

Small hands, big work: Girl domestic servants in Karachi

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The use of children as domestic servants is one of the most pervasive forms of child labor in Pakistan. Children as young as five spend 12-14 hours a day, seven days a week, to earn money to support their families. An unfortunate social and institutional acceptance of this practice has made thousands of Pakistani children vulnerable to many forms of violence and abuse.

Research has recently been conducted in three posh areas of Karachi, capital of Sindh province, with a view to ascertain the personal/family background and working conditions of girl domestic servants in upper or upper-middle class localities. The research team approached 40 girls under the age of 18, and requested them to answer some questions. Two girls refused to take part, while one girl was forbidden to do so by her employer.

Overall, the research notes that since the root cause of girl-child labor is endemic poverty and systematic gender bias against female children, the government should provide assistance to girl domestic servants under the Benazir Income Support Programme. According to the research, the majority of girls do not earn more than Rs 1000; it would therefore be easy for the government to provide their families with this amount under the Programme, in return for which girls can attend school.

The research found that most of the girls were between 8-12 years of age (64 per cent), a considerable number were between 13-17 years (23.41 per cent), and some were below eight years (10.11 per cent). The majority of the girls belong to Siraki speaking families, followed by Punjabi, Sindhi, Balochi and Urdu speaking families.

Migration from small villages and towns to big cities is quite prevalent in Pakistan. The research substantiated this trend, with more than 70 per cent of the girls having migrated to Karachi from southern and central Punjab, interior Sindh and even Balochistan. The rest were permanent residents of Karachi.

One of the major causes of migration to big cities such as Karachi and Lahore is the seeking of better employment opportunities. Sixty-four per cent of the girls belonged to families where parents and children were involved in economic activities. A certain number of girls (24.22 per cent) claimed their fathers did no work, while 10.65 per cent had brothers who attended school and did not contribute to the family income. One such girl noted,

My parents are absolutely clear that only male child deserves school education because after studies he will help them. My father is convinced that girls don't need to study as they have to help their mothers and contribute to family income. My mother is saving money from my salary because she has started the preparation of my marriage and huge finances are required for a girl's marriage in our community.

Moreover, these findings confirm the prevailing assumption that the parents of most working children are alive. Nearly two-thirds of the girls had both parents alive, while 16 per cent were in the care of a single mother, and 7.88 per cent with a single father. There was only one girl who had neither parents alive, and was in the care of her maternal grandmother.

Most of the girls had never attended any school, formal or informal (77 per cent), while some had attended a religious school or madrassa (22 per cent). A small number had attended formal school but were not able to even complete their primary education (7.33 per cent). Despite the low level

of education among the girls, nearly all of them showed enthusiasm to attend school if they were ever given the opportunity.

“I really like my employer’s daughter’s uniform, and the way she speaks English. I love airplanes and always wanted to fly in one with my mother and six siblings, but not with my father, because of his indifferent and erratic behavior,” said one girl.

The size of a family is often responsible for children having to work; a large number of the girls in the research (59.76 per cent) came from families of nine or more. Girls from families with seven or more members amounted to 27.43 per cent, while only 11.27 per cent were from families of five members. Not one of the girls was an only child.

The research also attempted to gauge the contribution made by the children to their overall family income. About 30 per cent of the girls said their family income was Rs 8000 or more, about 28 per cent said Rs 6000 or more, 21 per cent Rs 4000 or more and 17 per cent Rs 2000 or more. All the girls’ fathers were manual laborers, which is a low paying and unstable profession. Child domestic servants are also paid low salaries, with half of the girls receiving Rs 1000 for an entire month’s work. Another 17 per cent were paid Rs 1200 per month, 13 per cent received Rs 1500 and 11 per cent received Rs 2000. One of the girls was paid Rs 2500 monthly. Two of the girls received no salary for their labor, only three meals a day, clothes and shelter. These two girls said that since their parents could not provide them with basic necessities such as food and clothes, they had no choice but to work in their current environment.

Apart from these two girls, the others revealed they were able to save their monthly salary as their employers provided them with food and used clothes. Many of them saw their current work as a kind of apprenticeship; as soon as they learn all the daily chores--cleaning, dusting, washing clothes and crockery--they will get a higher paid job of around Rs 6000 per month.

While most employers are government officers or working in the corporate sector, where their employment terms would be clearly outlined, they do not provide specific job responsibilities for their child servants. In fact, one of the girls noted that employers take the services of child servants for granted. The children do all sorts of domestic work without any break--cleaning, dusting, washing dishes and clothes, preparing tea, and often taking care of small children. Most of them said they work over 14 hours a day, with some working 12 hours and others 10 hours.

