



# A STUDY ON CONDITIONS OF DOMESTIC CHILD LABOURERS AT WORKPLACE

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## ABSTRACT

Domestic child labour remains one of the most hidden and exploitative forms of child employment in India and several other developing nations. It involves children, often below the age of 14, engaged in household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, taking care of younger children, fetching water, and even assisting in outdoor errands for employers. These children are frequently employed by middle- and upper-class households and are often subjected to appalling working conditions that violate not only child rights but also basic human dignity. The conditions under which domestic child labourer's work are harsh, and in many cases, inhumane. They are generally made to work for long hours, beginning at the break of dawn and continuing late into the night, often with little or no rest periods. Unlike adult workers, they are rarely given fixed working hours or holidays, and they work seven days a week. Most domestic child labourers are live-in workers, which mean they stay at the employer's residence, separated from their families and denied opportunities for social interaction or education. They are deprived of a normal childhood that includes schooling, play, and social development. Many of them come from impoverished families in rural areas or belong to marginalized communities and are sent to cities with the hope of earning a living to support their families.



## INTRODUCTION

The working environment for these children is often unsafe and unregulated. Since the domestic sector operates largely within private households, it remains beyond the regular scope of labour inspections and government oversight. As a result, cases of abuse—both physical and verbal—are disturbingly common. Many child domestic workers face beatings, humiliation, threats, and mental trauma. There have also been numerous reports of sexual abuse and harassment, especially of girl children, which go unreported due to fear, stigma, and lack of access to justice. Moreover, their access to healthcare is minimal, and even in the case of illness or injury, employers often neglect their medical needs, considering them as secondary or replaceable. The food provided to domestic child workers is frequently inadequate and of inferior quality compared to what is consumed by the employer's family. In some households, they are made to eat separately, reinforcing a class-based or caste-based divide that leads to further emotional and psychological alienation. Clothing and sleeping arrangements are often just as poor—many children are given discarded or worn-out clothes and made to sleep on the floor or in cramped, unventilated spaces.

Another major concern is the complete denial of education. Although the Right to Education (RTE) Act mandates free and compulsory education for children between the ages of 6 to 14, child domestic labourers are typically excluded from this right. Employers rarely allow these children to attend school or receive any form of informal education, as it would interfere with their household chores. Some employers falsely promise to send the child to school but fail to fulfill their commitment. In some instances, these children are lured into domestic work with the assurance of receiving education and a better life, but in reality, they become trapped in a cycle of servitude. This denial of education not only violates the law but also hinders the child's personal growth and opportunities for future advancement. Moreover, the early exposure to adult responsibilities, coupled with isolation and poor treatment, often leads to emotional distress and long-term psychological effects such as depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety.

Culturally and socially, child domestic labour is often normalized in many parts of India. It is perceived as a lesser evil compared to street begging or hazardous factory work. In some communities, sending a child—especially a girl child—to work in a household is seen as a means of teaching discipline and securing her future. This mindset, however, fails to recognize the deep-rooted exploitation and rights violations involved. Gender plays a critical role in the dynamics of domestic child labour. Girls are more likely to be employed in



domestic work than boys, due to stereotypical assumptions that they are naturally suited for household chores. As a result, they face a dual burden of gender-based discrimination and child labour exploitation. In many cases, girl child labourers are also burdened with caregiving responsibilities that deprive them of even basic rest and safety. This gendered division of labour exacerbates the vulnerability of girls, subjecting them to multiple layers of marginalization.

The economic drivers of domestic child labour are deeply entrenched in poverty, lack of access to education, unemployment, and social inequality. Parents living in extreme poverty often see no option but to send their children to work to supplement household income. In some cases, children are placed in domestic service through middlemen or agents, who receive payment for finding 'help' for urban families. These arrangements often amount to child trafficking and bonded labour, especially when children are denied wages or are told that their earnings are being sent directly to their families. Most of these children have no way of verifying this, and are completely dependent on their employer for food, shelter, and survival. Their lack of legal documents, identity proof, or awareness of their rights further makes them vulnerable to being exploited and even enslaved.

