



LIFE AS CHILD DOMESTIC WORKERS IN KATHMANDU

Exploring the Trajectories,
Drivers, and Experiences
of Children Working in
Nepal's Domestic Sector

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Glossary



Child Domestic Labor

Child domestic labor refers to situations in which: (i) children aged 5-11 engage in domestic work (see below) for more than 1 hour per week; (ii) children aged 12-14 engage in domestic work for more than 14 hours per week; (iii) children aged 15-17 engage in domestic work for more than 43 hours per week; (iv) children engage in domestic work in conditions that harm their health, safety, or morals; (v) children engage in domestic work in slavery-like situations, such as debt bondage, serfdom, forced labor [ILO Minimum Age Convention (No.138) 1973 and ILO Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (No.182) 1999].



Child Domestic Work

Child domestic work refers to work performed by children in the home of a third party or employer. Child domestic work is not always exploitative or harmful to the child. Some light domestic work that allows a child to help the family financially or to earn pocket money outside school hours can contribute to a young person's positive and healthy development [ILO, Child Domestic Work Global Estimates (Geneva: ILO, 2013)].



Child Domestic Workers

Children who work in the household of people other than their closest family, doing domestic chores, caring for others, and running errands. Depending on the circumstances, they may be engaged in permissible work or they may be employed under exploitative, abusive, and prohibited conditions.



Hazardous Child Labor

Hazardous child labor is work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children and that, as such, should be prohibited. Guidance by the ILO on hazardous activities include (a) work which exposes children to physical, psychological, or sexual abuse; (b) work underground, under water, at dangerous heights, or in confined spaces; (c) work with dangerous machinery, equipment, and tools; (d) work in an unhealthy environment; (e) work under particularly difficult conditions such as work for long hours or during the night [Worst Forms of Child Labor, Recommendation No. 190, Article 3, 1999].



Worst Forms of Child Labor

The worst forms of child labor comprise: (a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; (b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances; (c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties; (d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children [Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (No.182) 1999].



Image 1. A house in a wealthy neighborhood in Kathmandu. Credit: @Free the Slaves

Introduction

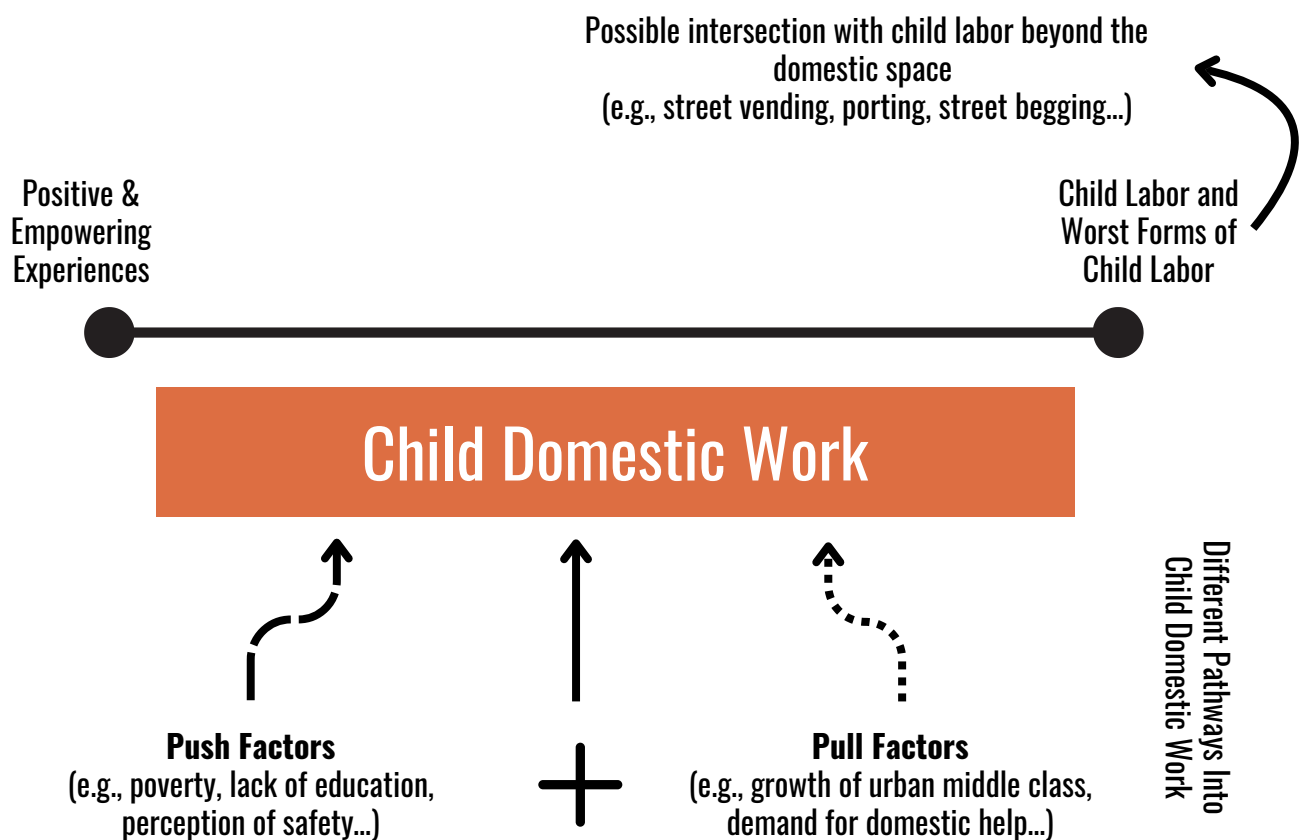
According to the most recent estimates released by the International Labor Organization (ILO), 17.2 million children worldwide are in domestic work, representing 6.5% of all children in economic activity. Most of them (67.1%) are girls (ILO, 2013a). In fact, it is estimated that girls under the age of 16 are employed in the domestic sector more than in any other area of work (ibid). Additionally, 65.1% of all children employed in the domestic sector are younger than 14 years old, with 7.4 million being age 5 to 11 and 3.8 million being age 12 to 14 (ibid). Considering that those estimates rely on household surveys that cannot realistically capture all instances of children working in private houses, the numbers are likely much higher.

In the ILO Domestic Workers Convention (No.189), 2011, domestic workers are defined as workers who provide services for third-party private households. Typically, they engage in activities such as preparing, cooking, buying and serving food, washing, ironing and mending clothes, cleaning the house, caring for an infant or an elderly person, and guarding the house (ILO, 2013b; Erulkar et al., 2022).

The reasons why children are recruited to work in the domestic sector include family poverty, lack of access to education, ethnic-based marginalization, domestic violence and abuse, displacement and migration, the loss of one or both parents, and debt bondage (Freedom Fund, NORC & The Khana Group, 2024). Other reasons specific to child domestic work are the illusion that domestic service offers educational and occupational opportunities, the belief that domestic work is a safe occupation for girls and one that can prepare them to their future roles as wives and mothers, and the increasing demand for domestic help as urban women in developing countries progressively engage in economic activities outside the house (ILO 2013b). When child domestic work takes place in the framework of child fostering, socio-cultural practices also act as an important driver (Jacqueline, 2004).

Most child domestic workers worldwide move from poor, rural areas to wealthy, urban centers. In some cases, they may even move across national borders (Loungou, 2011). As they relocate to the city to work as domestic helpers, children are encouraged, or even forced, by their parents (ILO, 2002). In other cases, children are recruited by intermediaries who broker the deal between the children's families and the employers and transport the children to their new houses (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Freedom Fund, NORC & The Khana Group, 2024). However, this should not suggest that children are entirely devoid of agency. In many cases, it is the children themselves who decide to leave their families and seek employment in a city as domestic workers, believing that this occupation may offer them better life opportunities (Blagbrough, 2007).

Figure 1. A conceptualization of child domestic work



As much as children enter domestic work for different reasons and through different pathways, there are also considerable differences in the reality that children face once they start to work as domestic workers – from positive and empowering (Gamlin et al., 2013; Klocker, 2011), to exploitative and abusive (Benvegnú et al., 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2012; Gamlin et al., 2013). Some of the forms of exploitation and abuse to which child domestic workers are commonly exposed include excessively long working hours, the lack of adequate accommodation and clothing, food and sleep deprivation, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, and exposure to hazards. Significantly, the exploitation of child domestic workers may extend beyond the domestic space. For instance, child domestic workers may be exploited by their employers in small informal businesses (Jacquemin, 2006), on farms (Freedom Fund, NORC & The Khana Group, 2024), and in street vending (Devatop Center, n.d.).

Child domestic work is thus a highly heterogeneous phenomenon that can assume different characteristics in different settings and that can have different meanings for different children. Acknowledging the complexity of this form of employment, in-depth and context-specific studies seem critical to the development of adequate, realistic, and sustainable responses capable of protecting the rights and the dignity of child domestic workers.

Building on these considerations, the report aims to offer a detailed investigation into the reality of child domestic workers in Nepal, where it is a common practice for wealthy urban families to employ children as domestic helpers. Since in recent years the phenomenon of child domestic work has remained at the margins of the discourse on child labor in Nepal – where it has been overshadowed by the more visible forms of child labor that take place in agriculture, brick kilns, restaurants, and entertainment venues – this report aims to produce original evidence on the lives of child domestic workers. The intention of this research effort is to end the neglect to which child domestic workers have been subjected and to ultimately guide government agencies, employers, civil society organizations, and families of origin towards steps capable of ensuring greater protection to children in the domestic sector.

Image 2. Skyline in Kathmandu. Credit: @Free the Slaves





Image 3. A young boy engaged in street selling in Kathmandu. Credit: @Free the Slaves

The Complex Reality of Child Labor in Nepal

In Nepal, the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 2056 (2000), the 2015 Constitution, the Labour Act 2074 (2017), and the Act Relating to Children 2075 (2018) have taken important steps against child labor. Moreover, Nepal has committed to expanding and expediting its efforts to eradicate child labor as a Pathfinder Country in the framework of Alliance 8.7.

However, despite these commitments, child labor is still a major concern in the country. In the words of the Government of Nepal (2019), “[a]lthough the constitution and the law prohibit the use of children in hazardous work, and policies and plans include provisions to reduce child labor [...] the problem still remains significant.” According to the most recent data, in fact, Nepal counts 1.1 million children in labor, accounting for 15.3% of the total child population (ILO & Government of Nepal, 2021).

As reported in the Government of Nepal’s National Master Plan on the Elimination of Child Labor (2018-2028) and the Nepal Child Labor Report released by the ILO and the Government of Nepal, child labor in the country has been decreasing in sectors like carpet industries and stone quarries, while it has been increasing in street vending business, motorcycle and bicycle repair, goods transportation, domestic work, brick kilns, garment industry, transportation sector, restaurants, and construction sectors (Government of Nepal, 2018).

In Kathmandu, Nepali boys and girls are commonly employed in cabin restaurants, bars, khaja ghars (snack shops), massage parlors, and dohori folk dance bars that comprise the adult entertainment sector. There, they are victims of salary retention, low wages, long working hours, forced labor, forced alcohol consumption, and commercial sexual exploitation (Hacker & Sharma, 2022; Risal & Hacker, 2018). In the country's major urban centers, child labor is also widely observed in street vending, with children selling samosas, balloons, and other small items. Children are also employed extensively in teashops and small restaurants where they cook, serve customers, clean, and carry water jars (Hacker & Bhattarai, 2024a; Hacker & Bhattarai, 2024b). In those places, they work in congested and unhealthy environments, work very long hours, have some time off only during slow business hours, and are often underpaid (ILO, UNICEF & Government of Nepal, 2020; de Groot, 2010).

Beyond urban areas, tens of thousands of children continue to be exploited in the agricultural sector, where they are trapped alongside their families in the bonded labor systems known as haruwa charuwa and haliya (Cannon & Oosterhoff, 2021). There, physical harassment, extreme fatigue, exclusion from school, and vulnerability to injury and illness are part of the daily reality of those boys and girls. Children are also exploited for labor in the brick industry, where they are forced to work in hazardous conditions, including exposure to dust, flames, extreme heat, inadequate ventilation, and where they are forced to engage in hazardous tasks, such as carrying heavy weights and operating heavy machineries (ILO, UNICEF & Government of Nepal, 2020).

Among all children engaged in some form of work in Nepal, the latest estimates indicate that 12,265 are working as domestic workers in Nepal's urban areas (CWISH, 2016).[1] In Kathmandu alone, 1 in 20 households reportedly has a child employed in domestic work (ibid). In fact, it has long been a common practice among Nepal's middle and upper classes to employ children as live-in domestic workers, tasked with carrying out a wide range of domestic chores inside the house (WIEGO, 2020). According to existing reports, this practice is especially observed in the case of girls (UNICEF, ILO & World Bank, 2003), to the point that nearly all rural girls migrating to Nepal's cities are engaged in domestic work, while domestic work among boys is less widespread because more occupational opportunities (e.g., transportation) are available to them.

However, while child domestic work continues to be widespread in Nepal's urban areas, the phenomenon has remained insufficiently addressed in recent years, and child domestic workers have remained at the margins of the most recent literature and discourse on child labor.[2] This is especially the case vis-à-vis forms of child labor that take place in more visible settings, such as agriculture, brick kilns, and the adult entertainment sector. While the difficulty of exploring a form of child labor that occurs in the private space of the house is certainly a major challenge for researchers and a major hindrance to data collection, the consequence is that very little is known and understood on the current reality of Nepal's child domestic workers. For its part, the lack of accurate and updated evidence on child domestic workers has inhibited the design of adequate and effective responses, leaving this group of children forgotten and vulnerable.

[1] Considering that this number is based on household surveys and does not capture child domestic workers in rural areas, the total number of children employed as domestic workers in Nepal is likely much higher than reflected in official statistics.

[2] The most recent study on Nepal's child domestic workers is a quantitative survey carried out by CWISH in 2016.



