



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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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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, most of whom (67.1%) are girls (ILO 2013a). 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.

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 2024a). Other more specific reasons are the illusion that domestic service offers educational and occupational opportunities, the belief that domestic work is a safe and natural occupation for girls, the increasing demand for domestic help in urban areas, and socio-cultural practices (ILO 2013b; Jacquemine 2004).

Many child domestic workers worldwide are encouraged, or even forced, to work by their parents, while others are recruited by intermediaries (ILO 2002; Human Rights Watch 2012; Freedom Fund & NORC 2024a). However, children are not entirely devoid of agency, and 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).

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). Common forms of exploitation and abuse 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, exploitation may extend beyond the domestic space, with child domestic workers exploited in their employers' small informal businesses (Jacquemin 2006), on farms (Freedom Fund & NORC 2024b), and in street vending (Devatop Center n.d.).



Image 2. A child reviewing the consent form prior to starting the interview.. Credit: @Free the Slaves

Research Objectives

The present research aimed to shed light on the current reality of child domestic work in Nepal 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 were the following:



Document the pathways whereby children enter the domestic sector in Nepal's cities, including the role played by traffickers, intermediaries, and employers, as well as the role of children themselves.



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.



Unveil the experiences of child domestic workers in Nepal's urban areas to offer an in-depth assessment of their working and living conditions. At the same time, explore the intersections of child domestic labor with other forms of child labor, which no study has addressed thus far.

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.



Interviews were conducted with 20 children who are currently employed, or were recently employed, as domestic workers in Kathmandu. Here, 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.



Two full-day participatory workshops were organized with 10 children currently employed as domestic workers. The first half of the first workshop aimed to collectively define the problem of child domestic workers and identify the issues that have the greatest importance for them as domestic workers. The purpose was to make sure that the children's priorities and needs are adequately reflected in the research. The second half of the workshop was devoted to evidence generation. Here, children were asked to draw their "river of life". In the second workshop, children worked together on solution-thinking. They identified the actors that have the most influence on child domestic workers and developed recommendations in small groups.

