

A Qualitative Study on Exploitation and Vulnerabilities of Underage Girls Domestic Workers in Lahore



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Abstract: *Child domestic labour continues to be a major form of child exploitation in developing countries, especially in Pakistan, where young girls are hired on an unprotected and exploited basis to work in private homes. Domestic labour is hidden from view and it is easy for it to be neglected or abused, which is not the case for other types of child labour. This study aims to examine the vulnerabilities and exploitation of underage female domestic workers in Lahore, Pakistan. The data was collected by purposive sampling of labour inspectors, social workers, legal practitioners, child welfare representatives and human rights advocates using a qualitative research design. The results show that child girls are subject to a variety of different types of exploitation such as physical abuse, psychological abuse, lack of education, economic exploitation, limited freedom of movement, and social isolation. Children are also vulnerable due to poverty, gender discrimination and the fact that they do not have access to education and weak family support system. The study also revealed that abuse frequently is not reported due to domestic work being conducted in private households and minimal institutional oversight. It also finds that child domestic labour is not just an economic problem, but a serious violation of children's rights. Improving the protection system for children, raising community awareness, broadening educational opportunities and providing assistance to vulnerable families are critical to the reduction of domestic child labor involving girls.*

Keywords: Child Domestic Labour, Exploitation, Underage Girls, Vulnerability, Child Protection, Lahore, Domestic Workers, Qualitative Research

Introduction

Child labour remains one of the most entrenched human rights and social justice issues in developing countries. Despite considerable progress toward the elimination of hazardous forms of child labour, millions of children are still engaged in child labour that puts them at risk to their health, wellbeing, education and social development. Child labour is not a uniform phenomenon, and domestic work among children, particularly those working as girl child workers, is not the same as other forms of child labour, as it is hidden behind the doorsteps of private households, where child labour can be hidden from the public gaze and legal protection (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021).

Child domestic labour is a part of the informal economy in Pakistan. There are thousands of girls from poor families who migrate or are sent to urban centres to work as live-in or part-time domestic workers. For many families, domestic employment is seen as a way to alleviate poverty or ensure that they are able to feed and house their children. But this often masks the very harsh reality that these children face. Typically, underage domestic workers are subjected to high workloads, emotional abuse, physical abuse, limited mobility, lack of nutrition, lack of learning opportunities, and social isolation. Domestic workers work in households, and the monitoring and intervention opportunities are far less compared to children who work in factories or commercial establishments (UNICEF, 2022).

Punjab has been undergoing a phase of rapid urbanization, rising economic disparities, and growing demand for low-cost domestic labour in Lahore, the capital city of Punjab. Such transformations have been a factor in the increasing uptake of young women into the labour force in middle- and high-income

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households. Domestic work is perceived as an extension of what is considered traditional work of females in the household and is not regarded as a formal job; thus, domestic work is normalized as child labour in private households. For this reason, a number of employers do not understand that giving children too much responsibility at home is exploitation and an infringement of internationally recognized child rights.

Girls who are child domestic workers often have to cook, clean, wash, look after children and elderly people, and do all these without any breaks and without any remuneration. In many instances, they have not a single thing to rely on but their employers to provide them with food, shelter, medical care, and personal protection. This dependency has an unequal power dynamic, which makes children more vulnerable to violence and coercion (ILO & UNICEF, 2021).

Underage domestic workers are more vulnerable than those who are economically depressed. Working as a house servant can cause children to be in constant fear, intimidation, verbal abuse, social isolation, and emotional neglect. Being away from their family exacerbates feelings of loneliness, anxiety and depression. The evidence base is growing on the psychological impacts of childhood exploitation, which are often long-lasting, even after the work is completed (World Health Organization, 2020).

Although international focus has begun to grow on the issue of child labour, child workers are still relatively invisible in academic research as their workplaces are inaccessible. Past research often focuses on policies or legal frameworks, labour regulations, or how policy is enacted in practice, but comparatively little attention is paid to the lived experiences of underage girls. A multi-dimensional understanding of vulnerabilities, such as physical, psychological, social, educational and economic vulnerabilities, is vital for the formulation of appropriate child protection interventions and evidence-based public policies.