Image 4. Houses on the outskirts of Kathmandu, Nepal. Credit: @Free the Slaves

Research Objectives

The present research aims to shed light on the current reality of child domestic work in Nepal, so as to collect evidence that can inform the development and implementation of effective interventions aimed at protecting children in the domestic sector.

Specifically, the objectives of the proposed research are the following. First, document the pathways whereby children enter the domestic sector in Nepal's cities. While previous studies have noted that Nepalese children are typically recruited into the domestic sector by their own parents (Blagbrough, 2007), the role played by traffickers, intermediaries, and employers should be explored further. Similarly, the role that children themselves play in the decision to pursue employment in the domestic sector calls for deeper investigation. When exploring children's recruitment, it is also important to discuss those social, economic, and cultural factors that pull and push Nepalese children into the domestic sector and how they intersect with and reinforce each other. Third, the research aims to unveil the experiences of child domestic workers in Nepal's urban areas to offer an in-depth assessment of their work and living conditions. At the same time, the research aims to explore the intersections of child domestic labor with other forms of child labor, which no study has addressed thus far.

Research Questions

Areas of Interest	Trajectories	How are children recruited into the domestic sector? What is the role of intermediaries, traffickers, employers? What is the role played by children themselves?
	Drivers	What factors push and pull children into the domestic sector? What is the social, economic, and cultural context in which the recruitment of child domestic workers takes place?
	Experiences	What are the life and work conditions of child domestic workers? What abuses and exploitations do child domestic workers suffer? How does child domestic labor intersect with other forms of labor?
Recommendations		

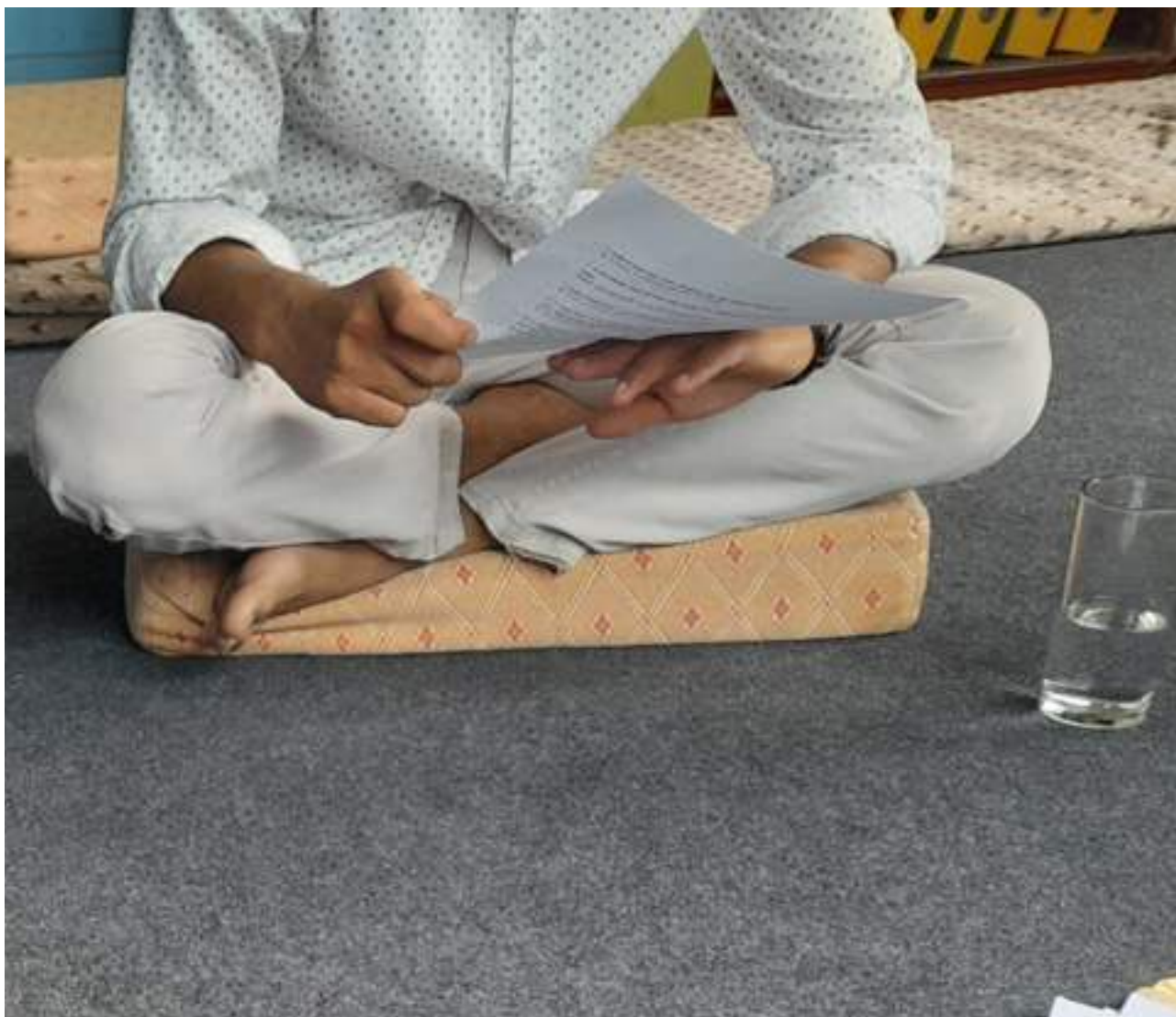


Image 5. A child reviewing the consent form prior to starting the interview. Credit: @Free the Slaves

Methodology

As the phenomenon of children working in the domestic sector in Nepal is most prevalent in the Kathmandu Valley, this research focused on child domestic workers in the capital city. To answer the proposed questions, a qualitative approach was employed. Qualitative research, in fact, is particularly well suited to generate rich, detailed, and in-depth findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). As such, it is useful to illuminate complex phenomena, whose nuances might be difficult to capture quantitatively. Moreover, qualitative research is especially useful to understand what meaning people give to experiences, how they position themselves vis-à-vis certain issues, how they perceive and understand certain phenomena, and why they follow certain patterns of thinking and behavior (Creswell, 2007). A more detailed discussion of the methodology and the ethical considerations that informed this research can be found in the Appendix.

Interviews with Child Domestic Workers

A total of 20 interviews were conducted with children aged 12-17 who are currently employed as domestic workers and with young people aged 18-20 who were employed as domestic workers when they were children.

Table 1. Child participants, interviews

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Hometown
C/I01	18	Chhetri	Male	Doti
C/I02	12	Indigenous	Female	Dhanusa
C/I03	12	Indigenous	Female	Sindhupalchowk
C/I04	14	Chhetri	Male	Bajura
C/I05	15	Brahmin	Female	Nuwakot
C/I06	13	Terai Hindu	Female	Nuwakot
C/I07	18	Terai Madhesi	Male	Dhanusa
C/I08	18	Indigenous	Male	Okhaldhunga
C/I09	14	Brahmin	Female	Jumla
C/I10	14	Chhetri	Female	Jumla
C/I11	16	Chhetri	Female	Sindhupalchowk
C/I12	17	Indigenous	Female	Dhading
C/I13	20	Indigenous	Female	Palpa
C/I14	19	Chhetri	Female	Dang
C/I15	20	Indigenous	Male	Okhaldhunga
C/I16	18	Chhetri	Female	Ramechhap
C/I17	17	Chhetri	Male	Bajhang
C/I18	12	Chhetri	Male	Karnali
C/I19	15	Indigenous	Female	Jajarkot
C/I20	16	Indigenous	Female	Okhaldhunga

The interview process started with an icebreaker activity, whose aim was to create a comfortable environment. Following that, a semi-structured questionnaire composed of open-ended questions was used to guide the conversation. This allowed flexibility throughout the conversation, gave respondents the space to articulate their views and experiences in as much depth and detail as they wanted to, facilitated a dynamic and open conversation, and allowed the research team to adjust the questionnaire according to each child's situation. Beyond the specificities of each interview, respondents were invited to share about how they entered the domestic sector, what factors drove this decision, and their experiences living and working in their employers' house – and, possibly, beyond the house as well.

Image 6. Children taking part in the dot voting activity during the first workshop. Credit: @Free the Slaves



Participatory Workshops with Child Domestic Workers

Two full-day participatory workshops were organized with 10 children aged 13-17 currently employed as domestic workers. In the context of this research, participatory workshops aimed to foster dialogue among children with similar experiences, encourage self-reflection, support them to identify key issues related to child domestic work and think of solutions, and value the children's own knowledge, experiences, and perspectives.

Table 2. Child participants, workshops

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Hometown
C/W01	15	Brahmin	Female	Okhaldhunga
C/W02	13	Indigenous	Female	Morang
C/W03	16	Terai Hindu	Male	Sindhuli
C/W04	14	Chhetri	Male	Arghakhachi
C/W05	14	Chhetri	Male	Accham
C/W06	14	Indigenous	Male	Surkhet
C/W07	17	Indigenous	Female	Bajura
C/W08	15	Brahmin	Female	Hetauda
C/W09	14	Chhetri	Female	Jumla
C/W10	15	Chhetri	Female	Salgadi

The first half of the first workshop aimed to collectively define the problem of child domestic workers. Through a diamond ranking exercise, children were invited to work in small groups and to identify the issues that have the greatest importance for them as domestic workers. A dot voting exercise was then used to allow each child to individually vote his/her three priority issues. The purpose was to make sure that the children's priorities and needs are adequately reflected in our research, including in our approach to data analysis and interpretation. Following that, the second half of the workshop was devoted to evidence generation. Acknowledging that drawing is a powerful means through which children can comfortably and confidently express themselves, especially when addressing sensitive topics such as child labor, children were asked to draw their "river of life" (i.e., their life story), identifying major turning points, events, characters, and feelings.

The second workshop started from there. Each child presented and explained to the rest of the group his/her drawing and afterwards children worked together in groups to identify similarities and differences across pathways, drivers, and experiences. In the second part of the workshop, children worked together on solution-thinking. Here, children were instructed to draw a Chapati diagram, placing the child in the center and identifying the actors that have the most and least influence on the lives of child domestic workers. Following that, they were invited to "enter" an imaginary time machine and to "travel" to their future child labor-free communities. The final step was to develop recommendations in small groups, identifying specific actions that each stakeholder identified in the Chapati diagram should take to advance the imagined ideal of a child labor-free community.

Focus Group Discussion with the Employers of Child Domestic Workers

A half-day focus group discussion was conducted with 5 employers of child domestic workers, who were identified, contacted, and recruited through the mediation of local school principals. This process of data collection is especially important because employers have typically been excluded from existing studies on child domestic work, both within and beyond Nepal.[3] While the difficulty of recruiting employers of child domestic workers as research participants has been widely lamented in the literature, our understanding of child domestic work will remain limited and unsatisfactory unless efforts are made to better illuminate the “demand side” of the phenomenon.

Throughout the workshops, employers were invited to discuss their reasons for employing domestic help, their reasons for recruiting children rather than adults as domestic workers, the ways in which they recruited children, the perceived positive and beneficial aspects of employing child domestic workers, the perceived negative and problematic aspects of employing child domestic workers, their perception of the work and life conditions of child domestic workers in Nepal, their relationship with the child domestic workers employed in their own house, the tasks assigned to their child domestic workers, and their opinions on whether something should be done to change this form of child employment in Nepal.

To elicit an open as possible conversation on those topics, at the beginning of the workshop the research team read out a vignette telling the story of a Nepalese employer and his attitude towards the child domestic worker in his house. Using that fictional story as a starting point to raise questions made it easier for employers to express their opinions and share their perspectives with the researchers.

[3] Notable exceptions include N. Klocker, “Negotiating change: working with children and their employers to transform child domestic work in Iringa, Tanzania”, *Children’s Geographies*, Vol.9, No.2 (2011): 205-220; P. Olayiwola, “Vulnerabilities, support systems and child domestic work in South-West Nigeria”, *Children’s Geographies*, Vol.19, No.6 (2021): 705-716.

Table 3. Employer participants, focus group

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Profession
E01	Female	Brahmin	Housewife
E02	Male	Chhetri	Retired
E03	Female	Indigenous	Housewife
E04	Female	Chhetri	Housewife
E05	Female	Brahmin	Housewife

Interviews With Key Informants

In-depth interviews were also conducted with 10 topical experts who have a solid and well-documented knowledge of the reality of child domestic work in Nepal.

A semi-structured questionnaire composed of open-ended questions was employed for the purpose of this investigation. This allowed flexibility throughout the conversation and enabled the research team to adjust the questionnaire according to each respondent's specific knowledge and field experience. In line with the research objectives of this research, respondents were invited to share about the children's recruitment in the domestic sector, the drivers behind their recruitment into the domestic sectors, the conditions and circumstances under which child domestic workers are found to live and work, the engagement of child domestic workers beyond the domestic walls, and the impact that working in the domestic sector has for children.

Table 4. Key informants, interviews

Informant	Gender	Profession
KI/01	Female	NGO worker
KI/02	Female	School principal
KI/03	Male	Government official
KI/04	Female	NGO worker
KI/05	Male	School teacher
KI/06	Male	School teacher
KI/07	Female	NGO worker
KI/08	Female	Government official
KI/09	Male	NGO worker
KI/10	Female	Government official

A Reflection on Strengths and Limitations

This study provides an in-depth assessment of child domestic work in Kathmandu, offering detailed knowledge on the phenomenon in its current manifestation. From a methodological perspective, the participatory approach followed in the workshop with the children and the inclusion of employers in the focus group discussion represent important points of strength of the research that set it apart from previous studies on the topic. However, a series of limitations remain. First, the research was limited to 30 child domestic workers and 5 employers, which limits the generalizability of the findings beyond those groups of participants. Second, the study focused on Kathmandu, which leaves unexplored whether and to what extent the dynamics described in this research apply to other urban contexts within Nepal. Finally, there is a risk of recall bias among former child domestic workers and a risk of social desirability bias among employers. While the research team worked to minimize these risks (e.g., using vignettes), they can never be fully eliminated.