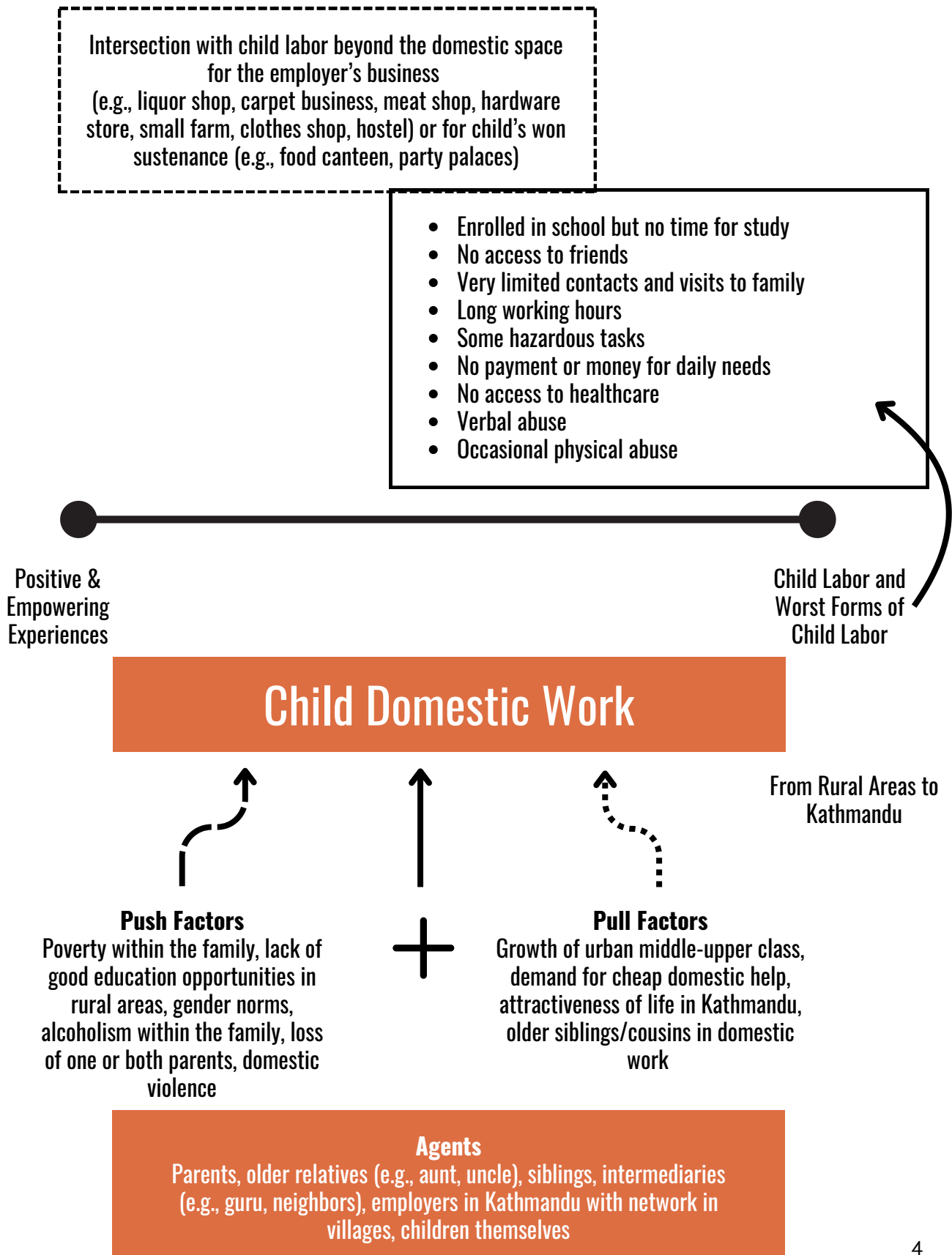


A half-day focus group discussion was conducted with 5 employers of child domestic workers. This was especially important because employers have typically been excluded from existing studies on child domestic work, both within and beyond Nepal. Using a vignette (fictional story), employers were invited to discuss their reasons for employing children as domestic workers, their perception of the work and life conditions of child domestic workers in Nepal, their relationship with the child domestic workers in their own house, and their opinions on whether something should be done to change this form of child employment in Nepal.



In-depth interviews were also conducted with 10 topical experts (NGO workers, schoolteachers and principals, government officials) who have a solid and well-documented knowledge of the reality of child domestic work in Nepal. They were invited to speak about the drivers behind the children's recruitment into the domestic sectors, the conditions and circumstances under which child domestic workers live and work, the engagement of child domestic workers beyond the domestic walls, and the impact that working in the domestic sector has on children.

Life as Child Domestic Workers in Kathmandu



Children who currently work in Kathmandu as domestic workers come from villages in rural areas of the country. The modalities through which they 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, other relatives such as aunts, uncles, older siblings, and grandparents can also play a role. Importantly, the research also illuminated the role played in the recruitment process by employers, intermediaries, and the children themselves. In fact, many children do play an active part in the process by pursuing or accepting employment opportunities.

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, they 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 make an effort to understand the children and do not always offer them a space to talk about their situations, thus contributing to their isolation and loneliness. Similarly, most children prefer not to share about their life with peers. Indeed, most child domestic workers do not have close friendships, which relates to the fact that employers prohibit them from hanging out with friends.