Although there are laws prohibiting child labour in domestic work—such as the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016—implementation remains weak. Domestic work was officially listed as a hazardous occupation for children below the age of 14, yet children continue to be employed due to lack of effective monitoring and social acceptance of the practice. The fact that the workplace is a private home makes it extremely difficult for authorities to inspect, and often, even if a case is reported, action is not taken due to lack of evidence or social pressure. NGOs and child rights activists have played a significant role in rescuing and rehabilitating such children, but the scale of the problem far exceeds their capacity. Rescue operations are complex and often face resistance from employers, who view their actions as interference in personal matters. Moreover, rehabilitation of child domestic workers remains a challenge, as it requires not just rescue but reintegration into society through education, counseling, and vocational training.

Addressing the conditions of domestic child labourers requires a multifaceted approach. There must be stronger enforcement of existing laws, greater accountability from employers, and widespread awareness campaigns to shift public attitudes. Community-based monitoring mechanisms can be effective in identifying cases of child labour at the local level. Additionally, supporting vulnerable families with income-generating opportunities, adult

employment, and access to social welfare schemes can help reduce the economic compulsion that drives children into domestic work. Education must be promoted as a right and an essential part of every child's life, regardless of their social or economic background. It is only through a combination of legal action, public awareness, education, and community involvement that the exploitative practice of domestic child labour can be meaningfully addressed and ultimately eliminated.

### **WORKING HOURS AND LACK OF REST**

One of the most severe and concerning aspects of domestic child labour is the long and exhaustive working hours that children are subjected to, often without any formal breaks or adequate rest. Unlike regulated employment sectors, domestic work takes place in private homes, where there is no standardization of work hours or enforcement of labour laws. Child domestic labourers are frequently made to begin their tasks early in the morning—sometimes as early as 5 or 6 AM—and continue working late into the night. Their day may involve a series of physically demanding chores such as cleaning, sweeping, washing clothes and utensils, preparing food, running errands, and caring for infants or elderly members of the employer's family.

What makes this situation more exploitative is the absence of defined shifts or break periods. Children are expected to be "on call" throughout the day, often with no time to rest, eat properly, or play. Unlike adult domestic workers who may have contracts or the agency to negotiate hours, child labourers typically accept whatever conditions are imposed upon them—either out of fear, helplessness, or a lack of alternatives. In many cases, even illness or injury does not grant them a break, as employers consider them replaceable or see rest as a luxury rather than a necessity. This constant state of work not only leads to physical exhaustion but also stunts the child's natural development and emotional well-being.

Moreover, being live-in workers in most cases, these children rarely get a chance to step out of the home, interact with others, or enjoy any semblance of a normal childhood. Their sleep schedules are compromised, and they are often allotted poor-quality sleeping arrangements—sometimes just a mat on the floor in a corner of the kitchen or store room. The lack of rest and recreation over time can lead to both short-term fatigue and long-term health complications such as weakened immunity, stunted growth, and mental stress. Overall, the excessive working hours and absence of rest highlight the exploitative nature of domestic child labour and the urgent need for social, legal, and policy interventions.



## **LIVING CONDITIONS AND FOOD PROVISIONS**

The living conditions and food provisions provided to domestic child labourers are often substandard, reflecting the deep-rooted neglect and marginalization they experience in their workplaces. Most domestic child labourers are live-in workers, meaning they reside in the employer's home, completely dependent on them for shelter, food, and basic necessities. However, the accommodation given to these children is typically inadequate, uncomfortable, and unhygienic. They are usually made to sleep in small, poorly ventilated spaces like kitchens, storerooms, or even on the floor without proper bedding. In many cases, these children are not allowed to use furniture such as beds, sofas, or chairs, and are treated as inferior or separate from the family they serve. Their access to basic facilities like clean water, personal hygiene, and sanitary toilets is limited or restricted.