Image 7. The river of life drawn by one of the children during the first workshop. Credit: @Free the Slaves

Life as Child Domestic Workers in Kathmandu

Trajectories into Child Domestic Work

Nepalese children who are recruited as domestic workers are typically very young. While not all children we spoke with could remember the exact age at which they moved to Kathmandu, the average age seems to be 9 years old. The youngest children were 5-6 years old when they entered the domestic sector (C17, C20), while the oldest child was 13 years old (C14). Other children who could not recall their age noted that they were “very young” when they moved to Kathmandu (C08). Interestingly, there is considerable discrepancy in this regard between what was reported by the children and what was reported by the employers, who mostly declared hiring child domestic workers who are above the age of 13 (FGD). Conversely, key informants gave age ranges very similar to those reported by the children.

Children surveyed, who work in Nepal’s capital as domestic workers, arrived in Kathmandu from villages in rural, remote areas of the country. The journey to Kathmandu can be long and exhausting, involving multiple buses and last for a number of days (C01, C18). A long journey on foot may also be necessary to reach the closest town with a bus station (CW). For some children, this was the first time taking a bus and travelling on the road (C02). For all children, this was the very first time leaving their village and seeing the city – an emotional experience that some experienced with happiness and enthusiasm, curious to explore the capital and dive into their new lives (C03), while others felt sadness, were scared of the unknown, and upset by the separation from their family (C05, C06, C20, CW).

For the first time, I was travelling to Kathmandu. It took one day to travel from Bajura to Surkhet. After reaching Surkhet, we stayed there for a night, and the next day, my maternal uncle's brother booked tickets to Kathmandu for us. After that, it took two days to travel from Surkhet to Kathmandu. I came to Kathmandu with my aunt (father's sister). She left me there at the bus park and sir (the employer) came to pick me up.
[C03]

I cried a lot on the way to Kathmandu. Aunt (employer) bought me some snacks to console me, but I threw them from the bus, and aunt slapped me on my face. She even scolded me by saying that if I cry one more time, then she will leave me alone at that place. After that, I didn't fall asleep the whole way. I was just crying continuously. [C13]

Depending on the dynamics whereby children are recruited into the domestic sector, they may travel to Kathmandu with one of their parents or relatives, with a sibling, with an intermediary, or with the employers themselves (C06, C09, C15, C20). Some children even made the journey unaccompanied and were subsequently met at the bus station in Kathmandu by someone from the employer's house – often using a picture as an identification method (C18). Other children, after arriving in Kathmandu, spent the first night at a relative's or acquaintance's house, only to be brought to the employer on the following day (C17).

An interesting case was that of a child from a village at the border with India (C07). Initially, he moved to Kathmandu to work in the house of the daughter of a local landowner. After that lady's husband passed away, he was brought to work for a friend of the original employer, thus moving from house to house within Kathmandu. As that family moved to the United States and he was left to fend for himself, he returned to his village. Less than a year later, as the family for whom he had been working returned from abroad, he went back to Kathmandu with them. When the employers left once again, he moved back to his village, only to eventually return to Kathmandu and find work as a domestic worker in the house of a former teacher of his.

While this case is quite unique in its complexity, it is interesting to understand how children's transition into the domestic sector may be non-linear and how the typical rural-to-urban trajectory may become more intricate. Moreover, the urban-to-urban trajectory whereby a child domestic worker leaves the initial employer for a new one was also reported by other children (C12, C15, CW). Here, the most common reasons for shifting families seemed to be the employer's death, the employer's relocation abroad, or a fall-out between the child and the employer, as reported by a child who was dismissed by her original employer because she was accused of not knowing how to do household chores (C13).

Actors Involved in the Recruitment Process

The modalities through which a child is brought to Kathmandu are heavily influenced by the recruitment process and by the actors involved therein. Most children acknowledged the role of their parents (C04, C06, C15, C20). In the workshop, during the Chapati diagram exercise, the children identified the parents as the most relevant actors, noting that “children come to work as domestic child workers based on their parent’s decision” (CW). In some cases, it may be the parents who initiate the recruitment process by looking for opportunities in the city for their children (KI01, KI10), especially when they indirectly know the owners of the house where the child would be living (C20, CW). In other, more common cases, the parents are contacted by the employers and/or intermediaries with an offer of employment for their children, and they agree to it (KI01, KI03, KI05, KI06).

Other relatives are also found to play a role (C11, C12, C17). In some cases, it was the uncle or aunt who approached the child or the parents with an offer of employment in the house of acquaintances (C09, C19). During the workshop session, one of the children said that his uncle arranged for him to work in someone’s house in Kathmandu and that he did the same for many other children from the village, thus acting as a regular intermediary (CW). In one child’s case, the uncle was already working in the employer’s house as a gardener (C05). In other cases, it was the grandparents who played the biggest role (C15), as reported by a child whose grandfather knew the employer and proposed that he take his granddaughter in the house as a domestic worker (C10). Other, more distant relatives can also be influential in the recruitment process (C20, KI01, KI05).

My maternal uncle asked me if I wanted to come to Kathmandu to support one of his friends, as there was a small problem in the house, as there was a small child to be taken care of, and there was no one else apart from the husband and wife. That is why I came here. [C09]

Beyond adult family members, siblings are also important agents in the recruitment process. In some children’s cases, it was the older brothers who decided to send them to Kathmandu (C01, C17). Other children were brought to the employer’s house by their sisters, who were already living and working in the capital and knew the prospective employers directly or indirectly (C07, C18). The connections that older siblings establish in the city, in fact, can be the primary channel through which a child is placed somewhere as a domestic worker. This was clearly noted by some children whose current employers are relatives of the employers where their older siblings work (CW).

However, this research also contributed to existing knowledge by illuminating the role played in the recruitment process by other actors who had not received great attention in previous studies – namely, employers and intermediaries. Employers who need a child domestic worker typically mobilize their own network, reaching out to relatives, friends, employees already working in their house, or acquaintances from their own village of origin. A child, for instance, was brought to the city by a well-known guru (religious figure) whose uncle was renting an apartment in Kathmandu and had been informed that the house owner was looking for a child domestic worker (C01).

As the guru visited his village for puja (rituals), he acted as an intermediary, looking for a child to bring back to the city. In the case of another child, the owner of her mother's workplace knew someone looking for a child domestic worker, and that is how the girl was brought to work there (CW).

For example, if I need a child domestic worker, I will tell someone I know, and they will inform someone in their village. They tell the parents of the child that they will keep the child in someone else's home, they convince the family, and bring the children to the employers. [KI06]

Neighbors of the child's family, as well as people from surrounding villages, are also typical intermediaries, acting as a liaison between the child and the employer (C14). In other cases, the employer and the child's family already know each other because they are from the same village, and the employer approaches the family, suggesting that they send one of their children to work in his house (C17, KI01). One of the employers with whom we spoke confirmed that when she was looking for a child domestic worker, she approached an acquaintance asking whether she knew of a child who would be willing to support her with some chores.

There was a person from outside our village, who was not related to us either. We just came to know him. Initially, a brother from a nearby village was recruited as a worker, but his parents, perhaps knowing about child labor, decided not to send him. The person had visited our home, and after that, my father asked me if I wanted to go instead. Initially, I had not even seen Kathmandu, how it would be. So, I declined. I was not well acquainted to the person either, but my father knew him. We called him baje (elderly person). I ended up going to Kathmandu. [C16]

Most importantly, however, our research unveiled the agency of children themselves. Many of the children with whom we interacted played an active part in the recruitment process, taking the initiative of going to the city (C02, C04, C05, C12). Unsurprisingly, the decision to move to Kathmandu seems to be more common among children who already have an older sibling living and working in the city (C18, CW) or among children who team up with someone else (e.g., a cousin) to make the journey (C14). Others reported that someone else (e.g., parents) initiated the recruitment, but that they were consulted and that they agreed, contributing to the final decision (C01, C03, C09). Interestingly, children also revealed agency when deciding to move from one employer to another in Kathmandu (C07, C12, C15). Employers confirmed the agency of children, noting that on occasions, they were approached by children working in their house asking for a placement for a sibling back home.

One of my brothers told me about his experience working in Kathmandu and mentioned that I could also work and study there. He also informed my uncle's daughter to work in Kathmandu. After hearing his experience, I decided to go to Kathmandu. [CW]

However, the extent to which children understand the significance and the implications of their decision is often limited. The vast majority of children are given very little information on what their new life in Kathmandu will look like. Some children are lied to (C06, C07, C09, C10, C19), others are given only partial information (C11, CW, C17). For instance, a child was told that he would be going to a good school and that he would be living in a nice house in exchange for some occasional household help (C20). Here as well, there is a discrepancy between what was reported by the children and what was declared by the employers, as the latter argued that the children “come to our houses knowingly”.

I had to stay at someone else's home (employer) and study, which I came to know later on after arriving here. I was not informed while at the village because they might have thought that I would not come if I knew the truth. [C19]

The baje [an elderly person who acted as intermediary] told me that I had to help a bit, manage my bed, and help the employer in the kitchen, and that I don't need to do much other work. He further said that the employers would send me to a school. So, I had to go to school and help with household chores, that's it. But later, when I came here, I [found out that] I had to do all the work. [C16]

As such, many children come to Kathmandu with great expectations that they will be able to finish their studies, earn money, and have a better life (C09, C14, C15, C17, C19). Some children remembered their initial excitement about life in a big city (C10, C17). In the river of life exercise that was done during one of the workshops, a child drew rainbows and fish to picture her excitement about coming to Kathmandu in the first place. For most, however, those hopes crash with the reality as soon as they get to their employer's house and they are faced with intense domestic work, marginalization, and loneliness (C19, C12, C13, CW) – something to which we will return in much greater detail in the next sections.

I came to Kathmandu, happy that I would be supported with my education, but it was not the case. [C19]

Significantly, the children's parents may also receive false or incomplete information from the recruiters. Some children, for instance, reported that their parents are not aware that they need to work. They just think that their child is staying with a wealthy family and is attending school (C11). Key informants with whom we spoke also noted that many parents are unaware of the reality that awaits their children in Kathmandu. They trust the employers' promises and they believe that the child will have a better life (KI01, KI02, KI03, KI06, KI07).

Before departing, the family lacks awareness on the matter of child labor. There is no guarantee that the child will attend a good school or have sufficient study time, but the family is unaware of these potential issues. They send the children to Kathmandu just because the employer promises to send their child to school, and the family trusts the employer. But the family and the child are both unaware of the scenario after the child comes to work. [KI01]

The lack of awareness on the part of the parents is perpetuated by the fact that they typically do not or cannot follow up appropriately on their children's situations. There can be different reasons for this – they do not have the means to travel to the city to visit the child, the employer calls the parents regularly and gives them positive, if untruthful, updates on the child's situation, the child is instructed by the employer to lie when speaking on the phone with the parents, and/or parents lack the means (e.g., phone or phone credit) to communicate with the child (KI06).

Image 8. Drawings made by children in a public school attended by child domestic workers. Credit: @Free the Slaves



Factors that Push and Pull Children into the Domestic Sector

Regarding the reasons why children move to Kathmandu to work as domestic workers, the one most cited is the lack of sufficient education in the village and the expectation that children will be able to attend a better school in the capital. Some of the children with whom we spoke reported that primary education was not available in their village (C02), that teachers would often be absent (C02) or be unprepared for the job (C18), that continuous changes within the school hindered continuity in education (C01), that stationary materials were not available (C10), or that the only school was far away from the village, requiring children to pass through hard and dangerous terrain (C15, CW).

The school was very far from my home; we had to walk almost two hours to reach it. In addition to that, we had to climb a steep pathway and I was a small child. That was one reason and we had difficulty in family as well so... [C15]

This bleak reality of education in the village was further confirmed by the key informants and the employers, who noted that rural schools do not follow the minimum recruitment standards set by the government to appoint teachers, thus creating a quality gap between teachers in rural and urban areas.

The first reason [why children become domestic workers] is quality education in a city that attracts children, as there is a lack of quality education in the village. [In the village], the school up to grade 5 is near home, but the school that teaches higher grades is located far away, so children have to walk a lot to attend school. There is no safe environment for children to make the journey from home to school, as children may have to pass by a forest, and it can be risky. [...] Then children start thinking it is better to work than stay at home. The family also searches for work for their children. In such a way, children entering the city to work is increasing. [KI01]

For some families, the barriers to education are further compounded by economic difficulties that prevent parents from paying school fees and buying school supplies (C16, CW, C10). In fact, poverty is another factor that pushes parents to look for employment opportunities for their children in the city (C04). For some children, poverty within the family is due to the illness of one of their parents (C02, C17, CW). For other children, poverty is connected to the lack of a breadwinner in the family (C01, C05). Another respondent mentioned that the family did not own land and the parents were forced to work on someone else's property for a meager income (C07). Regardless of the specific cause of poverty, all children reported that this burdened them with the responsibility to earn money (C01).

My mother had a tumor and she was treated at Gangalal hospital. After treatment she is doing better but she must take medicines. This has hampered my family's financial condition even more. [...] Due to the weak financial situation of my family, I have to stay at my employer's house. [CW]

Other reasons that explain the decision to go to work in Kathmandu include alcoholism within the family (C20, KI04, C12), domestic violence (KI05), loss of, or abandonment by, one or both parents (C01, C04, C13, C17), and multiple marriages that may expose a child to mistreatment or neglect on part of the stepparent (KI04, KI05). Socio-cultural norms were also mentioned, especially with respect to girls (C11, C16). A schoolteacher and a school principal with whom we spoke noted that patriarchal norms entrenched in Nepalese society create an expectation for girls to get married and engage in household chores. Because of this, domestic work is seen as a good way through which girls can learn their future duties (KI05, KI08). Interestingly, these same patriarchal norms contribute to explaining why employers typically prefer girls as child domestic workers, thinking that they are naturally more inclined to domestic chores (KI06).

