

**International workshop for practitioners
on child domestic work**

**4-6 April 2001
Imperial College, London**

Summary Report

I. Overview

I.1 Anti-Slavery International is currently undertaking a project designed to build the capacity of local NGOs in developing and carrying out advocacy action in relation to the many predicaments of children working as domestics in the households of others. The international meeting of NGO practitioners from around the world hosted by Anti-Slavery and held at Imperial College, London, from 4-6 April 2001 was a key element of this project. Not only did the meeting provide an opportunity for organisations already committed to addressing the situation of child domestic workers to meet and share experiences, but it provided a building block for the enhancement of advocacy around the many aspects of the issue, by the organisations themselves and their partners.

I.2 The meeting can be seen as a follow-up to an earlier meeting, also hosted by Anti-Slavery, on **Research methods relating to child domestic workers**, held in January 1996. This led to the production of **Child Domestic Workers: A Handbook for Research and Action**. This meeting was similarly intended to lead to a handbook, by the same author (Maggie Black), this time on advocacy strategies and practice. (Advocacy is understood to mean campaigning, lobbying of decision-makers, awareness-raising within society especially among key actors and child domestics themselves, and public education around 'best practice'.) The production and dissemination of this handbook is another key element of the Anti-Slavery project, and will take place in mid-late 2001.

I.3 The 23 NGO participants came from the following countries: **Africa:** Kenya, Morocco, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo; **Asia:** Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, Thailand; **Latin America and the Caribbean:** Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Haiti. These organisations included NGOs focused primarily at the national level and a number of regional networking groups. All are at varying degrees of involvement with the issue; some have been engaged over many years and have a special relationship with Anti-Slavery as 'project partners' on child domestic workers (see annexe). The working language of the meeting was English, but translation was provided for those participants using French, Spanish and Portuguese. There were also full-time participants from the headquarter offices of UNICEF and

the International Labour Organization's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (ILO-IPEC). Both organisations are fully engaged with the issue of children in domestic work as part of their ongoing programmes in relation to the reduction and elimination of child labour, especially of its worst forms as articulated in ILO Convention No. 182.

I.4 The aims of the workshop were, therefore, three-fold:

- To provide information for a best practice report on advocacy techniques surrounding child domestic workers and their many predicaments;
- Create a stimulating environment in which to share ideas and generate creativity for solving problems in relation to work for and with child domestic workers;
- Strengthen the networks of NGOs working for and with child domestic workers.

Participants were invited to identify their own personal needs and objectives for the workshop. A wide range of issues emerged, including the following: understanding the links between advocacy and research; developing strategies for helping children in different working situations; how to stem the flow of recruitment and trafficking of children into domestic work; exploring the connections between customary quasi-adoptions and actual employment and addressing ingrained cultural attitudes which tolerate or approve the practice; how to reach 'hidden' children; how to involve child domestic themselves; combating their own isolation.

I.5 The workshop was designed to use a blend of plenary and group work to allow for maximum participation. It was facilitated by Maggie Piazza, and the atmosphere was entirely collegial. None of the usual ideological tensions surrounding child labour (notably abolition of child work vs support for child workers) clouded the proceedings: a tribute to both the organisers and the positive attitudes of the participants.

II. Content of the workshop

II.1 The content of the workshop had been designed in such a way as to provide participants with the maximum possible opportunity to share their experiences of advocacy activity, as well as other related programme and research action. Therefore, as well as regional presentations by key participants from Africa, Asia and Latin America, each participant was invited to make a short presentation of their activity vis a vis child domestic work. The size of the meeting meant that these short organisational presentations took place within regional working groups, which meant that they were not available to the full meeting (except through their literature, which was prolific). However, a

synthesis of ‘factors leading to success’ and ‘obstacles’ were presented to the plenary. Participants also had many opportunities to learn about each other’s work by networking, and through the whole workshop process.

II.2 The activity of the first day of the workshop therefore primarily revolved around finding out about each other’s experiences as a basis for examining advocacy strategies. This ranged from promoting regional initiatives (South America) to small-scale hands-on initiatives in towns and cities. The second and part of the third day were used to address the **‘what’** of advocacy: what are the predicaments of child domestic workers and the circumstances surrounding their recruitment, employment, and removal from employment that advocacy action needs to address, and what are the advocacy objectives; the **‘who’** of advocacy: who are the actors, both those to be reached and enlisted, and those whose attitudes and practices need to be changed; and finally the **‘how’** of advocacy: what are the strategies and techniques to be used to achieve the various objectives with the various actors. The rest of the third day was used to examine partnership with key international organisations, and examine where to go next. This included examination of the ongoing Anti-Slavery project, including the handbook; and the development of inter-NGO networks.