The objective of the present study is to bridge this gap by exploring the practice of exploitation and vulnerabilities faced by the young girl domestic workers in Lahore. The study does not aim to point to legal enforcement or institutional deficiencies, but rather to gain an understanding of the impact of exploitative working conditions on children's daily lives, health, education, emotional well-being, and future opportunities. The study is guided by a qualitative research approach, which allows for capturing the voices of practitioners who are on the frontline of child protection and domestic labour issues, and therefore gives a vivid picture of the lived realities of children. Finally, this research builds on the existing literature on child labour and emphasizes that domestic work by children is not only an economic survival but a multidimensional social issue related to poverty and gender inequality, as well as limited school access and structural vulnerability. It is vital to have an understanding of these interlinkages to ensure the rights of children are upheld, and vulnerable girls live in safer childhoods in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Child domestic labour is, among all forms of child labour, one of the most hidden and least regulated forms of child exploitation in the world. While there is a global trend to move away from child work, millions of children still engage in hazardous child labour, which impacts their health, education and development. Domestic labour is especially hard to monitor, because it occurs within the confines of private households, where abuse is frequently hidden. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2021) reports that globally, girls make up the bulk of child domestic workers, and that such work is often not accounted for in official labour statistics, making it challenging to find out how many are involved.

Child domestic labour in South Asia is intricately tied to poverty, unemployment and restricted access to education. In many homes, families send their girls to work in the households of the town so as to lessen the burden of the financial needs of the family. While domestic work may be considered safer for children than other types, it can still be associated with significant physical, emotional and psychological abuse, as household workers are completely dependent on their employer's control over their daily activities (UNICEF, 2022).

In Pakistan, child domestic labour is prevalent in the informal sector. Domestic service is often the work for which families will have underage girls work for them in exchange for a home, and it will be work for which they will not have any formal contract or legal protection. Education exclusion, malnutrition, limited movement, verbal abuse, and physical abuse have been reported to occur frequently with these children (Ghaffar & Enam, 2025). These situations make them more susceptible and restrict chances for personal development and growth.

Females are important determinants of children's experiences of domestic labour. The recruitment of girls is more common than boys, as household duties are mostly regarded as women's tasks. Girls are seen as under-ambitious, low-achieving, and fit for caring roles, making them vulnerable to discrimination, emotional and gender-based violence from employers. Research also indicates that live-in domestic workers are socially isolated and have limited engagement with their families, which adversely impacts their emotional growth (ILO & UNICEF, 2021).

Common types of abuse reported include physical and psychological abuse. A lot of girls are under the age of 18 when they begin working, and they work long hours without enough rest, causing them to become tired and injured, or to suffer other health issues. In some cases, physical punishment is also a form of discipline at the place of work (WHO, 2020). Insults, humiliation, intimidation, and neglect are also forms of emotional abuse, which can cause anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, and lead to social withdrawal (UNICEF, 2022). Children can experience these psychological impacts even after they have left domestic employment.

Children's vulnerability is further exacerbated by the lack of education. Child domestic workers drop out of school due to heavy workload, thereby limiting their future employment potential and perpetuating poverty. According to UNESCO (2023), the prevention of child labour is one of the most effective approaches: access to education. Likewise, many children are left without social interaction and emotional support, and without the ability to report abuse or seek help as a result of the extended period of separation from their family members (Musizvingoza, Blagbrough, & Pocock, 2022).

In general, the literature reviewed shows that underage domestic workers are not only deprived of their livelihoods, but also suffer from physical violence, emotional violence, exclusion from education, gender discrimination, and lack of social integration. But there has been little qualitative work that has specifically examined these inter-related vulnerabilities from a Lahore perspective. To fill this gap, the present study focuses on the lived experiences of underage girls in domestic work in order to illuminate the various aspects of their exploitation.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which tries to explain the multidimensional exploitation and vulnerabilities faced by underage female domestic workers in Lahore. These frameworks offer a holistic perspective on the interrelationships between individual, family, community, and societal determinants of child domestic labour and its negative impacts.

The Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory proposes that the growth and development of children are impacted by several environmental systems that are interconnected. The theory takes a more holistic perspective on exploitation, recognizing that it is not an isolated occurrence but rather a result of ongoing experiences of children in their families, communities, institutions, and social norms.

At the microsystem level, families and employers directly impact underage girls. A large number of children live in families of extreme poverty, in families lacking jobs, families with sick parents, families in

disarray. Under such circumstances, parents are frequently forced to give their daughters to domestic service at early ages. After getting a job, girls rely on the employer for food, shelter, and survival. Their unequal relationship often leads them to be physically beaten, emotionally abused, given excessive workloads, and socially isolated.

The mesosystem is the child's immediate environments and the linkages between these items, such as family and workplace. Very little emphasis is placed on the children's educational, emotional, and psychological needs, and communication between parents and employers is mainly limited to financial matters. As a result, parents are not aware of how their daughters are exploited in the households of the employers.

The exosystem comprises institutions that have a significant impact on the lives of children but are not directly involved, including educational institutions, labour departments, child protection agencies, and social welfare organizations. Conditions of weak monitoring, lack of intervention by the relevant authorities, and lack of social protection services limit the chances for detection and prevention of exploitation inside the private household.