She [mother] thought it would help with our studies. Because my father always came home drinking alcohol and the family environment was also not that good since we were a lot of members in the family and since my elder sister was also employed in someone's home, so, expecting that we would be educated in better school, we were sent to be child domestic workers [C20]

To build a comprehensive picture of recruitment into child domestic work, it also seemed important to explore the reasons why employers hire child domestic workers. The employers with whom we spoke argued that they bring in the children to offer them “a better education and better opportunities”, more than to make them work. They “prioritize education for the children”, “some domestic chores, some help in the house” come afterwards. In their view, by hiring child domestic workers from marginalized and poor backgrounds, they give a series of benefits to the children – access to better schools, better care, better living conditions, better opportunities for the future, and skills that will serve the children in life. In what seems to be an oversimplified view of things, employers told us that “the children would not leave their family to work as child domestic workers if it was not benefiting them as well”. This, however, clearly ignores the fact that the children's decision to be employed in the domestic sector is typically caused by circumstances that are beyond their control.

We have not brought them into our family to make them do labor work. We brought them promising a better education. They came here to study. [...] The children would not leave the[ir] family for work as CDW if it [was] not benefiting them as well. [FGD]

You are helping your working child to be a better and successful individual in her life. She will never forget that in her life; she will always accredit you for what you have done to improve her life. In addition, you are not just ensuring a quality education of the working child but also teaching her the life skills required to live a better life. [FGD]

Clearly, we could not judge the truthfulness of those statements. However, the employers in the focus group did acknowledge that “other employers” primarily hire children to make them work in the house without any interest for the child’s wellbeing and education.

Among some employers [who hire children for work], there is a mindset that the primary reason for bringing young children is to do labor work. Those kinds of people go searching for working children. They don’t consider such children as a member of the family but just a worker to do household chores such as washing clothes, cleaning house, cooking food, cleaning utensils, and taking care of the employer’s children during morning and evening. So, to perform all these tasks, they search for child workers. [FGD]

With respect to the perceived benefits of hiring child domestic workers instead of adult domestic workers, employers in the focus group noted that some people hire children thinking that they can be more easily controlled than adults, that they are more submissive and obedient, and that they are incapable of saying no, and arguing with the employer. Some employers (from whom, of course, people in the focus group distanced themselves) also believe that they can make children work more using threats and fear. Another reported benefit is that children sleep in the house and therefore can act as security guards 24/7, while most adults would come, do the required chores, and leave.

At the same time, employers reported that hiring child domestic workers comes with many challenges – they need to take care of them when sick, feed them, and clothe them, engage in household chores alongside the children, take care of all household chores while the children are in school, teach the children how to behave properly (especially when guests are around), protect the children from bad company, and bear the responsibility for those children. Interestingly, we will see that the reality depicted by the children is quite different than what the employers suggested.

Access to School and Education Opportunities

After moving to the employer's house, children reported that they could go to school on a mostly regular basis. There was considerable variation, however, with respect to the time that they needed to wait before being enrolled in school. Some children were enrolled on the first days (C01, C02, C11, C16), others were enrolled a few months after moving to the city (C10, C20), while others had to wait even one, two, or three years before they could finally join a classroom (C06, C07, C13, C17). In one child's case, the alleged reason why the employers waited more than a year before sending him to school was that the child was not fluent in Nepali, as he was raised only speaking the local language (C17).

I got enrolled at school, a year after I started to work in that house. For 2-3 years, I worked at their house and didn't go to school. The family guest and some villagers who used to visit there asked them [employers] if I had joined school or not. Only after that, the employer enrolled me in school. Even my sister told the employer to enrol me. I was then enrolled in grade 2, and I was around 11 years old. [C07]

Image 9. Buses arriving in Kathmandu. Credit: @Bryon Lippincott



In this regard, NGO workers with whom we spoke noted that there has been a positive change over the past few years, as the pressure exerted by some Nepalese children's rights organizations encouraged employers to send their child domestic workers to school (KI01). School principals also confirmed that the rate of school access among child domestic workers has increased quite considerably in recent years (KI07, KI08).

However, a full understanding of the reality of child domestic workers' education cannot stop at their enrollment in school. First, it must be noted that child domestic workers are exclusively enrolled in public schools, where fees are much lower. This stands in stark contrast with the employers' own children, who are enrolled in Kathmandu's private schools. As we had the opportunity to visit a number of those public schools, some observations need to be made in this regard. The teaching staff there is positively and sincerely committed to providing the children with the best education that they can offer. The enthusiasm with which several school principals and schoolteachers agreed to support our research was a testament to their interest in the children's well-being. However, the commitment of teachers is inevitably constrained by the circumstances, which are characterized by overcrowding in the classrooms, less than optimal hygiene facilities, and limited resources to invest in facilities and food.

Another problem is that child domestic workers may need to miss their classes when there is work that needs to be done. A child, for instance, told us that sometimes she is forced to miss school to stay in the house and look after the employers' grandfather (C12). Another child said that one of the employers may ask him to stay at home rather than going to school to complete some household chores (CW). All employers who took part in the focus group discussion declared that their child domestic workers always go to school six days a week.

When allowed to go to school, child domestic workers are often late for their first class of the day due to work that they need to complete in the house (C06, C09, C11). One child even reported having to regularly miss the last two classes of the day so that she could pick up the employer's own children from school (C14). In the words of another child, the employer allowed him to go to school only after cooking the food, cleaning the kitchen, and cleaning the temple utensils. On many occasions, that meant arriving half an hour late to school and leaving the house on an empty stomach, as there was no time to eat after completing the morning chores (C17). A schoolteacher with whom we spoke confirmed this, saying that in his school, child domestic workers often arrive late because of work that they must do in the house (KI06).

If I was late for school, then the teacher would make me stand outside the classroom for a whole period, saying that I was undisciplined. We should be inside the school by 10:05 AM.

But the employer would not let me go to school unless I completed a certain task, so I had to rush. So, even though it was 10:10 or 10:15 AM, I would run towards my school. It was just 5 minutes away from the employer's home. Despite trying so hard, when I was the last to enter the class, I felt sad. [C16]

Even more common is the situation whereby children are not given enough time to study and complete their homework, as they are required to carry out household tasks as soon as they return home from school (C18). Some children lamented that even during the exam period, they are not given sufficient time to study and prepare (C05), which contradicts (or at the very least nuances) the argument that employers care about the education of their child domestic workers. Only after all the household chores have been completed, which may be late in the evening, can children dedicate themselves to their study (C12). As they do so, they are forced to go to bed late (C19, CW). Another child said that because she cannot complete her homework on time due to the amount of domestic chores assigned to her, she is trying to do some homework when she is in the classroom (C09).

During lunchtime in school, I preferred doing my homework as I would be occupied with work at home, and I might forget what had been taught as well. So, I did my homework during lunch, that is why. And also, I thought that I could always eat snacks at home after returning from school. That is why I had separated lunchtime for my homework. [C17]

I don't get enough time for homework and studying. After completing the house chores, I start doing homework at 10 PM and go to bed between 12 AM and 1 AM. [CW]

Additionally, most child domestic workers reported that employers do not provide them with adequate school supplies, including stationery, books, and uniforms. During the dot voting exercise, children identified the lack of necessary school materials as the most important issue. A schoolteacher working in a school attended by many child domestic workers confirmed that those children often show up to school without proper clothes, for instance, wearing slippers rather than shoes (KI06). Other children, as we could confirm from our own visits to the schools, come to class with stained or torn uniforms.

Another element worth noting is that child domestic workers are not allowed to be late from school and employers are very strict on the fact that as soon as the last class is over, they must return home (C01, C02). Several children even told us that if they happen to be late from school, the employers will scold them (C04) or beat them (C09). According to the children, the reason why they need to return home immediately after school is that employers want them to work and not spend any more time outside the house than what is strictly necessary. It is thus not surprising that all children reported that the school in which they have been enrolled is very close to the employers' house (C02, C03, C05, C17, C18.) On this point, however, the employers in the focus group discussion gave a different version, whereby they want the children to return quickly from school because otherwise they would worry about them.

Relationships With Teachers and Peers

Some children said that when they cannot complete their homework, teachers have no interest in finding out the reasons why the child could not study, and they punish them for not having the homework done (C05, C09, C20). Some teachers even go as far as beating the students (C07, C09). In this environment, children do not feel comfortable talking with their teachers and sharing about their lives (C06, C10, C19). The preference not to talk with the teachers may also relate to the fear that the employer may find out about the child's complaints (C19) – something that says a lot about the fear-based relationship established between the employer and the child domestic worker. Tellingly, some employers even instruct their children to lie at school and – if asked about that – to say that they live with their own family (C17).

The aunt [female employer] had told me that if someone asked me with whom I lived in the house, I should tell them that it was my own home. It was taught to me by her when I joined the school. [...] The same was taught to my best friend from grade 1 by his employers as well. In addition, right now we are addressing my employers as uncle and aunt, but at home we don't address them by this relationship. [C17]

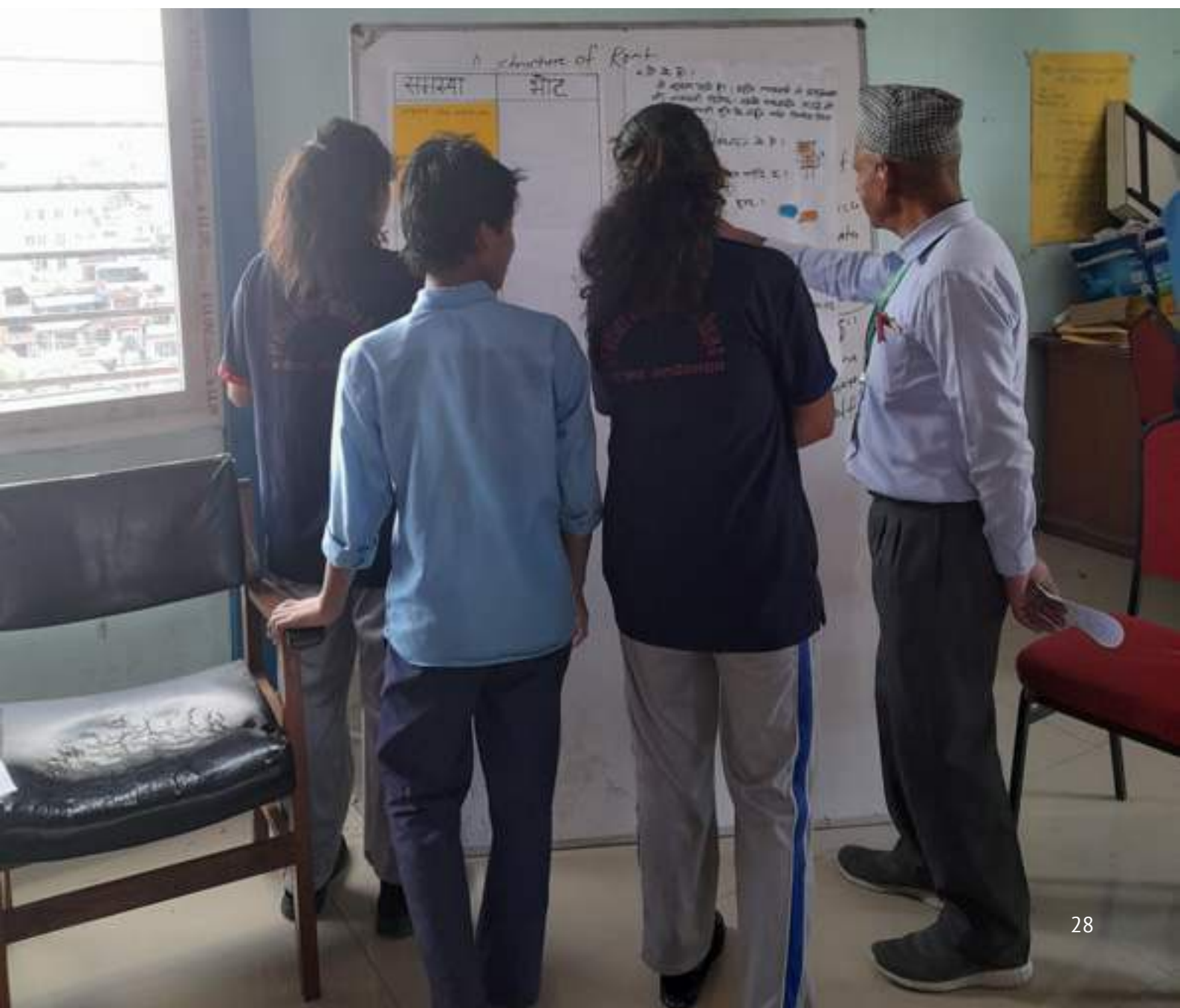
When children feel that they cannot confide in their own teachers, the school becomes a place where adults replicate the exclusion and isolation that child domestic workers already experience in the house (something to which we will return later). To be sure, some children reported a different, more positive relationship with their teachers, whereby they feel comfortable talking with them. However, this was only the case for two children.

Similarly, there is some diversity in the relationship that child domestic workers have with their classmates. A few children told their classmates about their situation (C11, C12, C16). Most children, however, prefer not to share about their life with peers. Some told us that they simply do not feel like talking about this (C09, C10). Others said that they do not speak out of fear of being bullied at school (C03). Still others said that they do not have close enough friends with whom to reach that level of trust and confidence (C17, C20) – a sad indication of the extent of isolation and loneliness that child domestic workers may experience.

The fact that most children reported not having close friendships is connected with the fact that employers prohibit their child domestic workers from hanging out with friends, visiting their friends' houses, and inviting their friends over. Almost all children with whom we spoke reported that they are not allowed to spend time with their friends. Some of the pretexts advanced by employers are that friends may turn out to be bad company (C03, C97), that the house dog may harm the friends and expose the employer to problems (C04), or that children may steal things from the house (C04, C09). Some children told us that they still try occasionally to get outside and meet with friends (C02, C19, C20), but for most children, leaving the house without the employer's knowledge and permission is not an option. A child who once tried to invite a friend to the house was beaten and verbally abused so badly by the employers that she has never dared to try again (C06).

