to study looks into the problem of girl child labour under the age of 18 years of age in paid domestic services in Jammu. The paper looks into various causes which have impact on entry of girls in paid domestic services and working experiences of girl children.

Child labour is different from child work. Child labour can be defined in terms of age and the social situation in which it exists. The age criterion is thus, common in both child labour and child work. The main difference is in the compulsion or lack of it (Bilal,2010). Child labour is linked to harmful and exploitative activities that threaten the physical, mental and overall growth and development of children. On other hand, the later is associated with activities that are beneficial to growth and development of children and that prepares them to become socially responsible.

The concepts like child, work and labour are encompassed in understanding of child labour. Childhood is generally defined in terms of age. In traditional societies, the accomplishment of certain social rites and traditional obligations are important requirements in defining “adult” and “child” status. In still others, the integration of children into socio-economic life may begin so early that it may be virtually impossible to identify clearly the different life phases. However, in the context of child labour, a working definition of a “child” may be a person below the general limit of fifteen year or in special circumstances fourteen years, set by the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No.138).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has suggested that the term child labour is best defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children, or work whose schedule interferes with their ability to attend regular school, or work that affects in any manner their ability to focus during school or experience healthy childhood (ILO, 2012).

According to Homer Folks, the chairman of the US National Child Labour Committee, the term ‘child labour’ is generally used to refer, “any work by children that interfere with their full physical and mental development, the opportunities for a desirable minimum of education and of their needed recreation”(Mishra et.al, 2004).

Gender and child labour:

Gender is a crucial determinant of whether a child engages in child labour. Within households, where there are adult men and women, the gendered division of labour generally allocates to women the responsibility for household tasks. Men are considered to be heads of the households, bread-winners, owners and managers of property and active in politics, religion, business and the profession. Women, on the other hand are expected and trained to bear and look after children, to nurse the infirm and old, do all household work, and so on (Bhasin,2000). Girls because of their gender, in almost every patriarchal society are expected to do work at home at cost of their education and leisure time. They do enormous work at home, at the fields and take care for their siblings too. In all societies, boys and girls are assigned different societal roles and experience different perspectives of life as a result of their being male or female, girls are found starting working at an earlier age especially in household chores. Female children work in large numbers and for long hours in and outside the household, but their labour is unacknowledged or underrepresented in formal labour statistics. Parental perception also contributes to the underrating of the labour of the female child.

The issue of gender is now universally regarded as a vital component in addressing child labour. The returns to education may vary with gender. This seems likely to be especially important in third world where men and women participate in different economic activities. Likewise, the returns to activities other than age may also vary across cultures because of discrimination of the sex typing of tasks. Moreover age and gender may interact in important ways. First, girls develop earlier than boys so they may be capable of more sophisticated tasks at certain age. As puberty onsets, boys may develop comparative advantage in more physical activities. Second, the sex typing of tasks may be more important in the types of activities performed by older children. Hence gender difference in household or market work may manifest itself both in the types of activities performed at a given age, and these gender differences may vary with age. The research shows that the largest gender

differences are in household production, and these gender differences are increasing in age (Edmons, 2003).

Among girls, domestic work is by far the most common form of informal employment, whether paid or unpaid. But, where it is common, because of the uncertainties, which encircle the children's working situation- which is often confused with alternative upbringing- the practice of taking children into a household for the purpose of using their labour may typically be regarded as socially acceptable, even benign(Sarkar,2010).

By ILO estimates of 2010, 15.5 million children, worldwide, are engaged in paid or unpaid domestic work in the home of a third party or employer and who could be particularly vulnerable to exploitation because of their work is hidden from the public eye, where labour laws can hardly be applied. According to research on children in domestic work, 10.5 million of the estimated 15.5 million children engaged in paid or unpaid work are in child labour either because they are below the minimum age for admission to employment or because their work is regarded as hazardous. Research has also established that 72% of child domestic workers are girls and that 52% of all child domestic workers are engaged in hazardous chores.

In most of the developing countries even today, the female child has a lower status and enjoys fewer childhoods' rights, opportunities and benefits than the male child who has the first call on family and community resources with the female child instigating the process of inequality that the adult woman finds so difficult to overcome. Available evidences show the pride with which a newborn male child is welcomed and the cynicism that greet the baby girl (Anandharajakumar, 2004).