II.3 From early on in the workshop, it became clear that diversity was a key characteristic of the issues and practices emerging. This diversity was not only a product of different regional settings, but of different goals, approaches, and organisational make-up. A tension between the natural inclination to synthesise experience and draw from it common themes and principles, and the need to identify specificity and variety, marked many workshop sessions. The tendency to submerge different strands beneath clustered headings, such as ‘inaccessibility’ or ‘child worker participation’, could obscure as much as it revealed. Since the workshop did not set out to make recommendations for a common policy framework, but to propose practical courses of action based on ground realities, extra efforts were made to cite examples of ‘good practice’ or ‘unhelpful practice’ from group work. It was recognised that there would be no prescriptive solutions for improving the situation of child domestic workers, but that creativity and flexibility for different settings would be needed.

II.4 Since the workshop would in time produce a major product in the form of the handbook on advocacy, it was understood that any report of its activities would be summary and would not attempt to capture the richness of the many major and minor contributions which constituted its output.

III. The ‘what’ of advocacy: main findings

III.1 The workshop identified four objectives of advocacy on behalf of child domestic workers:

- Removing children from domestic work;
- Improving working conditions;
- Reintegrating/rehabilitating child domestic workers who have left the workplace;
- Preventing children from entering domestic employment.

Although strategies for advocacy (as well as other interventions) should be different for the different objectives, there are overlaps. For example, approaches (such as those advocated by WAO Afrique in Togo) for removing young children from domestic work by advocacy with parents would be similar to approaches for the prevention of their entry into domestic service. (For example, explanation of the negative experiences child domestics are likely to encounter, to counteract the idea that domestic service represents an opportunity for the child). Similarly, if no advocacy is done to reduce the entry of children into domestic work, removal of a child from the working household will probably lead to rapid re-entry in another household. It is unlikely, therefore, that one objective alone can be addressed by any advocacy strategy; rather, some or all may need to be addressed simultaneously.

III.2 **Underlying factors:** One of the working groups made a distinction between underlying and immediate factors to take into account. These underlying factors apply to all four objectives, and include the following:

- **Age:** The age of the domestic worker is a major determinant of whether to opt for ‘removal’ or ‘improvement of conditions’. Although it might be seen as arbitrary by some, the workshop accepted that the age of 14 was the cut-off between the two options. This is primarily because this is the age more or less universally accepted as the minimum at which formal work should begin, (see ILO Convention 138 concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, 1973), and it is important to assert that child domestic work is ‘employment’ not a surrogate form of upbringing. Although domestic workers are younger than 14 in many countries, it would be inconsistent with international norms to argue for their retention in the workplace. However, the strategy of ‘rescue’ should be adopted with caution. If advocacy simultaneously supports the improvement of working conditions for those aged 14 and above, this is likely to have effect for the whole working population.
- **Gender:** Child domestic workers are overwhelmingly female, a factor which affects all strategies and approaches. However, there may be

circumstances in which the presence of boys in the workplace also needs to be taken into account.

- **Culturally fixed ideas:** Both the practice of employing child domestics, and the exploitative way in which they tend to be treated, are socially endorsed in most societies in which the practice occurs. Changing this ingrained social acceptance is the greatest challenge with regard to advocacy on their behalf. The commercialisation of the practice, especially where children are trafficked as in West Africa, is a key trend which underlines how important it is to disallow ‘culture’ as a legitimising umbrella for this form of child servitude.
- **Universal primary education:** Advocacy on behalf of primary education as the right of all children will assist the removal of younger domestics from the workplace. Even where they are not removed, establishing the norm that children should go to school will increase the number of employers who allow children time off for school. School is usually seen by policy-makers as the desirable alternative to child work; but it may not be so seen by parents unless quality as well as spread of schooling is considered.
- **Birth registration:** Promoting birth registration is an essential aid to establishing children’s ages and identities, both of which are critical for reduction of child labour and exploitation.
- **Laws and regulations:** The inadequacy of laws and legal machinery for regulating the presence and conditions of children in the domestic workplace was reiterated on a number of occasions. However, it was also underlined that laws represent benchmarks of society’s acceptance or non-acceptance of a practice, and that advocating for laws regulating/banning child domestic work is therefore important.
- **Poverty:** Those who place, or traffic, their children into domestic work invariably do so because they see this as a poverty alleviation strategy both for the child and for the family. This poverty may have been exacerbated by the orphanhood of the child, because of war, HIV/AIDS, or some other cause. Income generation for poor families, especially woman-headed households and non-parental substitute carers, and better basic support services, are needed.

