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Child domestic labour: Child domestic workers speak out

As part of an ongoing project on child domestic labour, Anti-Slavery International and its local partners have undertaken consultations with more than 450 current and former child domestic workers in nine countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In the many individual interviews and group discussions which took place, child domestic workers provided an unparalleled insight into their situations as well as their views about the kinds of help and support they need most – and what interventions protect them best from abuse and exploitation.

Consultations took place in Benin, Costa Rica, India, Nepal, Peru, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Togo. Reflecting the reality of child domestic labour in many countries the majority of those who participated were female – but more than 100 boys also took part.

Results have confirmed that children as young as seven years old are routinely pressed into domestic service. Despite some children entering domestic labour in the hope of continuing their schooling, most are deprived of opportunities for education and are working in conditions that can be considered amongst the worst forms of child labour. Worldwide, the majority of child domestic workers are girls, and many have been trafficked, or are in debt bondage. Child domestic workers are isolated from their families and from opportunities to make friends – and are under the total control of employers whose primary concern is often not in their best interests as children.

As figures from the International Labour Organization demonstrate¹, child domestic workers are large in numbers, yet they remain invisible and marginalized both economically and socially because of the myths still surrounding their employment. While it is conventional to regard domestic work as a 'safe' form of employment, in reality a wide range of abuses – including physical, verbal and sexual violence – routinely accompanies this type of work.

How do children become domestic workers?

Children spoke of the many ways in which they were pushed and pulled into domestic service. The need to sustain themselves and their families due to poverty was commonly why children began in domestic service. In India, a number of children were working to repay loans. In Peru and the Philippines older children spoke of their decision to seek work in the city in order to pursue their education. A quarter of participants in Tanzania recounted that

¹ The ILO estimates that more girls under 16 are in domestic service than in any other category of work. Recent statistics from a number of countries show the numbers to be in the millions worldwide. See *Helping hands or shackled lives: Understanding child domestic labour and responses to it*, ILO, Geneva, 2004.

they were forced into domestic work as family members had died due to HIV/AIDS and they had no reliable relatives to take care of them.

Often it was family problems which were the catalyst for children to begin work. Family breakups and physical and sexual abuse in their own families were common causes, as were issues such as alcoholism. In India, several children cited alcoholic fathers as the reason they had left home to work in domestic service.

Children were also pulled into domestic service by siblings and friends already working as domestics, and because of employers' demands for younger workers. In Nepal children said that it was hard to continue working as a domestic worker above the legal minimum working age of 14 years as employers had told them that older children are more trouble and are able to bargain for higher salaries and other rights.

What do they need? Child domestic workers speak out...

Several important issues emerged from the research which impact on the work of multilateral bodies and other individuals and organisations providing direct assistance to child domestic workers.

Results of the consultations indicate that the interventions which are having the most positive impact for child domestic workers are those which seek to: (1) maintain or re-establish contact between the child and her/his close relatives; (2) intervene directly with their employers in a non-confrontational way; (3) establish and support groups of domestic workers to help themselves; (4) encourage child domestic workers back to education and to retain them in education by catering to their specific needs.

Cutting across cultural and language divides, the child domestic workers who were consulted had some clear messages about the best kinds of assistance to protect them from the daily abuse and exploitation that many of them endure. Their common appeal for those who seek to help them are:-

- To provide opportunities for education and training which allow them to move on from domestic work;
- To assist them in seeking redress from abusive and/or exploitative employers;
- Not to alienate employers, but to make them part of the solution to their problems;
- To provide more services which cater specifically to the needs of child domestic workers (since their needs are often quite different from those of other child workers);
- To develop longer-term interventions, i.e. not to develop services for them and then pull-out after just one or two years;
- To develop interventions which take into consideration some of the issues which most affect child domestic workers, for example, early pregnancy and the effect of HIV/AIDS;
- More awareness raising about their situation, and to ensure that this awareness raising goes hand-in-hand with concrete services for child domestic workers;
- Assistance in accessing government and state infrastructure that can help them; for example, in obtaining birth certificates, enrolling in school, in accessing health care, in locating families and returning home.

Perhaps the strongest message to emerge from the consultations was the importance of those providing assistance to talk to the children themselves about what they need. The work of Anti-Slavery International's partners in this area has shown that the most effective interventions are those which systematically involve child domestic workers themselves in the planning and implementation of their projects and programmes.

Recommendations

The views expressed by child domestic workers in the consultations serve to strengthen the calls to action which Anti-Slavery International and its partners have been making to UN bodies for some years.

1. Governments should ratify and implement ILO Convention No.182 as a matter of urgency and develop plans of action which include policies designed to offer better protection to child domestic workers, including raising public awareness about the issue
2. Multilateral bodies such as ILO and UNICEF should redouble their efforts to make the issue of child domestic labour a priority for action.
3. Governments should initiate legislative reforms to set minimum standards of practice for domestic workers of all ages – either by ensuring that the scope of existing labour legislation is widened to include domestic work, or through the enactment of sector-specific legislation to protect domestic workers.
4. In addition to making good on their commitment to provide good quality and accessible education and health care for all, governments should promote the development of specialised basic services for child domestic workers, such as specialised crisis centres.

Anti-Slavery International
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