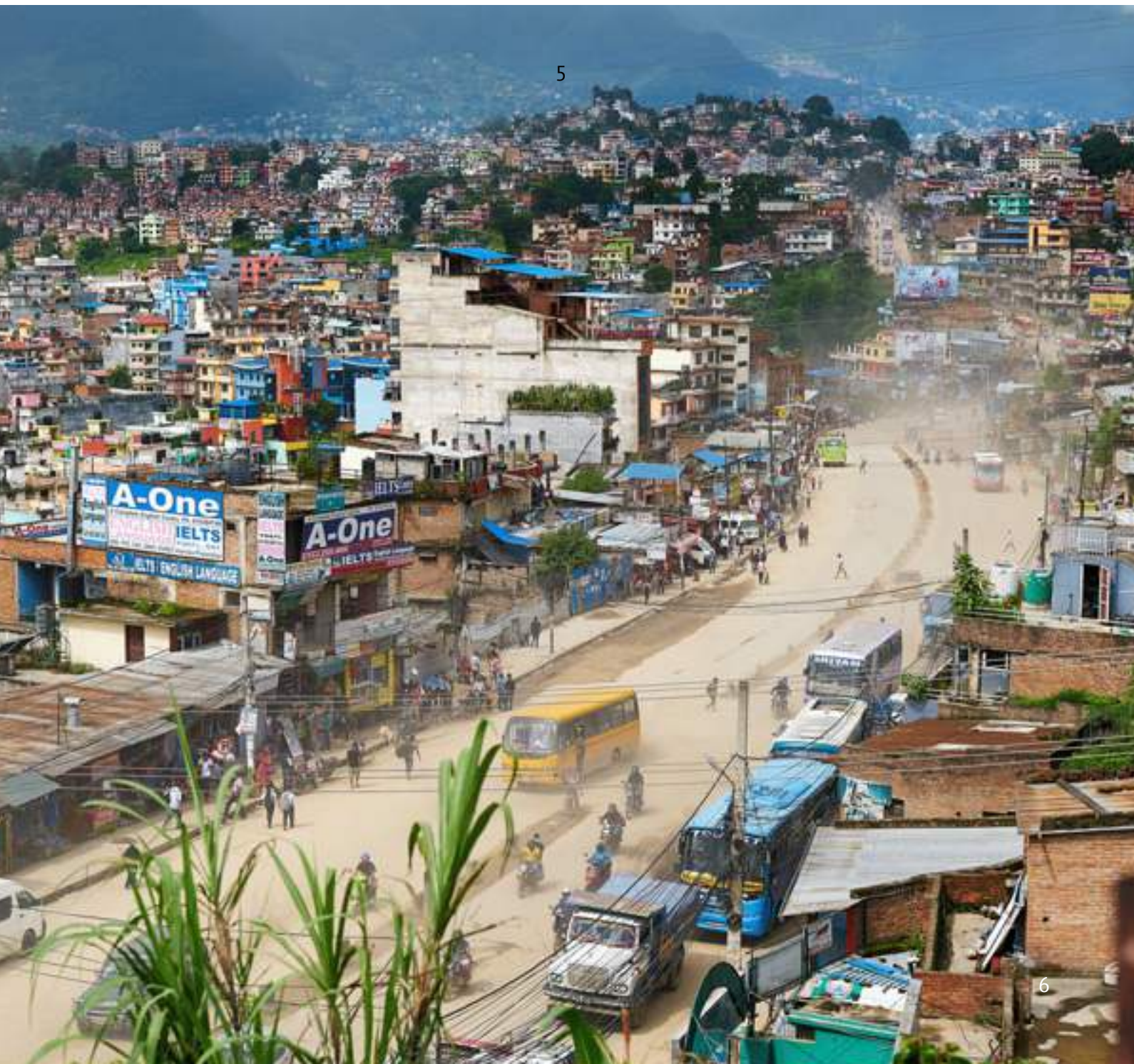
Even more dramatic is that many child domestic workers have only sporadic contact with their families of origin. Most children can only visit their parents once a year during the holiday season. Some do not even have that freedom. The reasons for this may include the need for children to do more household 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. Significantly, there are also children who work in the house of the employer's relatives or 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 (venues for events typically associated with the adult entertainment sector) during the night to make some money.

In fact, as they engage in domestic work, the great majority of children 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 doctors or to the hospital when they are sick, and they even have to work as usual.

While living in the employer's house, most children have a negative relationship with the employers, which 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 beatings. Under these circumstances, sadness, homesickness, and loneliness are common feelings among the children.

Image 3. Street winding through Kathmandu. Credit: @Free the Slaves



Recommendations

Based on the above findings, some targeted recommendations are offered below.

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 this is 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, 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.

Recommendations for Parents of Child Domestic Workers



Collect More Information About the Reality Awaiting Children in Kathmandu

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

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.

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 offer understanding and support.



Offer a Safe Space for Children to Talk about Their Reality

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

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

School principals and teachers who are already engaged with children's rights organizations should encourage their colleagues in other public schools to do the same with the aim of creating a more comprehensive and effective system of support for the children.

Image 4. One of the public schools in Kathmandu attended by child domestic workers. Credit: @Free the Slaves



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 Attitudes 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

This study was limited to Kathmandu, but there are also child domestic workers 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 unpacking more of 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 attitudes and behaviors towards child domestic workers. These include advocacy campaigns targeting the families, 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, many more cases of abuse and neglect that could not be uncovered in this research are likely to 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 4. Child domestic workers drawing during the workshop. Credit: @Free the Slaves



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