III.3 Immediate factors: The immediate factors which need to be considered in relation to an advocacy approach are specific to the objective. For example, in the context of ‘removal’, consideration should be given to the degree of abuse and exploitation in the workplace. This might depend on a case by case analysis, but a proper diagnosis would be needed before ‘rescue’ should be

chosen as the appropriate response. In the context of ‘improvement’, care would similarly be needed before adopting a strategy of training domestic workers so as to improve their skills and self-esteem. In one case (Kenya), this led to a gain for the employers without any corresponding improvement in terms and conditions of work for the child domestics; in another (Bolivia), there was a clear advantage to the workers, who were able to negotiate an improvement in pay and conditions as a result of their improved skills. In the context of ‘reintegration’, there must be understanding of family circumstances. It would not be to her/his advantage to be ‘reintegrated’ into an abusive and violent home. Thus, case by case analysis tends to be needed to identify immediate factors and address them effectively.

IV. Actors: ‘who’ does or can influence the situation of child domestic workers

IV.1 Advocacy is targeted at a specific audience, some members of which are also the vehicle for the advocacy messages, which are designed to persuade the audience to see things differently and to do things differently – ie, to change their attitudes and practices. The workshop divided potential audiences for advocacy on child domestic workers into two broad groups:

- Child domestics, their parents, employers, other children with whom they come into contact and adult domestic workers ie, those members of society who play a part in the practice;
- Decision-makers, such as MPs, bureaucrats, social workers, and others who influence the articulation of policy and laws and their implementation. These may be actors at the local level (community leaders, religious leaders) or at the national level.

IV.2 Findings in relation to child domestics, employers, and parents

The meeting heard presentations on influencing parents and child domestic workers, employers, and national level decision-makers. Various conclusions were drawn about advocacy among child domestics, parents, employers and their children:

- Child domestic workers were themselves important advocates of their predicament, particularly in influencing parents of potential child domestic workers, and members of society at large. They were at the heart of strategies used by ENDA Jeunesse Action in Senegal, among others.
- Since employers are often difficult to reach, their children are potential change-agents in the households of employers. These

children can be reached in school, and can carry home changed attitudes towards the rights of child domestic workers and ways of behaving towards them. The National Domestic Houseworkers Movement in India is one of the organisations that has pioneered such a strategy.

- Employers are usually seen as the enemy; but one organisation – Shoishab in Bangladesh – has over time managed to enlist the employers themselves as the principal change-agents in meeting child domestics’ rights.
- Although the media (eg, radio soap operas, television, print) can be used to change the attitudes of society at large, much of the advocacy with these groups has to be done on a one-to-one and small group basis. General campaigns cannot substitute for the power of personal communication.

IV.3 Findings in relation to national decision-makers

The main presentation in this context was made by Visayan Forum in the Philippines, an organisation that has been working with child domestic workers for over five years. Visayan Forum believes that it is important to enlist national policy-makers and legislators in order to put the issue into the national consciousness. The key observations in this context were as follows:

- The image of child domestic workers – and domestic workers in general – needs to be enhanced. If they are regarded as having no status and no rights, this stands in the way of improving attitudes and practices towards them. The Visayan Forum has given them a new name: *Kasambahay* meaning ‘household companion’.
- In Thailand, many domestic workers are illegal immigrants. Since their status is compromised by their illegal presence in the country, it is very difficult to campaign on their behalf. Thus it may be important to tackle other issues than their domestic status as a prelude to other kinds of advocacy.
- Any campaign which is to reach national-level decision-makers must be non-adversarial; raging against attitudes and practices which may be subliminally or behaviourally endorsed by decision-makers themselves will not bring them on board.
- Planning is critical. A carefully worked-out long-term strategy is needed, and extensive evidence in the form of facts, research, and case histories is needed in order to be persuasive. Special approaches are needed for different decision-makers: for example, the Department of Labour.
- International support is extremely helpful. The endorsement of Anti-Slavery, IPEC, UNICEF or other international organisations for

positions advocated by the NGO will give them credibility. Governments do not want to be 'out of line' with international practice towards the fulfilment of citizens' rights.

V. What works? Strategies for use with different target audiences

V.1 For the discussions on how to match strategies with actors to meet different objectives, the workshop divided into three groups. These discussed, respectively, strategies for use with parents, children and child domestic workers; strategies for use with employers; strategies for use with local and national decision-makers.