On top of these long hours, those girl servants living in their employer’s homes--44 per cent--get no weekly holiday. Only 36 per cent enjoyed a half-day off on Friday, while 7 per cent were given Sundays off.

With such a significant amount of their time spent working, the research team asked the girls what was the most enjoyable component of their work. A significant percentage of them responded that they liked to clean and dust in the lounge or bedroom, as that gave them the opportunity to watch television. One girl candidly noted, “Sometimes I even spend one hour cleaning and dusting Baji’s room, as the television there is never off.” Other girls said they liked taking care of infants, as it allowed them to sit in one place and relax a little.

Nearly all the respondents admitted the occurrence of emotional violence during their work; only six per cent replied in the negative, while two per cent said they don’t know. Verbal abuse, yelling and insults were frequent forms of emotional violence experienced. This was usually done by either the employer’s wife or mother, although sometimes other male members of the family would also shout at them. According to a 10-year-old girl,

When I was very young I didn't understand the meaning of Begum Sahiba's (Madam) favorite utterance, "kis haram ki oulad hain" (whose illegitimate child is this?). When I came to know the meaning last year, one day I responded to the burly Madam that "main tumhari terah haram ki oulad naheen hoon" (I am not an illegitimate child like you). She beat me severely and pulled me out of the house. She never paid my salary of 22 days and even alleged that I had stolen Rs 500 from her drawer.

In fact, all the girls were familiar with accusations of theft from their employers. "Whenever the family lose or misplace anything, they blame us," said one of the girls. In such instances, the girls experienced physical violence, like slapping or punching, or threats of informing the police.

Once they even called the cops when my employer's youngest sister lost her mobile phone somewhere. The policeman slapped my face and verbally abused my parents. Fortunately, at the same time, Madam discovered the lost mobile phone under the seat of her car. They thanked the cops for their immediate response, but didn't bother to say a single word of apology to me. I left the house after finishing all my work and never went back there. I didn't even take my 10 days salary.

Due to their miserable working conditions, many of the girls suffer from severe depression and sleeping disorders. None of them have ever sought medical help however, being unaware of health facilities in their residential areas.

Unlike emotional and physical violence, it was difficult to get structured answers from the girls regarding sexual violence. Many respondents politely refused to talk about the issue. Of the rest, some admitted to experiencing sexual violence, while others bluntly denied any such incidents. According to those who admitted sexual violence, it was mostly other servants, especially drivers, who tried to take sexual advantages. In some cases, teenage boys in the employer's family were also perpetrators of sexual violence. The girls said that indecent and inappropriate touching was the most prevalent form of sexual violence. Two of the girls had experienced inappropriate touching by the grandfather of the family.

I really liked 'Dada' (grandfather) because he always greeted me with nice words and gave candies. However, I soon realized that the old man is trying to take sexual advantages. That was a horrible time of my life as my parents were in Punjab and I had no option but to stay in the house. My mother came after one month, and as soon as she arrived I left the house immediately but never found the courage to tell my mother what happened during her absence.

The research therefore suggests that sexual violence is as common as emotional and physical violence. It is the lack of empowerment, young age and social taboos surrounding sexual norms and behaviour that prevent girls from honest discussion and redress regarding this violation of their dignity.

From community based organizations to international donor agencies, union councils to the federal government, there is theoretical agreement that affirmative steps need to be taken to provide solace to child domestic workers. The research suggests that a campaign to sponsor girls should be launched, with the government requesting expatriates, local businessmen and philanthropists to bear the daily and education expenses of girls from families experiencing absolute poverty.

In big cities such as Karachi and Lahore, donor agencies with the collaboration of NGOs should establish a helpline specifically for girl domestic workers in troubled situations. The helpline

should coordinate with service providers--government or non-government--to provide some relief to the girls. Community based organizations should initiate evening school and health programmes particularly for girl domestic workers, and government and institutional donor agencies can help them to this end. The country's electronic and print media can also play a role by spreading awareness about the problems of girl child domestic workers. In fact, the extent of the problems faced by child domestic workers, boys or girls, is enormous. Research, surveys, investigative or fact-finding reports can only spotlight a tiny portion of these at a time. Various forms of violence and exploitation are still unexplored.

This article is an edited version of a research report. The research was conducted by a group of students headed by Amir Murtaza, who is a human rights activist in Karachi, Pakistan. He is at present working as a development consultant.