The food provisions for domestic child labourers are another area of serious concern. These children are often given leftovers or food of inferior quality that lacks proper nutrition. While the employer's family may eat nutritious meals, child workers are given insufficient quantities or are made to eat separately, reinforcing a sense of exclusion and discrimination. Mealtimes are irregular, and children are sometimes forced to skip meals during busy periods or if they are perceived to have made a mistake. This nutritional neglect leads to undernourishment, stunted growth, fatigue, and a weakened immune system, making them more susceptible to illness and poor physical development.

In addition, the lack of care, emotional warmth, and proper supervision in their living environment contributes to severe mental stress. Being away from their families, living in isolation, and facing constant orders or scolding without affection leads to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. For girl child labourers, the situation is even worse due to the risk of sexual exploitation and lack of privacy in their living spaces. Employers often fail to recognize that these children require not only food and shelter but also safety, affection, and dignity. The poor living conditions and inadequate food provisions reflect a gross violation of their fundamental rights and underline the urgent need for stronger legal enforcement and societal change to protect these vulnerable children.

## **ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION AT THE WORKPLACE**

Abuse and exploitation are among the gravest concerns when it comes to domestic child labour. These children, often voiceless and powerless, are subjected to various forms of mistreatment by their employers, ranging from physical abuse to emotional and even sexual exploitation. Since domestic work takes place behind closed doors in private homes, away



from public scrutiny and monitoring by authorities, child workers are extremely vulnerable. Many employers treat child domestic workers not as individuals with rights, but as property or inferior beings whose sole purpose is to serve. This dehumanization opens the door to routine abuse and exploitation.

**Physical abuse** is alarmingly common and can include beating, slapping, kicking, or other forms of corporal punishment for minor mistakes or delays. Some children report being denied food or locked in rooms as punishment. Long working hours without rest further compound the physical toll on their bodies, leading to fatigue, injury, and long-term health problems.

**Emotional and verbal abuse** is equally damaging. Children are often yelled at, humiliated, called degrading names, or threatened with being sent away or punished further. This constant negativity can severely affect a child's mental health, leading to anxiety, low self-esteem, and trauma. In many cases, they internalize this mistreatment, believing they are worthless or deserving of such treatment, which affects their personality and development in the long run.

The most horrific form of abuse is **sexual exploitation**, especially of girl child workers. Many are vulnerable to molestation, harassment, and even rape by male members of the household or other adult figures. Due to fear, shame, and lack of knowledge about legal rights or avenues for help, these crimes often go unreported. Moreover, the child's dependency on the employer for shelter, food, and wages leaves them with little room to resist or escape such situations.

**Economic exploitation** is another widespread issue. Child labourers are typically paid very low wages—if they are paid at all. Employers often take advantage of their ignorance and lack of bargaining power, giving them only token amounts or promising payments that are never made. In some cases, children are sent to work by their families or middlemen and never even see the money earned.

These forms of abuse and exploitation are not isolated incidents but part of a larger system of inequality, poverty, and indifference. Without robust legal protections, regular inspections, and societal awareness, domestic child labourers will continue to suffer in silence. Addressing this issue requires not only law enforcement but also a shift in public attitudes and collective responsibility toward protecting the rights and dignity of every child.

## **NATURE OF WORK PERFORMED BY CHILD LABOURERS IN HOUSEHOLDS**

Domestic child labourers in India are often engaged in a wide range of household chores that are physically demanding, monotonous, and far beyond what is appropriate for their age. The nature of their work varies depending on the size and socio-economic status of the employer's family, but it generally involves multiple tasks that are essential for the day-to-day functioning of a home. These children, sometimes as young as five or six years old, perform duties that are usually reserved for adult domestic workers, robbing them of their childhood and education.