Paid domestic work is distinctive not in being the worst job of all but in being regarded as something other than employment. The paid work is feminized and informal. The two phenomena are not unrelated. Women's economic activity has, of course, always been characterized by a considerable degree of informality. Unpaid productive labour on farms and in family enterprises, paid work in domestic service in other people's households, street trading and sex work are some of the examples of these more traditional informal activities in which women are disproportionately represented. Informal employment continues to make up a much larger share of women's non-agricultural employment than men's in most developing countries (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2010).

Causes of girl child labour

Poverty is the most important reason for child labour. Though children are not well paid they still serve as major contributors to family income. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2008) and spreading smiles through education Organisation (OSSE) suggests poverty is the greatest single force driving children into the workplace. UNICEF suggests poverty as biggest cause of child labour. Between boys and girls UNICEF finds girls are two times more likely to be out of school and working in a domestic role. Parents with limited resources have to choose whose school costs and fees they can afford when a school is available. Educating girls tends to be a lower priority across the world, including India. Girls are also harassed or bullied at schools, sidelined by prejudice or poor curricula, according to UNICEF. Solely because of their gender, therefore many girls are kept out of school or drop out, then provide child labour (UNICEF,2001).

Schooling problems also contribute to child labour. No access to school or low quality of education (in case of school accessibility) make children to seek employment. Parents feel it better to send children to work and supplement family

income instead of sending them to schools because schools in rural areas suffer from problems like poor infrastructure, inadequate sanitation, bullying, apathetic teachers etc. A 2012 Wall Street Journal article reports while the enrollment in India's school has dramatically increased in recent years to over 96% of all children in the 6-14 years age group, the infrastructure in schools, aimed in part to reduce child labour, remains poor- over 81,000 schools do not have a blackboard and about 42,000 government schools operate without a building with make shift arrangements during monsoons and inclement weather. Parents who are educated understand the importance of education and schooling. Thus, parents education plays a large role in determining child schooling and employment (Tienda,1979).

Employing children is an easy option for employers. They find employing children is as cheap. As adult domestic workers put forward many demands, it becomes easy to handle a child worker. Also with more middle class women moving out to work, the need for domestic labour is also on rise. Employing children at lower wages is an easier option, without having to make any promises and without any tension to meet any demand.

The root causes for domestic child labour are multiple. They can be summarized under push and pull factors. Poverty and its feminization, social exclusion, lack of education, gender and ethnic discrimination, domestic violence, rural-urban migration, loss of parents and diseases are some of the 'push' factors for child labour worldwide. Increasing social and economic disparities, debt bondages, increasing need for the women of the household to have a 'replacement' at home that will enable more and more of them to enter the labour market and the illusion that domestic service gives the child worker an opportunity for education are some of the 'pull' factors.

Experiences of girl children in paid domestic service

Girl child involved in domestic service are from poor families in rural areas. Poor household income, separation of parents, death of father in family, discrimination for being girl as parents find it better investment to educate boy in family are main reasons for sending them to urban areas for work. Household work is seen as women's work so many employers continue to prefer girls for domestic work. Household work is seen as dirty and inferior job because it involves cleaning of dirt. Because of early training of girls in their homes, they are seen as best fitted for the demands of the work. As there is risk in employing a stronger, most employers prefer to employ young girls as they are more obedient and easy to mould. Majority of girls started working between the ages of 7 to 11. Recruitment is either directly through the employers or through the recommendations of friends and relatives of children's parents. All respondents live with their employers. This gives them chance to enjoy free food and roof but at the same time it means no fixed working hours as they are available for household work at any time. They cannot work at fixed timings and have to adjust according to employer's needs and life-style.

The respondents have to regularly do works ranging from cleaning the house, washing utensils and clothes to looking after children in family. Work period ranges from 5 hours to 10 hours. There reported there are no clear rest hours but they love to watch television and play with children in family which often involves child minding too. Domestic work is among the lowest paid occupations in the world. Being a part of informal economy it does not have any set norm for deciding wages. Majority of girls receive an around Rs. 1500 per month. In remote areas with few opportunities for schooling and poverty, girls are sent in urban areas to work at members of their extended family or some family recommended by person from village with a hope

that they will get food, clothes and get a chance to education. “Educational support is probably the biggest contribution a mistress can ever extend to her helper, as it has a long-term impact and can enable the helper to leave paid domestic work and enter into more prestigious job”(Arnado,2003). Many girls working as domestic worker are admitted to schools but they are either not permitted to go to school or allowed to go ones or twice a week. Some of the girls are admitted to government schools in village where they go for taking examination only. Thus, quality education is not provided although girls are enrolled in schools. In many cases girl child is employed for education, clothes and food with no cash remuneration. In few cases where employer provides cash remuneration along with education, the wages are decided between parent and employer and are given to parent direct. However, in such cases more work is demanded.