On this same line, most child domestic workers do not have free time during their day. Even during the weekend, children do not regularly get time for themselves (CW). The words of a child were especially powerful in this regard, as she shared that she does not have any free time because the employers “keep telling [her] to do this and do that” (C05). They also prohibit her from attending activities organized by children’s rights organizations because there is household work to do. In the child’s own assessment, however, that prohibition has more to do with the employer’s concern that the child may become “empowered and learn so many things”. Another child reported that on Saturdays (Nepal’s public day of rest) she needs to do extra washing of clothes (C12). The point made by the employers in this regard is that since child domestic workers attend school six days a week, it is fair that on Saturdays they help in the house – an argument clearly oblivious to the fact that child domestic workers are still required to work every day of the week, both before and after school time. Only a few children reported having free time on Saturdays, during which they can “shower, eat, watch TV, play with the employer’s son” (C03) or attend meetings at certain child rights organizations (C17).

Image 10. Child domestic workers and a school principal doing a group activity during the first workshop.
Credit: @Free the Slaves



Relationship with the Family of Origin

As noted above, many child domestic workers lack the support of close friendship circles and lack the support of trusted adults. Even more dramatic is that most child domestic workers lose the capacity to rely on their family of origin. Many children, for instance, told us that they have very little contact with their parents over the phone. This could be as little as once a year or, more commonly, once every few months (CW, C06, C17). One cited reason is that employers do not let the children use the phone and, when they do let them make a call, they instruct them to keep the conversation brief (C06). Another child told us that the employer discouraged her from talking with her parents to avoid getting homesick, and that when her mother called, the employer would speak with her (C16). In the case of another child, the employers concealed his brother's phone number for one and a half years (C17). When the child eventually found that out, the employer made up excuses to delay the call.

Even when they get a chance to talk with their parents over the phone, some children choose not to share their real situation, preferring for their parents to think that everything is going well (C11, C16). While the children do so to prevent their parents from getting worried, the consequence is that they end up even more lonely and isolated, as they must bear the burden of their new life alone.

At first, when I was in grade 5, I used to talk [to my parents] once a year, but after I reached grade 6, online classes started, and since then, I learned to use the phone and contact my mom. After I disconnect the call, my employer scolds me for taking lots of time. As I'm in grade 10, I don't call my mom often because I'm occupied with my studies. [C05]

Equally concerning is the situation of child domestic workers when it comes to visits to the family. Some children are allowed to visit their family once a year during the Dashain holiday (C05, C11, C19, CW). In some employers' houses, however, the holiday period is especially busy, with guests coming and going all the time, which requires the children to stay in their workplace and engage in more household chores (C06). A similar situation is also experienced by those children whose employers leave the country for the holidays, as they want the child domestic worker to stay and take care of the house in their absence (C10).

Other children have an even harder time trying to visit their families. A girl told us that it has been 6-7 years since she last saw her family (C10), two former child domestic workers waited about 6 years after coming to Kathmandu before they could go back home for a visit (C13, C15), and during the workshop session a child mentioned not seeing her family during the three years that she has been in the city (CW). Another could only visit his family once after three years in his first workplace and once after two years in his second workplace (C07).

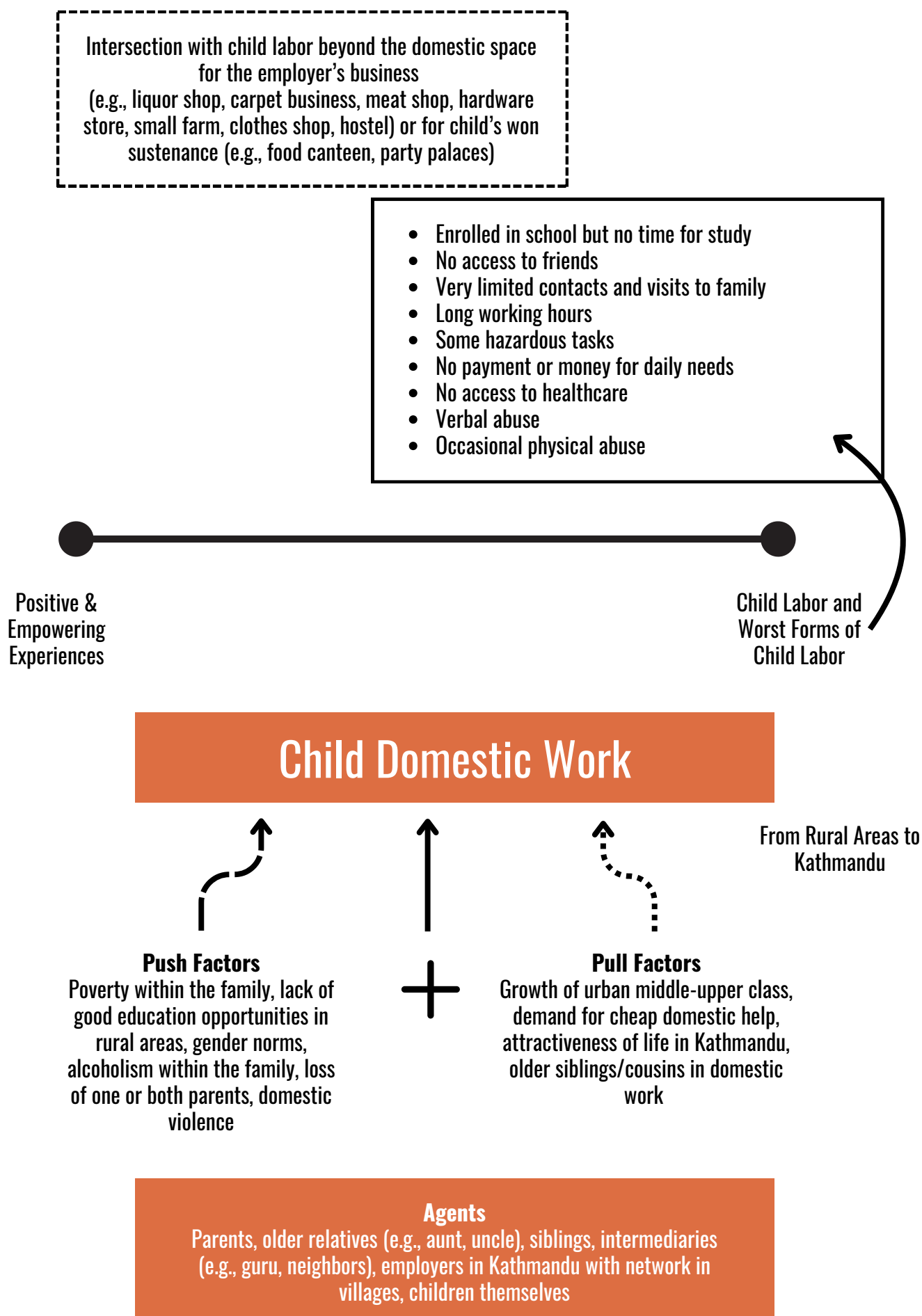
When I tell them [the employers] that I want to go home, they say it's a long journey from Kathmandu to Doti [child's home district]. They say that as an excuse. Once I said I wanted to go home during Dashain, they asked me to complete all the housework beforehand, so it was double the pressure for me than my regular days. I felt bad when they said that. Even this year, my sister-in-law has asked me to go home during Dashain, but I don't think I'll be able to go home because my employer is in the USA, so I must look after their house. [CW]

In a radical reformulation of the narrative, employers in the focus group told us that when their child domestic workers did not go home for Dashain, it was not because of their opposition, but because of the children's desire not to go home, as they wanted to focus on their studies. An employer also argued that the child cannot travel alone and that it was simply impossible to always arrange for someone to bring them, since the trip takes 4 days each way.

Image 11. Child domestic workers drawing during the workshop. Credit: @Free the Slaves



Figure 2. Child domestic workers in Kathmandu



Workload and Tasks of Child Domestic Workers

Once they start to work as child domestic workers, children must wake up early in the morning. Some children wake up at 4-4:30 AM, others at 5 AM, others at 6 AM. As soon as they wake up, children must start to carry out household chores such as preparing tea, breakfast, and lunch for everyone, doing the dishes, cleaning the utensils of the temple, preparing the employers' children for school, and accompanying them. When they return from school, child domestic workers must babysit the employers' children, go to the market and buy groceries, prepare tea and cook dinner, serve the food to the employers' family, clean the dishes and kitchen, wash clothes and socks, take care of the family's pets and water the plants. Most children need to clean the house daily. This may include not only cleaning the apartment where the employers live, but also cleaning the garden, the rooftop, the stairs, the other floors of the building, and even the footpath around the building (C01, C03, C05, C07, C08, C11, C13, C15, C17).

Unsurprisingly, we were told by children that when guests are in the house, their workload increases, as they need to prepare more (and better) food, clean more dishes, serve the food, and in general be ready to attend to any request that the employers or their guests may have. Conversely, employers with whom we spoke denied that children are overburdened with work and said that they are given nothing more than a few daily tasks, such as babysitting and cooking, that should not be regarded as child labor.

The housework can vary from day to day. Mostly, there can be just regular housework to do, and sometimes the employer's guest visits them, so I must prepare tea/snacks and serve them. [C02]

Regarding work, being a child, the child domestic worker might not be able to work all day long, even we can't do it. But preparing tea a couple of times, washing a few utensils, and sweeping the floor, these kinds of work could not be considered as heavy work. [FGD]

When it comes to hazardous or heavy tasks, some children reported having to carry out chores that can hardly be considered appropriate to their age and stage of physical development. For instance, when the drinking water in the house runs out, it is the children's responsibility to go and bring a new water container (C18). As the weight of the latter is typically 10 kilos, it is evident that this is a heavy load to carry for a young child. This is even more so the case when children have to travel quite a distance on foot with the water container on their backs (C08). Other children carry heavy packets of milk or sacks of rice to the house and carry them up several floors (CW).

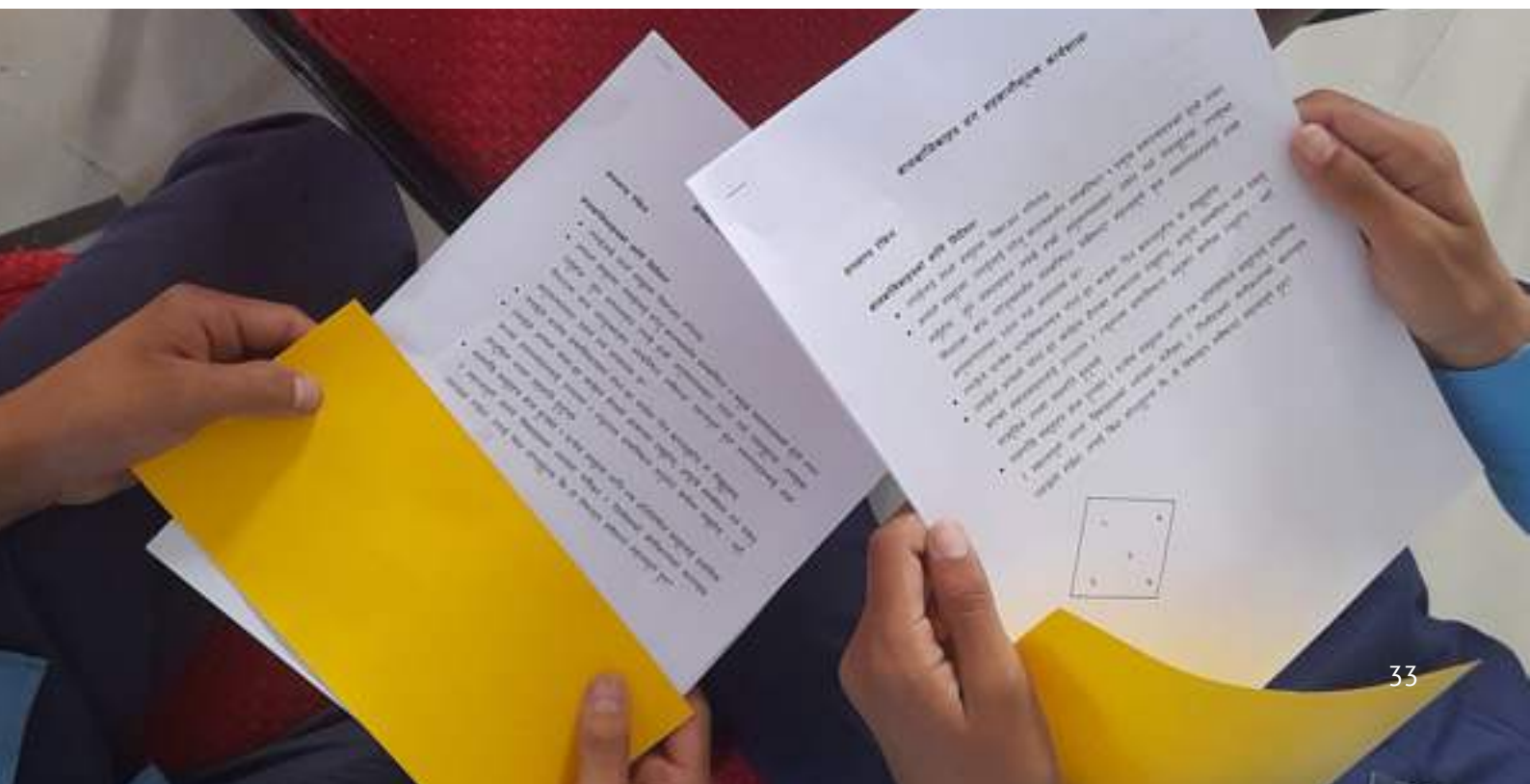
During a workshop session, one of the children told us that he has to carry rice sacks, gas cylinders, and water jars from downstairs to the kitchen and expressed that “those works are difficult for me”. At the workshop, another child commented that “domestic child workers have to work more than their capacity, such as carrying heavy water jars and gas cylinders.” Also, those children who must clean the entire building expressed that this is a very heavy and tiring task, as it takes a number of hours and requires moving up and down the stairs with buckets of water, mops, and soap (C12).