V.2 Strategies for parents, children and child domestic workers:

Considerable emphasis was given to the use of testimonies, either recounted by child domestics themselves, or presented to parents, schools and communities in the form of dramas, sketches, and posters. Developing an association is helpful, such as a Child Rights Forum as in Nepal, where children with experience as child domestic workers can join together and take part in advocacy programmes directed at others. In some countries, such as Tanzania, community dialogues have been developed as an awareness-raising tool. Adult domestic workers, both individually and in organised groups, were considered to be a good way to reach children and effective as advocates for change (such as in Bangladesh, Costa Rica and India).

In other settings, figures of local importance and moral clout such as priests and imams have been enlisted; however, it was also pointed out that in other settings, these might be the most reactionary members of the community. Specific settings where child domestic workers could be found, such as milk booths and water points in India, were potential ways of reaching them. Child domestic workers themselves needed to be the target of advocacy, to counteract the way in which their servant persona overwhelmed their sense of independent identity. Any setting where employers might be found with young domestics should be used; in Togo this included the Maternal and Child Health services, when mothers took their babies to the clinic for vaccinations, and the domestic went too, to help. Other participants, notably from India, pointed to opportunities for reaching child domestic workers within programmes such as drop-in centres and non-formal education activities.

V.3 Strategies for reaching employers

This group agreed that employers were the most difficult group to access, and any strategy had to be carefully developed, and be based on consensus and

agreement. Public campaigns, using the media, could be effective. Other routes included indirect approaches, via religious leaders, trades unions, employer associations, and other existing organisations whose members would include employers of child domestic workers. From Bolivia and Bangladesh came the insight that the ‘messenger’ was all-important. Employers would listen to ‘one of their own’, where they would not be willing to listen to someone not of their cultural identity or social class. Use of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to underline rights deprivations, and other relevant international instruments, could be helpful where these were well understood and respected. Fashioning the message was also important: the notion that the employer was the only person in a position of responsibility for the upbringing of a child under her or his roof could be persuasive.

V.4 Strategies for influencing national-level decision-makers

At this level, strategies had to be planned and executed with great care. The task should be seen as a process, in which the NGO nudged change along; an NGO has to recognise that it has no mandate for setting the parameters of moral or social codes, and needs established (ie, governmental) decision-making partners to endorse ideas it wishes to promote. Documenting cases of abuse and bringing them to the courts was an important instrument. Although existing attitudes of complaisance among decision-makers might be seen as a major obstacle, there are always ‘angels’ to be found among bureaucrats and law-makers. Once these are identified, they become allies. The same applies within the media, which is an invaluable ally for changing ‘official’ attitudes. Other groups need to be targeted, including women’s organisations, trades unions, and professional associations. With all such groups, messages should include testimonies, and awareness-raising concerning children’s rights, based on the CRC and relevant ILO instruments.

VI. The international dimension

VI.1 Presentations were made by Anti-Slavery, UNICEF, ILO-IPEC, Save the Children UK, the Global March, and other representatives of international organisations concerned with child labour issues. Some issues raised were to do with the broader parameters of child labour, particularly in the formal workplace, which were not specific to child domestic work.

VI.2 The main observation to be drawn from these presentations is that, while they usually depend on local NGO partners for activity on the ground, international organisations have a capacity to influence governments and national-level organisations which can be beneficially harnessed. On their side, the international organisations serve as a useful barometer of opinion and

concern, and are in a position to monitor trends which have inter-country characteristics, such as trafficking of child domestics in West Africa.

VI.3 The international organisations represented in the meeting were honest in terms of admitting that they were sometimes inflexible and failed adequately to respond to local realities; the exchanges indicated a common perception of the need to be creative and flexible in addressing problems.

VI.4 Last but not least, the international NGOs and intergovernmental organisations are vital sources of funds for research, advocacy, and programmatic work. A number of fruitful alliances were cited. Much depended on the attitude and capacity of the personnel of the organisations present on the ground.

VII. Networking

VII.1 Discussions within regional working groups centred on promoting mechanisms for networking among the participants. In Asia, the network on child domestic work coordinated by Child Workers in Asia is already relatively well-developed, and its programme of joint action received a useful boost of energy from the meeting. From other regions, a number of approaches were identified, including study tours, regular distribution of information, joint training workshops, and possible joint research and/or lobbying efforts at international fora such as the Organization of African Unity and other regional bodies.

Maggie Black, Oxford, April 2001