Although domestic work is a necessity, child labour cannot be justified. There are many difficulties also at work as it is the least regulated of all occupations. Working in the privacy of individual homes, these girls are often invisible to the outside world and thus particularly vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse. Some of the respondents reported they are given remaining or wasted food. Many times they are severely beaten and punished by employer. Also, there are incidences of sexual harassment by employers or other household members or guests. Girls because of small age cannot understand the abuse and if they understand they cannot do anything about it because they are living with their employer. Often their position of belonging to servant class creates a divide and they are often not trusted. Girls in domestic work are hidden in private homes, where they are more likely to be abused and less likely to get education.

Child labour prohibition and protection

The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (CLPRA) of 1986 lists hazardous industries in which the employment of children (below 14) is completely banned; in other sectors, it is sought to be ‘regulated’. In October 2006, domestic labour and child labour in the hospitality industry were added to hazardous category, banning employment of children. There are no substantive studies to give a true picture of the number of children below 18 in full-time employment in homes. ‘Save the Children’ has recently estimated that around 50,000 children below 14 work in major cities such as Hyderabad and Kolkata, and at least twice that number in Delhi (Srinivasan, 2010).

The ILO’s Committee of Experts on the application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) has been very active in responding to the problem of child domestic labour, given the special attention paid to the matter in the Worst Forms of Child Labour Conventions on forced labour and minimum age, is a crucial source of guidance on the setting of standards to combat child domestic labour. Implementation of the Conventions is facilitated through the provision of substantial technical cooperation, notably through the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC). The CEACR has repeatedly called upon member States to take effective action to prevent child domestic labour, highlighting the traditional practices of entrusting young children (often distant relatives) to the care of the adults.

At the 100th ILO Annual Conference on June 2011 the government, worker and employer delegates decided to bring domestic workers under the realm of labour standards by adopting an international set of standards with the aim of improving the working conditions of domestic workers worldwide. The international set of standard,

that is, the Convention concerning 'decent work' for domestic workers also referred to as the Domestic Workers Convention 2011 (No. 189), provides a clear message that domestic workers like other workers have the right to decent work and living conditions. By these standards, domestic workers should be entitled to the same basic labour rights as those available to other workers such as reasonable hours of work, weekly rest of at least 24 consecutive hours, a limit on the in-kind payments, clear information on terms and conditions of employment as well as respect for fundamental principles and rights at work, including freedom of association and right to collective bargaining. Convention No. 189 and Recommendation No. 201 also specify the need to identify hazardous elements of domestic workers and to prohibit such work for children below the age of 18.

Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that both girls and boys engage in the worst forms of child labour. However, it is important to realize that due to certain societal expectations, duties and responsibilities placed on girls, they are often more vulnerable to exploitation. It is essential to understand the culture and environment in which child labour occurs in order to address all of the root causes of child labour, including gender bias. Gender discrimination often results in disparity in girls' enrolment, high dropout rate and their early involvement in economic activities. The female child helps the family to survive by spending her time and in this process she misses out education, good nutrition and future employment avenues that may be remunerative. Although child labour provides income for child and her family to survive but this cannot justify the child labour. Child labour is a denial of fundamental rights of the children having an irreversible impact on physical, psychological and moral impact on development and well-being.

Girl child mostly from poor families in rural areas are found working at other's house. The respondents have to regularly do almost all household chores with no clear rest hours. Domestic work is among the lowest paid occupations in the world. Being a part of informal economy it does not have any set norm for deciding wages. Working in the privacy of individual homes these girls are often vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse. It is well recognized that paid domestic work remains invisible, as it takes place in the house and is predominantly carried out by women. The reproductive significance of domestic work is often either disregarded or at best under-valued. Its coverage under existing international conventions is poor and legislative protection offered by various states is inadequate. Social norms and attitudes that hide the actual nature of mal-practices against girl need to be confronted. Employers must understand the importance of role that the girl domestic workers play in their family. There is a need to coordinate with school officials to develop gender sensitive methods to make children more aware of possible abuses at work.

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