I was the one who had to look after everything, like fetching drinking water from a bit further away. I used to do such things at a very early age. [C08]

I woke up in the morning and went outside to get the milk. I had to bring almost 10 or 11 packets (each packet contained 500ml) of milk each day. I had to carry all those at around 5 AM in the morning. I had to walk quite a bit up to Sankhamul to purchase the milk, and I had to carry all those milk packets back home. I had to bring a lot of vegetables during the evening. So, there was not much work, but it was heavy work for me. [C15]

A government official with whom we spoke also admitted that child domestic work seems safer than other sectors in which children are employed, but that this is an underestimation and that “child domestic work can hardly be considered child-friendly or child-sensitive” (K103).

Image 12. Children showing the diamond ranking exercise during the first workshop. Credit: @Free the Slaves



Engagement in Other Work Activities

One of the contributions of this research was to explore whether, to what extent, and under what circumstances children in the domestic sector engage in work also beyond their employers' house.

Some children reported that on occasions their employers make them work in the house of some close relatives (e.g., brothers and sisters of the employers), especially during special occasions and events, when there may be extra work and the child's help is needed (C05, C20). Other children noted that they are required to work in the business of their employer. This was also confirmed by key informants, who told us that if employers have their own businesses, children will have to work in those businesses as well, especially if they are close to the house (KI01, KI05, KI06, KI07).

For instance, one child is working in the employer's hardware store (C05), another has to work in the meat shop of his employer's brother, carrying merchandise and staying in the store (C11), another child must help in the employer's liquor stores, going there after dinner for 3 to 4 hours, helping with customers and products, and bringing food to the employer (C19). Another boy worked in the employer's clothes shop, looking after the shop, selling to customers, and procuring new merchandise (C15). Additionally, the child needed to work on the employer's small farm, where he helped to grow the vegetables. He was responsible for collecting the rent and the money for the bills from the people renting an apartment in the employer's building. Another child was working in the hostel run by her domestic employers in the same building (C10), while another one is working in the employer's carpet business, loading the carpets or bringing them inside the room after drying in the sun, and is working in the employer's laptop showroom, cleaning the space. (C17).

A child with whom we spoke found himself forced to engage in extra work outside the house because the employers frequently travelled abroad and left him in the house without any money to buy groceries (C01). As a result, he started to work at the school canteen during the daytime. There, he had to cook lunch for over 100 students. Conditions were far from easy, as there was no specific area for cooking, just a gas stove. There was also no sink area, and he cleaned pots and plates in an open area where there was a tap. He was only paid NPR 4,000 per month, and he received his payment every month and a half or two months.

Another child reported that he started to work on an occasional basis in party palaces (large venues that cater for events such as weddings that in Kathmandu are often associated with the adult entertainment sector) while working for his employer, as the latter did not care about his whereabouts once all tasks in the house had been completed (C15). The child noted that due to the timing of his job in the house, party palaces were the only place where he could do some extra work during the night. Another child also reported working as a waiter in one of Kathmandu's party palaces during the night in addition to his work as a child domestic worker. Besides, he also had to give 50% of the profit made in the party palace to his male employer (C08).

After cooking dinner, I go to the employer's liquor shop. If there are many customers, I assist them with distribution and manage the goods as needed. I usually stay around 3 to 4 hours in the shop. During the evening, after bringing the snack for the employer, I sometimes have to stay till 9:30 pm in the liquor shop. There are two (liquor) shops of the employers, so after completing household chores, I have to work in one shop and sometimes in the other shop as well.

[C19]

Work Hours and Payment

Regardless of the specific tasks that they need to carry out, most children work for long hours every day (C01, C05, C06, C09, C11, C18). They all noted that they do not have any specific working hours and that they need to be available anytime. In the words of an NGO worker with whom we spoke, “the notion of 8 hours work, 8 hours rest, and 8 hours entertainment does not apply to such working children [child domestic workers]” (KI04). When guests are in the house or when there is some special family event, such as a birthday, days become even longer for child domestic workers, as they are not allowed to go to sleep until the guests have left or the event has ended (C06, C10, C17). The weeks right before major holidays also see an increase in the workload for child domestics as “during that time [the Dashain festival] there is a lot of work to be done.” (C20).

I wake up at 6 AM. Then I sweep the whole house, it takes around two hours, then I clean the garden, wipe the table, clean the dishes, eat food, and go to school. [...] after my coaching class, I return home at 6:30 PM. Then again, I clean the dishes after that, I clean the utensils of the home temple, and by 10 PM, I complete all housework. On Saturdays, I have to clean the whole house for the entire day. [...] There is no self-time for me because they keep on telling me to do this and that. [C05]

When guests are in the home, they usually arrive in the evening. So, when the guests leave, it is often around 12 AM or 1 AM, and I usually prepare dinner. And sometimes I fall asleep while waiting for the guests to leave, but because the guests keep asking for food items, I need to stay awake. [C17]

As they engage in domestic work, the great majority of children reported that they do not receive any payment for the work done. For most employers, paying the children's school fees (which in public school are in any case contained) is a reason good enough not to pay them (C12, CW). At best, some employers give an allowance of about NPR 1000-3000 to their child domestic workers when they go to visit their family during the Dashain holidays (C11, C19, C20). Some employers may even give around NPR 4000-5000 as Dashain allowance for the child domestic worker's family (C11, KI01). In contrast with the children's experiences, employers with whom we spoke suggested that even when they did want to pay their child domestic workers, it was the latter's families that objected, saying that they only wanted their child to be enrolled in school.

Along these same lines, most children reported that they do not receive any money for their daily needs from their employers, including money for lunch. Only a few among the children told us that they are given some pocket money, which could range between NPR 30-60 per day (C02, C09, C11). Most children who do not receive any money are also uncomfortable or afraid of making requests to their employers, fearing an angry reaction. Equally, most children feel uncomfortable asking their employers to buy them clothes or school materials. One child even told us that when there is not enough food for her to have dinner like the rest of the family, she feels uncomfortable asking and stays hungry (C12).

Image 13. Child domestic worker discussing the recommendations developed by her group.
Credit: @Free the Slaves



Food, Sleeping Arrangement, Clothes, and Healthcare

While not receiving money for daily expenses, most children seem to have access to proper food and to proper sleeping arrangements in the employer's house. Many children have their own bedroom, while a few need to share a bedroom with another family member. In terms of food, most children reported eating three times a day and noted that they generally eat the same food that their employers and their family also eat (C01, C02, C03, C09, C19). A few children, however, reported that they are not given the same food that the others eat and that they cannot sit and have a meal with the employer's family (CW). The Clothing Situation is slightly worse, as most child domestic workers are not provided with new clothes (CW). At best, they are given the old clothes of the employer's children (C05).

A much more depressing and concerning picture emerged when children were asked if they receive medical care when they are sick. One child with pain in his arm was ignored for three months by the employers, who said that "it will get better". On another occasion, when he had tonsillitis, he was only given a bottle of pomegranate juice but was never taken to the hospital (C01). Other children noted that whenever they get sick, they are not given medicines, and that they need to get up at the usual time and carry out the usual activities, as if they were not sick (C10, C17). Several key informants with direct experience assisting child domestic workers also confirmed this, noting that the employers will take their children to the emergency room as soon as they are not feeling well, while they will not do the same with the child domestic workers (K01, KI02, KI03, KI04, KI05, KI06).

I had a fever, and during that time, I also had to wash dishes and do other household chores. I thought that if I had my mother with me, she might let me rest and give me some medicine to recover. Even though there was a doctor in the building, they didn't care much about my health condition. After that, I really got hurt emotionally [C17].

Relationship with the Employers

While living in the employer's house, most children have a negative relationship with the employers, which is due to the latter's treatment of them. When invited to share more details on this, almost all children said that the employers regularly scold and verbally abuse them. This may occur when the child makes a mistake in performing household chores (C05, C07, C13, C14, CW), when the child returns home late from school (C04), when something gets lost in the house (C08, C17), when the child takes friends home or visits friends (C06, C11, C20), when the child refuses or objects to a certain task (C10), or when the child is accused of not working enough or not working well enough (C12, C16, C17). Some children also reported being threatened and beaten (C06, C10). A girl even said that in her previous place of domestic employment, she was afraid of a male family member who used to approach her and touch her, making her feel uncomfortable and scared.[4]

[4] As noted, the child is no longer in that family, and she is currently benefiting from CWISH's psycho-social support.

The scoldings and verbal abuse were more hurtful than the physical punishments. I would have preferred to get beaten, but verbal abuse was much hurtful. I used to overthink about that and could not sleep properly at night. That is why. [C08]

The stone I drew in the river [of life exercise] represents the times my employer scolded me for not completing house chores. I felt afraid whenever my employer scolded. [CW]

Interestingly, during the focus group discussion, employers did not deny scolding their child domestic workers. However, they said that scolding them is part of bringing them up and teaching them certain things, and that they do scold child domestic workers as much as they scold their own children. Also, they tried to offer quite a different picture of their relationship with their child domestic workers, suggesting that children are happy in their house, that they support and help the children as they carry out their daily tasks, and that they treat them as equal members of their families or as their own children. They denied ever raising a hand against their child domestic workers, but they acknowledged knowing of employers who “do bad stuff to the working children”. Conversely, key informants with direct experience assisting child domestic workers gave a picture that supported what the children themselves have been saying (KI04, KI05, KI06).

While bringing child domestic workers for admission, they [employers] would ask if the education in the community school is free of cost. [...] Secondly, they don't even purchase school uniforms for children; they give the used dresses of their sons and daughters. They would never purchase the stationery in time, and don't pay the school fees either. So, just by admitting working children to school, they cannot say that they have done everything. [...] the employer's version of providing better facilities and education is just an excuse to cover up their misbehavior. [KI05]

The employer's eldest son was short-tempered, and if there were any arguments, he would beat his own mother. When he scolded me, he used many bad words. If there was a small mistake in the work he had asked you to do, then he would come to beat you. That is why I didn't want to stay there. [C16]

Feelings of Child Domestic Workers

Under the circumstances described above, sadness is a common feeling among Kathmandu's child domestic workers (C02, C04, C05, C10). This sadness often comes with homesickness, especially in those moments when the children are verbally abused or beaten (C02, C04, C18, C19). One child said that when he sees other children living with their families, he feels very homesick and wishes that he could be just like them (C03). Another child shared that she feels especially homesick during the parents' meetings in the school, when many of her friends' parents come to meet with the teachers (C09). Other children noted that when they get abused and beaten, or when they find themselves neglected while being sick, they instinctively think of their families and how that would have never happened had they stayed in their parents' care back home (C17).

When I would be alone at night, I remembered my parents and my village and cried alone, being unable to cope with that.
(C19)

Other children in the neighborhood used to play cricket. I watched them from the window and wished I could play with them. (CW)

Sadness is also associated with the feeling of being alone, as the children have limited contact with their families, are not allowed to spend time with friends, and are not part of the family life (C11, C12, C17). Most children, in fact, told us that they feel uncomfortable talking with their employers and sharing their feelings or experiences with them, which further exacerbates their feeling of loneliness (C05, C19, CW). When they do talk with their employers, for most children, the conversation is strictly limited to work (C06, C10). Some children even expressed feelings of fear towards the employers or specific members of the family (C02, C11, C16, C20, CW).

I have been to such an event just once, during which the employers kept talking and meeting their relatives, and I did not know anyone at all, so I sat down alone in one corner. So, when it was time for dinner, I was sent to another table where I would be eating while the employers sat at a different table.
(C10).

They took me along to parties and picnics with them, which made me happy, but even at the party and picnic, my employer used to ask me to get water for them and treated me as a house helper. (C01)

Overall, after spending some time in the employer's house, some children develop feelings of hopelessness, whereby they do not believe that their situation will be able to improve, they hardly dare to harbor any hope of change on part of their employers, and they are resigned to admitting that they were brought exclusively to engage in domestic work, not out of any altruistic sentiment (C01, C05, C10, C11). Unsurprisingly, many children said that life back at home was better than it is in Kathmandu and that they have developed regret for having accepted the move to the capital. One child told us, very emotionally, that if she had an opportunity, she would certainly return to her home village and her family (C19). Conversely, other children reported that even though life in the city is not what they expected, and that they miss their family, they are determined to stay in order to continue and complete their studies.

Image 14. Child interacting with diagram identifying the actors influential in their life during the workshop.
Credit: @Free the Slaves





Image 15. Workers cleaning on a balcony in Kathmandu. Credit: @Free the Slaves

Conclusion

The present research has offered a deep investigation into the reality of child domestic workers in Kathmandu. Through a combination of interviews and workshops with child domestic workers, focus group discussion with employers, and key informant interviews, the research has shed light on the trajectories of child domestic workers, the factors that drive children and their families to pursue employment as domestics, and the life and work experiences that child domestic workers go through.

The research found that children who currently work in Kathmandu as child domestic workers come from villages in rural areas of the country. The modalities through which children reach the city are heavily influenced by the actors involved in the recruitment process. Here, parents play a key role – either because they actively look for employment for their children or because they accept an offer of employment. Besides parents, other relatives (grandparents, uncles and aunts, older siblings) can also play a role. This research also contributed to existing knowledge by illuminating the role played in the recruitment process by employers, intermediaries (e.g., neighbors or acquaintances), and the children themselves. In fact, many children revealed considerable agency in that they pursued employment opportunities in the capital (e.g., through relatives and older siblings) or they accepted employment opportunities that were offered to them, having a say in the decision-making process within the family.

Common push and pull factors include the lack of sufficient education in the village, poverty, alcoholism within the family, domestic violence, loss of (or abandonment by) one or both parents, multiple marriages of the parents, and socio-cultural norms whereby domestic work is seen as a way for girls to learn future domestic duties. Many children and their parents also tend to regard Kathmandu as a city that can offer many educational and professional opportunities, thus allowing for a better course of life. The fact that some young members of the family, such as older cousins and siblings, may already be working in the city only adds to the attractiveness. At the same time, the growth of Nepal's urban middle-upper class and the increasing demand for cheap domestic help (which seems to be an actual need as much as it is a status symbol) presents children from rural backgrounds with easily accessible opportunities to set foot in the capital.