Common tasks assigned to child domestic workers include sweeping and mopping floors, dusting furniture, washing dishes and utensils, cleaning clothes by hand, and assisting in cooking or food preparation. Many are also responsible for fetching water, running errands such as buying groceries, or delivering messages and parcels. In some households, children may be required to care for younger siblings or elderly family members, including bathing them, feeding them, and ensuring their safety. This caregiving responsibility places a heavy emotional and physical burden on the child, who is often ill-equipped to manage such tasks.

The work is typically unstructured and continuous throughout the day, with children expected to switch from one chore to another without breaks. Unlike adults, child labourers lack the physical strength and endurance to sustain such workloads, yet they are pushed to meet the same demands. This can lead to exhaustion, injuries, and chronic health problems. The repetitive nature of the work also limits opportunities for learning or personal growth, as children spend their entire day in servitude rather than in play, study, or social interaction.

Moreover, domestic child labour is often hidden from public view, making it difficult to monitor the conditions or enforce regulations. The invisibility of their work adds to their vulnerability, as abuses can go unnoticed and unreported. Many children work in households where their presence is not officially acknowledged, and their efforts are taken for granted.

Overall, the nature of work performed by child labourers in households is exploitative and harmful. It deprives them of their right to education, healthy development, and a safe childhood. Addressing this issue requires awareness, strict enforcement of child labour laws, and social interventions aimed at preventing children from entering such exploitative work environments in the first place.

## **SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF DOMESTIC CHILD LABOURERS**

The socio-economic background of domestic child labourers is a critical factor that contributes to their vulnerability and exploitation. Most children who end up working as



domestic helpers come from economically disadvantaged families, often living in poverty-stricken rural or urban slum areas. These families typically face extreme financial hardships, lack access to basic resources, and have limited opportunities for sustainable livelihood. Poverty drives parents to send their children to work as domestic labourers, sometimes out of sheer desperation to meet daily needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. In many cases, parents themselves are illiterate or have very low levels of education, which restricts their awareness about children's rights and the importance of education.

Many domestic child labourers belong to marginalized and socially disadvantaged communities, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minority groups, which historically face discrimination and limited access to education and employment opportunities. This social exclusion further compounds their economic difficulties and perpetuates cycles of poverty and child labour. The lack of social safety nets, combined with poor living conditions, often forces children into work at a very young age to supplement the family income.

Another key aspect of their socio-economic background is the limited access to quality education. Many children working in domestic labour have either never attended school or have dropped out due to financial constraints or the need to contribute economically to their families. The absence of education restricts their future prospects and keeps them trapped in low-paying, unskilled labour. Furthermore, the awareness and enforcement of laws prohibiting child labour are often minimal in these communities, which allows the exploitation to continue unchecked.

In some cases, children are trafficked or brought from remote villages to urban households through agents or middlemen who promise better opportunities but instead exploit them as cheap labour. These children are often isolated from their families and communities, making them even more vulnerable to abuse and neglect.

Overall, the socio-economic background of domestic child labourers is marked by poverty, illiteracy, social marginalization, and lack of opportunities. Addressing these root causes is essential for eradicating child labour in domestic work. Efforts must focus not only on rescuing children but also on empowering their families through education, economic support, and social inclusion programs to prevent the cycle of exploitation from continuing.



## CONCLUSION

The conditions faced by domestic child labourers at the workplace are deeply troubling and highlight a severe violation of children's rights and dignity. These children endure long working hours without adequate rest, poor living arrangements, and insufficient or low-quality food, all of which take a significant toll on their physical and mental health. The hidden nature of domestic work often exposes them to various forms of abuse and exploitation—physical, emotional, sexual, and economic—without proper avenues for help or protection. Their socio-economic backgrounds, marked by poverty and lack of access to education, make them vulnerable to being trapped in this exploitative cycle. Addressing the plight of domestic child labourers requires a multi-faceted approach that includes stronger enforcement of child labour laws, greater awareness among employers, social and economic support for vulnerable families, and effective rehabilitation programs for rescued children. Only by improving the workplace conditions and safeguarding their rights can we ensure that these children are granted the childhood, education, and opportunities they rightfully deserve.

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