Lastly, at the macro level, the broader cultural values, gender norms, and socio-economic inequalities are normalized, and children's domestic labour is reinforced. Domestic work done by girls in many communities is not seen as work in itself, but as a part of the traditional work within the household. This social acceptance helps establish the perpetuation of the exploitation of child girls and the non-reporting of abusive practices.

This ecological approach sees exploitation as a product of the interaction of structural, economic, cultural, and institutional processes which all contribute to making children more vulnerable.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1929

The next theoretical basis for this study is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which highlights the right of every child to survive, be protected, be developed, and be able to participate. Children shall be protected from all forms of economic exploitation and any work which interferes with their education, health, dignity or overall development, in accordance with the Convention.

It is evident from the experiences of the underage female domestic workers that they are violating several basic child rights. A large number of girls are denied education, put to work in hazardous conditions, do not enjoy recreation, and are victims of physical and mental abuse. They are generally reliant on their employers to voice concerns, request support, or report abuse.

By applying the UNCRC as an analytical tool, this study can approach child domestic labour not just from an economic perspective, but also as a rights-based perspective. It reiterates that the protection of children is linked to access to education, health, emotional support and to a safe environment for children to grow up in without violence, neglect and exploitation.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the UNCRC together offer a broad understanding of the interplay between personal, familial, social and structural conditions that can lead to forms of exploitation, as well as child rights to protection and development.

Methodology

Research Design

The design of this study was qualitative research, with a descriptive case study approach used to explore the exploitation and vulnerabilities faced by underage female domestic workers in Lahore. A qualitative approach was felt to be appropriate as this allows a better understanding of complex social issues that could not be fully explained numerically alone. The study aimed to gain an understanding of the experiences, observations, and professional learning of those who are directly involved in child protection and domestic labour issues.

Study Area

The study was carried out in Lahore, the Provincial Capital of Punjab, Pakistan. Lahore was chosen because of its high urban population, growing need for domestic workers, and the presence of government and non-government organizations actively involved in child protection and labour welfare.

Sampling Technique

The purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who have a wide range of experience in issues concerning child domestic labour. The selection of the participants was determined by their firsthand involvement in child protection, labour regulation, legal advocacy, and rehabilitation services.

The study comprised professionals from labour departments, child protection agencies, social welfare groups, child welfare legal practitioners, child welfare human rights organizations, and non-governmental child welfare institutions. Their professional experiences enabled them to gain knowledge about the different forms of exploitation that are faced by underage female domestic workers.

Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to collect primary data. The questions used in the guide for the interviews were open-ended and asked to gain participants' personal insights into issues of physical exploitation, emotional abuse, educational deprivation, social isolation, gender discrimination, and other vulnerabilities of underage girls working in domestic work.

Participants gave informed consent for all interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the process of doing the research, which facilitated the provision of an open and honest interview. Interviews were conducted with participants' permission and audio-recorded and then transcribed in full for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used as the analysis method for the collected data. Repeatedly reading the interview transcriptions ensured that the same ideas, concepts, and patterns concerning child exploitation were identified. Themes of vulnerability of underage domestic workers were clustered around major categories of vulnerability that were similar responses.

Common themes were identified in the responses: physical exploitation, psychological abuse, educational deprivation, economic exploitation, gender discrimination and social isolation. The conclusions as presented in the results and discussion section were based on these themes.

Ethical Considerations

Research was conducted in an ethical manner. All participants were free to withdraw at any time, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to conducting interviews. The participants were assured of confidentiality of their identities and institutional affiliations. The study was exploring a sensitive issue in relation to children; hence, direct interviews with child domestic workers were avoided to prevent possible psychological harm or re-traumatization. Rather, data were gathered from practitioners who have large amounts of experience in child protection and rehabilitation. Ethical principles for the research were followed regarding confidentiality, privacy, consent, and responsible management of personal, sensitive information.

Results and Discussion

This study revealed that the various types of exploitation of these girls working in domestic occupations in Lahore are interlinked and have an impact on their physical health, psychological health, education, and overall development. The participants were unanimous that child domestic labor is not only an economic problem, but also a multidimensional social problem that is related to poverty, gender inequality, and low

educational opportunities. Six main types of exploitation were found in the thematic analysis, including physical exploitation, psychological abuse, economic exploitation, educational deprivation, gender based vulnerability, and social isolation. The findings as a whole demonstrate the realities of underage girls working in private households.