After moving to the employer's house, children can go to school on a mostly regular basis, which represents the most significant improvement in the lives of Nepal's child domestic workers over the past decade. However, children are often late for school due to domestic chores, they occasionally skip class to work, and they do not have enough time to study and do their homework. Lamentably, teachers do not always try to understand the children and do not always offer them a space where they can talk about their situations, thus contributing to their isolation and loneliness. Similarly, most children prefer not to share about their life with peers. In fact, most child domestic workers do not have close friendships, which relates to the fact that employers prohibit them from hanging out with friends.

Even more dramatic is that many child domestic workers have only sporadic contact with their families. Most children can only visit their parents once a year during the holiday season. Some do not even have that freedom. The reasons for this may include the need for children to do more household chores during the holidays, when the employers have guests, or the need for children to guard the house during the holidays, while the employers are abroad.

In the house of their employers, the days of child domestic workers are long and intense. Domestic work typically includes babysitting the employers' children, going to the market and buying groceries, preparing and serving food, cleaning the dishes, washing clothes, and cleaning the house. Some children also engage in tasks that are hazardous and not appropriate to their age, such as carrying heavy weights. One of the contributions of this research was also to explore whether children in the domestic sector engage in work outside the house as well. What was found in this regard is that some children also work in the house of their employer's relatives. Other children work in the business of their employer, for instance, carrying the merchandise, attending to customers, and looking after the shop. Other children work in party palaces during the night to make some money.

In fact, as they engage in domestic work, the great majority of children reported that they do not receive any payment for the work done. At best, some employers give an allowance to their child domestic workers when they go to visit their family during the holidays. Along these same lines, most children do not receive any money for their daily needs from their employers. Nonetheless, most children seem to have access to proper food and sleeping arrangements. Conversely, the situation is much worse when it comes to healthcare, as children are not brought to the doctor or to the hospital when they are sick, and they even have to work as usual.



Image 16. Houses in Kathmandu. Credit: @Free the Slaves

While living in the employer's house, most children have a negative relationship with the employers that is due to the latter's bad treatment towards them. This mostly takes the form of scolding and verbal abuse, but in the case of some children, it extends to threats and beating. Under these circumstances, sadness, homesickness, and loneliness are common feelings among the children.

Avenues for Future Research

To further expand the knowledge collected in this report, future research could look beyond Kathmandu and interrogate whether the dynamics described here hold true in other cities as well. In fact, many Nepalese children from rural areas who work as domestic workers in the houses of wealthy urban families are found in cities such as Pokhara and Biratnagar, which makes it important to investigate trajectories and experiences through a comparative approach. Future studies could also expand on the research effort made in this project by including a larger group of children in the participatory workshops. Constrained by the time and resources available, the present project could only include 10 child domestic workers in the participatory activities, but it would be interesting to replicate those activities with more children. Finally, this project adopted a purely qualitative approach to uncover the experiences and understand the perspectives of Kathmandu's child domestic workers. What remained unexplored in this research is the extent to which child domestic work is currently widespread in Nepal. Because the latest surveys on prevalence date back to 2016, future research could complement this study by investigating the current scope of the phenomenon.



Image 17. Houses overlooking a field in Kathmandu. Credit: @Free the Slaves

Recommendations

Based on the findings collected in this research, a series of targeted recommendations are offered below. Importantly, these recommendations were co-developed with the children during the engagement with them. As such, they reflect what child domestic workers themselves think that should be done by different social and political actors to address the reality of child domestic work.

When invited to travel with their imagination to their villages in ten years' time, all children dreamt of a community where parents have stable incomes that allow them to take care of their children, where families live together under the same roof as no one needs to move away for employment, where there are good schools where children can learn and receive a solid education, and where no child needs to move to the city and work.

Reflecting on the more immediate changes that they would like to see in their own life, and in those of children who are in similar situations of child domestic labor, children expressed their aspiration for a more positive relationship with the employer, better treatment on the part of the employer, more free time to spend with friends and on homework, more opportunities to visit their families back home, and access to school supplies.

For those aspirations to materialize, children believe that the actors with the greatest influence are the federal and local government, the police, their parents and families, the employers, the employers' neighbors, civil society organizations, and schoolteachers. In the children's opinion, all these actors have the capacity – to different extents and in different ways – to introduce changes and take steps that, taken collectively, can ultimately have a positive impact on child domestic workers.

Interestingly, the key informants with whom we spoke in this research voiced a similar opinion, that a whole-of-society approach is needed to address the situation of child domestic workers and provide these children with greater protection and better standards of life. According to key informants, everyone within the Nepalese society – from the government that has the authority to pass laws and policies, to the children’s families that drive them towards work, to the employers who hire children as domestic helpers but rarely take a honest interest in their well-being and development, to the civil society organizations that can empower society with knowledge, awareness, and understanding on child labor – has a responsibility to act towards the improvement of the situation of child domestic workers, and children in labor situations more broadly.

For their part, the employers that took part in the focus group discussion acknowledged that families that hire child domestic workers are the ones mostly responsible for those children’s well-being and that change is needed among employers to encourage better attitudes and behaviors. Here, they also noted the important role that schoolteachers can play. They can offer a safe space for children to open up and share about their circumstances, and they can convene employers to educate them on appropriate behaviors to take with their child domestic workers.

Image 18. Woman standing on a hill overlooking mountains and Kathmandu skyline. Credit: @Free the Slaves



Recommendations for the Nepali Government



Invest More Resources in Education in Rural Areas

As the great majority of children go to Kathmandu to work as child domestic workers in the hope of getting a good education that is not available in their villages, investing in the development of a better schooling system in rural areas would allow children to receive satisfactory instruction while staying with their families. This must also include investments in a better transportation and communications systems (e.g., roads) to ensure that all children can easily and safely reach the nearest school.



Create More and Better Job Opportunities in Rural Areas

Considering that poverty is another reason that pushes many families to send their children to work in Kathmandu, the creation of job opportunities in Nepal's rural areas would enable families to provide for their children and would remove the need to place them in the care of wealthier urban families. While each rural setting will require its own plan for economic development, examples in this regard could be support for farmers through training in advanced agricultural techniques and an improved system of agricultural subsidies.



Ratify ILO Convention 189 on Domestic Workers and Introduce Regulations on Decent Work in the Domestic Sector that Offer Protections to Children Employed Therein

This would include developing and enforcing a code of conduct for employers that defines appropriate living conditions for children, prohibits abuse, neglect, and exploitation, lists permissible domestic chores for children, determines maximum work hours, prescribes school enrolment, sets out a minimum wage, and defines the terms of payment.



Train Ward Level Government Officials on How to Recognize, Monitor, and Address Instances of Child Domestic Labor Within Their Wards

The training program would include modules on (i) understanding child labor and child domestic labor, (ii) keeping records of child domestic workers at the ward level, (iii) conducting periodic and unannounced monitoring visits on the conditions of child domestic workers, in line with the contents of the code of conduct discussed above, and (iv) removing those child domestic workers who are found to be in situations of exploitation, placing them in children's shelters and considering the appropriateness of family reintegration.

Recommendations for Employers of Child Domestic Workers



Offer Better Life and Work Conditions to the Children Working in Their House

Over the past years, employers have taken the very important step of enrolling child domestic workers in schools. While a commendable improvement, more needs to be done to ensure that child domestic workers enjoy decent working and living conditions. This includes providing children with access to healthcare services when sick and giving children enough time to study and do homework. Other essential needs include daily time off for the children; allowing them to meet with friends, talk over the phone with their families, and visit their families at least once a year. It is also important to make the children feel they are part of the family by showing care and respect and refraining from physical and verbal abuse.



Advocate with Peers for Better Conditions for Child Domestic Workers

Employers who are already behaving as recommended above (a minority of employers, according to this research) should encourage their relatives and friends who are also employing child domestic workers to adjust their behavior accordingly. Peer-to-peer pressure, in fact, can be very effective in encouraging shifts in norms and behaviors.

Image 19. Buses lined up on a street in the outskirts of Kathmandu. Credit: @Free the Slaves



Recommendations for Parents of Child Domestic Workers



Collect More Information About the Reality Awaiting Children in Kathmandu

Driven by a combination of factors, parents send their children to Kathmandu to work in someone's house. While doing so, most parents trust the promises advanced by recruiters and do not attempt to collect more information on the actual life and work situations that their children will encounter. Parents who have no other alternative than sending their children to work in someone's house should accompany the child to Kathmandu to meet the employers in person, see the house where the child would be living, and see the school that the child would attend.



Monitor the Situation of Their Children in Kathmandu

In addition to the above, parents should also monitor their children's situation through phone calls and/or visits to ensure their children's continuous well-being. When phone calls and visits cannot be realistically arranged, a trusted acquaintance in Kathmandu (sibling, older children, aunt/uncle) should be mobilized to do that.

Image 20. Lack of access to transportation means many people walk, limiting parents ability to visit and monitor their childrens situation. Credit: @Free the Slaves



Recommendations for Teachers of Child Domestic Workers



Understand the Situation of Child Domestic Workers

Teachers working in schools attended by child domestic workers should strive to recognize the unique circumstances and needs of those children. When child domestic workers are late to school or come with uncompleted homework, teachers should refrain from scolding and humiliating the children. Rather, they should aim to understand the reasons why the child could not comply with his/her duties and offer support.



Offer a Safe Space for Children to Talk about Their Reality

Most child domestic workers reported being unable to talk with their teachers about their situations, feelings, and needs. This adds to the isolation and neglect that many children are already experiencing in the house of their employers. As key adult figures in the lives of the children, teachers can play a fundamental role in creating a safe space for children to talk about their lives. This would also allow teachers to identify cases of concern (e.g., abuse) and provide prompt assistance to the child in question.



Teach Students to Show Respect and Understanding Towards Classmates in Child Domestic Work

Most children have revealed that they do not feel comfortable talking about their situation with classmates. Here, teachers have an important role to play in creating an environment of support and trust within the class. Teachers should teach their students the reality of child labor in Nepal and encourage them to display sensitivity and compassion towards children who may find themselves in that situation, while never exposing a child as a child domestic worker in front of the other students.



Encourage Other Teachers to Collaborate With Children's Rights Organizations

This research benefited from the support of school principals and schoolteachers across Kathmandu who recognized the value of this project and saw it as an opportunity for child domestic workers to express their perspectives and claim their rights. These principals and teachers should encourage their colleagues in other public schools to also establish collaborations with children's rights organizations with the aim of creating a more comprehensive and effective support system for the children.

Recommendations for Children's Rights Organizations



Develop Advocacy Campaigns to Raise Awareness Among Parents on the Conditions of Child Domestic Workers in Kathmandu

This would be in line with Nepal's Next Step 3 and Next Step 7 as set out in the country's latest Pathfinder Country Progress Report 2021. By targeting rural areas where child domestic workers typically come from, organizations can spread knowledge on the reality of child domestic workers. This could be done through a weekly radio program as well as through leaflets, posters, and community meetings.



Launch Awareness and Empowerment Programs in Nepal's Public Schools Attended by Child Domestic Workers

The aim would be to inform children about their rights under Nepali law and guide them through the available avenues to get assistance and help if needed (e.g., child helpline and/or physical address of relevant organizations). Throughout this research, for instance, many children revealed that they have no knowledge of what child labor is and that they are not aware of where to turn to if in need of help.



Assist Child Domestic Workers to Create Mutual Support Groups at the School Level

Such school-based peer groups would allow children to share their experiences, exchange perspectives, and support each other. As many children in domestic work struggle to communicate with the adults in their lives (employers, teachers, parents) about their situations and feelings, these initiatives could provide children with an important system of support.



Launch Campaigns on Attitude and Behavior Change Targeting Employers and Their Families

Examples in this regard could be monthly meetings and workshops with employers at the neighborhood level, poster campaigns on community noticeboards, monthly newsletters for employers, and the use of television. Over time, employer-to-employer training on best practices could also be an additional effective tool of peer learning and peer pressure, as noted above. Similarly, campaigns on attitudes and behavior change could also be introduced in private schools, targeting the children of households in which child domestic workers are employed.

Recommendations for Funders



Support Further Studies into the Reality of Child Domestic Workers

As noted, this study was limited to Kathmandu, but there are child domestic workers also in other cities within Nepal, such as Pokhara and Biratnagar. There are also Nepalese children who are taken to work as child domestic workers in India. Funders should support studies that explore the reality of these children and contribute to a more comprehensive picture of child domestic labor. Likewise, funders should also support studies that aim to expand on the knowledge base produced in this report by including more employers in the investigation and by further unpacking the dynamics whereby Nepalese urban families employ children to work in their houses.



Support Advocacy Campaigns on Child Domestic Workers

Funders should provide support to children's rights organizations in their efforts to raise awareness on the reality of child domestic workers and to mobilize changes in behaviours and attitudes towards child domestic workers. These include advocacy campaigns targeting the families of origin of the children, the employers in Kathmandu, schoolteachers and school principals, as well as government officials.



Fund Direct Support Efforts for Child Domestic Workers

During this study, we came across some cases of abuse and neglect against child domestic workers. When confronted with this reality, we mobilized our resources to promptly address those cases, provide immediate support to the child in question, terminate those situations of concern, and place the child in a safe environment where their well-being can be ensured and monitored. However, it is evident that many more cases of abuse and neglect that could not be unveiled in this research do exist. Funders should therefore provide their support to rescue and rehabilitation efforts that seek to identify children in concerning situations, remove them from those, and provide them with adequate shelter and psycho-social assistance.



Image 21. Houses and farmland outside of Kathmandu. Credit: @Free the Slaves

Appendix - Methodology & Ethics

Here, more details are provided on the methodology and ethical protocol followed in this research.