Physical Exploitation

Many participants noted that underage girls are routinely given household responsibilities that exceed their physical strength, such as cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, carrying heavy loads, caring for children or older members of the family. Fatigue, body pain, and other health problems are common due to long hours of work with inadequate rest. Some participants also observed that physical punishment (slapping/beatings for minor errors) still exists in some households. Domestic violence occurs in private homes, and as a result, it is frequently ignored by the public authorities. The results are similar to earlier studies which indicated that child domestic workers continued to be very vulnerable to physical abuse, as their employers have a high level of authority over their lives (ILO, 2021; WHO, 2020).

Psychological Abuse

Another significant theme was psychological abuse. Participants said that they have witnessed many employers who use insults, humiliations, threats, or intimidation to control children's behaviour, using words. Ongoing emotional abuse leads to fear, anxiety, low self-esteem, and emotional withdrawal. Many girls are afraid to speak up or report abuse for fear of losing their jobs or disappointing the families in which they live. These findings are in line with those of UNICEF (2022) and Musizvingoza et al. (2022), who reported that increased emotional abuse over a prolonged duration can have significant negative impacts on children's psychological development and mental health.

Economic Exploitation

Exploitation in the economic sphere was also identified as a major concern. The participants reported that while girls were working as adults, they earned very low wages and were working with very demanding domestic work. In many situations, the parents/guardians are paid wages directly, and employers may be liable for payments to be deducted without cause. For many children, the necessity of going to work is driven largely by economic dependence, and many work in exploitative conditions because they need to work to support their families. The results are corroborated by previous studies, which show that child domestic labour is driven by children's low bargaining power and financial weakness (ILO & UNICEF, 2021).

Educational Deprivation

All participants agreed that educational deprivation is one of the most harmful impacts of child domestic labour. Many girls miss out on school because they have to work long hours, and those who do attend are likely to drop out of school when they are ready to enter the workforce, reducing their future employment prospects and perpetuating intergenerational poverty. The results align with UNESCO (2023), which sees education as one of the best protective factors against child labour and child exploitation.

Gender Vulnerability

The study revealed that girls were more likely to be employed in domestic work than boys, as domestic work is traditionally considered female work. This perception is gendered, participants explained, leading to increased exposure of girls to discrimination, emotional pressure and unequal treatment. These relationships of unequal power are reinforced by the fact that they rely on their employers. These findings are corroborated by international evidence which shows that gender norms play a significant role in children's experiences of domestic labour (ILO, 2021).

Social Isolation

Social isolation was the last of the key themes. A high percentage of the girls said they were separated from their families for extended periods of time, and had little access to friends or community activities. Mobility is limited, and children are always reliant on others, such as employers, which diminishes their capacity to seek assistance and/or report abuse. These findings are in line with Bronfenbrenner (Ecological Systems Theory) and other research that indicated that social isolation diminishes the protective factors in children's lives and makes them more vulnerable to exploitation (UNICEF, 2022).

Overall Discussion

The results provide strong evidence for the importance of children's experiences being shaped by a variety of factors, including family factors, employer practices, community attitudes, and broader cultural beliefs, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Likewise, the findings further support the child rights approach underpinning the UNCRC, affirming that children who are child workers continue to face violations of their right to education, protection, dignity and healthy development. Reducing poverty is thus not enough to mitigate the vulnerabilities; society's attitudes towards child domestic labour also need to change, and child-centred protection mechanisms need to be strengthened.

Conclusion

In the present study, the exploitation and vulnerabilities of underage girls working as domestic workers in Lahore, Pakistan were discussed. The results show that child domestic labour is a multidimensional phenomenon where children are not just economically exploited but also physically abused, psychologically traumatized, denied education, discriminated against based on gender, and socially isolated. The interrelated vulnerabilities have profound impacts on children's physical health, emotional health, personal development, and life opportunities.

The study found that underage girls often do tasks at home that are physically intensive and above their age and development. For some, the long hours of work, short time for rest, poor nutrition, and even physical abuse place children at great risk of suffering ill health. Meanwhile, verbal humiliation, intimidation, and neglect are also forms of emotional abuse that have a negative impact on children's confidence, mental health, and emotional stability. These can have a profound impact on their psyche, and usually have lasting effects well into adulthood.

The Ecological Systems Theory developed by Bronfenbrenner offers a useful framework for understanding how poverty, family context, employer practices, community values and attitudes, and cultural context can place children at risk. Similarly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations (UNCRC) reiterates that child domestic workers lack the protections of a few basic rights: having access to education, to a safe childhood, to healthy development, and to freedom from exploitation. The results thus lend credence to the claim that child domestic labour is an infraction of children's dignity and wellbeing, and not a viable means of household survival.

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