Interviews with Child Domestic Workers

Interviews were conducted with 20 children who are currently employed, or were recently employed, as domestic workers from Kathmandu's domestic sector. This approach is in line with the child-centered approach defended in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Art. 12, where it is maintained that children have the right to take part in activities that affect them, including research.

Of those, nine interviewees were identified from among the child domestic workers who are engaged in the weekly awareness and empowerment programs provided by CWISH. Seven other interviewees were identified in coordination with the principals of local public schools, who offered support to the research project and connected the research team with child domestic workers attending their schools. Finally, four interviewees were identified through the mediation of a child who has long been engaged with CWISH and who created a peer support group in his school that brings together child domestic workers. The referral of interviewees to the research team by the CWISH psychosocial counsellor, school principals, and a peer student leader helped to facilitate an environment of trust and ensured the recruitment of children who were psychologically and emotionally prepared to take part in the research.

Depending on the process through which children were identified and recruited, and in order to ensure a private, safe, and comfortable space, the interviews were conducted in CWISH premises or in local schools. In all cases, the minimum age of children invited to take part in the research was 12. While successful examples of younger children taking part in research are not missing,⁸⁸ in the specific context of this project, it is believed that children aged 12 and above are better positioned to participate in the interview process meaningfully and positively.

In line with the ethical protocol designed for this research, consent was collected from the children themselves as well as from the adults responsible for them. Consent from the guardians of the children was collected before collecting the consent of the child, so that the final decision on whether the interview would take place or not would rest with the children. Prior to starting the interview, children were presented with a child-friendly participant information sheet and consent form in Nepali. One member of the research team would guide the child through the documentation, taking the time necessary to introduce the research, explain in detail the topics that the interview would address, emphasize that participation was entirely voluntary and freely withdrawable, and invite and answer any questions that the child may have. In the one case in which a child recruited in a local school refrained from giving his consent, he was thanked for his time and was accompanied back to his classroom.

As established in our ethical protocol, all children who took part in the interview process were presented by the research team with a drawing kit as compensation for their time. Children who came to the CWISH premises to carry out the interview were also provided with monetary reimbursement for the cost of transportation. In the case of four girls interviewed in a local public school, the research team offered sanitary pads instead of the drawing kit because during the interviews, the topic of menstrual stigma was discussed as an important issue, with the girls disclosing their lack of access to hygienic pads in their employers' houses.

To create a comfortable environment for the children involved in the interview process, the research team followed a two-stage engagement process. First, an icebreaker activity involving the child and the research team was proposed. Following that, a semi-structured questionnaire composed of open-ended questions was used to guide the conversation. This allowed flexibility throughout the conversation, gave children the space to articulate their views in greater depth and detail, facilitated a dynamic and open conversation, and allowed the research team to adjust the questionnaire according to each child's specific reality. Beyond the specificities of each interview, children were invited to share about how they entered the domestic sector, what factors drove this decision, and their experiences living and working in their employers' house – and, possibly, beyond the house as well.

Importantly, at the onset of the research, a pilot interview was carried out with one child to ensure the appropriateness of the questions. This proved to be an important exercise. The initial plan, in fact, was to have 90-minute-long interviews in which children would also be invited to draw a typical day as child domestic workers, thus relying on the method of participatory drawing. However, during the pilot interview, it became apparent that children would hardly be able to commit more than one hour, and it was decided to eliminate the drawing section.

Image 22. The diagram built by one group of children to identify the actors with most influence on their lives.
Credit: @Free the Slaves



Trauma-Informed Approaches to Research With Children

Before

- Establish a personal contact with the child that gives her/him the opportunity to know the Research Team, the objectives of the research, and the purpose of the research process. Appropriate time will need to be invested in this introductory engagement.
- Ensure that the child receives adequate, age-appropriate, and culturally relevant information about the research. The aim is to enable the child to make an informed decision about participating in the research. The same information will be shared with the child's parents or other adults responsible for her/him.
- Ensure a private, safe, and comfortable space for the engagement to take place.
- A comfortable environment includes also offering breaks during the engagement. Some hot drinks and snacks are also arranged to create a welcoming setting.
- Make arrangements for psychological support to be provided to children who might need it (e.g., they show signs of perduring trauma). If and as needed, psychological support is provided by the in-house psychosocial counselor of CWISH.
- Hand over to the child the compensation (e.g., transport reimbursement) that was assessed as being appropriate for her/his time. It is important to do so before the engagement begins to confirm to the child that should she/he later decide to withdraw from the process, the decision does not impact on her/his compensation.

During

- Uphold the principles of control and choice that place control over the conversation and choice of what to share and what not to share in the child's hands. If a child prefers not to talk of a certain topic, such preference should be unquestionably respected and accommodated. Encouraging words of understanding and respect for the child's boundaries should also be added.
- Avoid everything that might cause re-traumatization, such as triggering words and visual evidence. Also, gently introduce difficult topics, including by giving a warning.
- Remind children throughout the engagement that their participation is entirely voluntary, that they will face no repercussions for leaving the research, and that they can leave the interview at any time.
- Pay attention to signs of psychological distress and emotional discomfort (e.g., avoidance of eye contact) in the child. If identified, invite the child to take a break. If the signs of distress and discomfort persist, gently bring the engagement to an end. Consider the appropriateness of offering psychosocial support to the child.

After

- Express sincere appreciation to the child for her/his time, for the trust placed in the research team, and for sharing all that she/he did during the research. This is important to show that the participant's time is not taken for granted, that the difficulty of her/his lived experience is heartfully recognized, and that her/his experience and perceptions are deeply valued.
- Spend some extra time with the children (if they so wish) and move the conversation to topics unrelated to the research to help them reconnect with lighter thoughts.
- If possible, one or two days after the engagement, be in touch with the child to ask about her/his well-being.

Image 23. One of the public schools in Kathmandu attended by child domestic workers. Credit: @Free the Slaves



Participatory Workshops with Child Domestic Workers

Workshops were organized with child domestic workers from Kathmandu's urban space. Through the collaboration with the principal of a local public school, 10 children (6 girls, 4 boys) were identified and invited to participate in the workshop sessions.

In the context of this research, participatory workshops aimed to foster dialogue among children with experience as child domestic workers, encourage self-reflection, support them to identify key issues related to child domestic work and think of solutions, value the children's own knowledge, experiences, and perspectives, and place the rights of the children at the center. In this way, the research also tried to fulfil an important emancipatory function by allowing children to take control of the knowledge production process.

As in the case of the interviews, written consent was collected from the children themselves as well as from the adults responsible for them, which in this case was the school principal. Consent from the school principal was collected before collecting the consent of the child, so that the final decision on participation would rest with the children.

Prior to starting the workshop, children were presented with a child-friendly participant information sheet and consent form in Nepali. These were also replicated on a whiteboard, so that children could refer to them throughout the workshop if needed. One member of the research team would guide the children through those documents, taking the time necessary to introduce the research, explain in detail the topics and activities of the workshop, emphasize that participation was entirely voluntary and freely withdrawable, and invite any questions that the children may have.

As established in our ethical protocol, all children who took part in the workshops were presented by the research team with a drawing kit and some small pocket money as compensation for the extensive time that they dedicated to the engagement.

There were two full-day participatory workshops, which were held in the school whose principal had co-led the recruitment process. The first workshop session aimed to collectively define the problem of child domestic workers and identify the issues that have the greatest importance for children in the domestic sector. The purpose was to make sure that the children's priorities and needs are adequately reflected in our research, including in our approach to data analysis and interpretation. The second part of the workshop was devoted to data collection. Acknowledging that drawing is a powerful means through which children can comfortably and confidently express themselves (especially when addressing sensitive topics), children were asked to draw their "river of life" (i.e., their life story), identifying major turning points, events, and characters.

The second workshop started from there. Each child presented and explained to the rest of the group his/her drawing, and afterwards, children worked together in groups to identify similarities and differences across pathways, drivers, and experiences. In the second part of the workshop, children worked together on solution-thinking. Here, children were invited to draw a Chapati diagram, placing the child in the center and identifying the actors that have the most and least influence on the lives of child domestic workers. Following that, they were invited to "enter" an imaginary time machine and to "travel" to their future child labor-free communities. The final step was to develop recommendations in small groups, identifying specific actions that each stakeholder identified in the Chapati diagram should take in order to advance the imagined ideal of a child labor-free community.

As reported in the tables below, each workshop included specific child-friendly activities and was interrupted by lunch breaks and other shorter breaks as needed. The research team was active throughout the workshop sessions in a facilitating function. Moreover, one of the facilitators kept a “Research Diary” to record observations and considerations.

First Workshop

Workshop

Session 1				
Activity	Technique	Description	Time	Materials
Icebreaker	Personality Bingo	Each child receives a Bingo sheet with personality traits and looks for children with those traits.	30 min	Bingo sheets
Research Problem	Diamond Ranking	Children are divided in small groups. They are invited to reflect on the five priority issues related to child domestic work that they would like the research to address.	90 min	A1 sheets, colors, pens
Research Objectives	Dot Voting	Participants present the work of their group to the rest. A list of priority issues is built collectively. Each child then approaches the whiteboard and marks a dot next to the two issues that are of priority importance to him/her.	120 min	Whiteboard
Lunch Break				
Data Collection	River of Life - Individual	Children are asked to draw a mapping of their life, with special focus on their journey and experiences in child domestic work.	120 min	A1 sheets, colors, pens
Wrap Up				

Second Workshop

Workshop

Session 2

Activity	Technique	Description	Time	Materials
Icebreaker	The Dance-Chair Game	Participants dance around and when the music stops, they need to sit. Facilitators remove chairs as the game goes on.	15 min	Speakers
Data Collection	River of Life - Collective	Each child is invited to illustrate and explain his/her drawing to the rest. A discussion on differences and similarities across experiences follows.	120 min	Whiteboard
Lunch Break				
Solution Thinking	Chapati Diagram	Children are divided in small groups and invited to reflect on the actors that have a stake in the issue of child domestic work and the opportunities for influencing them.	120 min	Sheets, pencils, erasers, colors
Recommendations	Time Machine	Participants are invited to imagine how a child labor-free community would look like. They then get together to formulate recommendations addressing them to specific stakeholders from the Chapati diagram.	120 min	Whiteboard
Conclusion				

Focus Group Discussion with the Employers of Child Domestic Workers

Thirdly, one half-day workshop was conducted with 5 employers (4 females, 1 male) of child domestic workers. Employers of child domestic workers were identified, contacted, and recruited through the mediation of local school principals.

Based on CWISH's experience in participatory research with employers of child workers across a variety of sectors in Kathmandu, it is believed that workshops are a useful method for the purpose of this research and one that is appropriate to the social and cultural context involved. In fact, workshops were found to be more welcome and better received by employers, rather than one-on-one interviews. They were also found to create a trustful atmosphere, which was conducive to sharing ideas and opinions.

This process of data collection seems especially important because employers have typically been excluded from existing studies on child domestic work, both within and beyond Nepal.⁸⁹ While the difficulty of recruiting employers of child domestic workers as research participants has been widely documented – and lamented – in the literature, our understanding of child domestic work will remain limited and unsatisfactory unless efforts are made to better illuminate the “demand side” of the phenomenon.

Throughout the workshops, employers were invited to discuss their reason – or combination of reasons – for employing domestic help, their reasons for recruiting children rather than adults as domestic workers, the ways in which they recruited children to be employed as domestic workers, the perceived positive and beneficial aspects of employing child domestic workers, the perceived negative and problematic aspects of employing child domestic workers, their perception of the work and life conditions of child domestic workers in Nepal, their relationship with the child domestic workers employed in their own house, the tasks assigned to their child domestic workers within and beyond the household walls, and their opinions on whether something should be done to change this form of child employment in Nepal. In order to elicit as open a conversation as possible on those topics, at the beginning of the workshop, the research team read out a vignette telling the story of an employer and his attitude towards the child domestic worker in his house. Using that fictional story as a starting point to raise questions, it made it easier for employers to express their opinions and share their perspectives with the researchers.

Recognizing the unique ethical challenges posed by workshop discussions, the research team followed a series of strategies to manage the confidentiality issues associated with such an activity. As noted above, the number of participants was kept deliberately small. In the participant information sheet provided to potential participants, employers were required to respect the privacy of other participants (i.e., never disclose the identity of those who participated in the workshop), commit to the confidentiality of the focus group discussion (i.e., never reveal what was discussed and by whom), and refrain from revealing any identifying information about themselves (i.e., use a pseudonym of choice during the workshop). A briefing session was also held prior to the commencement of the workshop to repeat the ground rules for participation.

Interviews with Key Informants

In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 topical experts (5 males and 5 females) who have a solid and well-documented knowledge of the reality of child domestic work in Nepal. These interviews were believed to be useful to better contextualize some of the data collected from other sources. Key informants targeted in this research included the staff members of Nepalese organizations working on child protection that are active in the rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration of children employed in Kathmandu's domestic sector. Staff members interviewed for this research might cover a wide variety of roles – researchers, program managers, project officers, psychosocial counsellors, and child rights inspectors. Other informants included government officials and schoolteachers.

Participants were selected by the research team through an expert sampling technique, building on the extensive network that the research partner organizations have in Nepal.

Interviews took place in person in Kathmandu during the research team's fieldwork in the capital. A semi-structured questionnaire composed of open-ended questions was employed for the purpose of this investigation. This allowed flexibility throughout the conversation and enabled the research team to adjust the questionnaire according to each respondent's specific knowledge and field experience. In line with the objectives of this research, respondents were invited to share about the children's recruitment in the domestic sector, the drivers behind their recruitment into the domestic sectors, the conditions and circumstances under which child domestic workers are found to live and work, the engagement of child domestic workers beyond the domestic walls, and the impact that working on the domestic sector has for children.

Image 24. Community on the outskirts of Kathmandu. Credit: @Free the Slaves





Image 25. Rooftop of a house overlooking mountains outside of Kathmandu. Credit: @Free the Slaves

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Image 26. A view of Kathmandu from Swayambhunath Stupa. Credit: @Free the Slaves

