

INVISIBLE GIRLS

Employers' perceptions of child domestic workers: Results of a scoping study in Myanmar

Global estimates suggest that 17.2 million children are engaged in domestic work and that 65% of them are between 5 - 14 years (1,2). The vast majority of child domestic workers are girls (3,4). The determinants of child domestic work are complex, but the practice is commonly linked to a combination of financial coping strategies among poor families and the need for home help among employing households. These economic causal drivers are underpinned by social and cultural norms that often condone or at least overlook this form of child labour. Because these workers reside in private homes, child domestic work is relatively invisible. Moreover, young domestic workers are rarely considered part of the workforce, despite their large workload and long hours and few go to school. (3,10). These working and living arrangements mean that a young domestic worker's health and well-being, and future livelihood options depend substantially on arrangements dictated by the employing household (3,10). This scoping study aimed to explore the views of employers about child domestic work, including their thoughts about feasible interventions to support young domestic workers.

In Myanmar, at least 1% of working children are child domestic workers and child domestic work is the fifth most common occupation among working children (1). Estimates suggest that 30% of child domestic workers are engaged in hazardous work that maybe detrimental

to the health and well-being (1), however, data on child domestic work has notoriously underestimated the prevalence of young workers and the potential health and safety risks. To date, Myanmar has not yet ratified the domestic work convention No. 189 (11), (12) and current legislation does not include legal protections for child domestic workers. (13,14)

Summary of the *Invisible Girls* Research Programme

The *Invisible Girls* research programme aims to raise the visibility and voices of child domestic workers—who are primarily girls and young women. This programme of research is specifically designed to generate intervention-focused, gender-informed evidence to guide programming and policies that reduce the exclusion of these young workers. To date, child domestic workers have been shamefully neglected in public dialogue, development programmes and most importantly, targeted action. Effective action, however, depends on well-informed interventions. We are cognizant that ill-informed investments to help children in difficult circumstances can sometimes make their situations even harder, such as causing them to lose their current income or housing or force them to move to more dangerous work. Well-informed programming can prevent wasting precious development funding. To ensure we provide well-founded evidence that takes account of the complexity of child domestic work, we have designed our research to examine the structures, individuals and interactions that create these harmful versus beneficial circumstances. Ultimately, the *Invisible Girls* programme is in search of interventions that can brighten the futures of child domestic workers.

Aim of employer scoping study

Building on our series of rapid systematic literature reviews (published elsewhere), which were conducted as part of *Invisible Girls* Programme, we carried out a scoping study on the perceptions and roles of employing households. The qualitative interviews with employers explored the challenges, benefits and responsibilities of employing young people as domestic workers, workers' roles and responsibilities and employers' opinions about feasible intervention opportunities (e.g., education, training, social support, health) for the child workers in their households. Studies on child domestic work have tended to focus

on the most extreme cases of abuse, often neglecting employers' perspectives, especially among more benevolent, supportive employing households. This study was designed to understand employers' views and consider feasible intervention approaches that would be amenable to employers to improve child domestic workers' education, skills and future livelihood opportunities. In this briefing note, we present the results of our scoping study on employers' perceived needs, experiences and attitudes about child domestic work to inform future interventions that involve contact with employers.

Methods and participant group

This scoping study used qualitative methods, drawing on a conceptual framework outlining the relationship between employers and child domestic workers (published elsewhere) to develop semi-structured interview guides. Participants were recruited through opportunistic sampling followed by snowball sampling to reach further participants until no new findings appeared from interviews (theoretical saturation). Informal qualitative interviews with 19 employers who employed domestic workers, many of whom were children when they began work. Interviews were conducted from September to October 2020.

The majority of employers (n=15) were young graduate women from cities of Myanmar: Mandalay (n=12) and Yangon (n=3). The age of employers ranged from 27-78 years with a median age of 32 years. According to the participants, of 27 domestic workers discussed, 14 started when they were under 18 years old. Employers reported that they recruited domestic workers between the ages of 12 and 45 years-old, with a median age of 22 years.

Findings

We explored four main questions in our interviews with employers:

1. What do employers want from child domestic workers?
2. What are the challenges of employing children to carry out domestic work?
3. What types of services or training for child domestic workers would be desirable to employers?
4. How do employers recruit, pay and treat child domestic workers?

1. What do employers want from child domestic workers?

Many employers (n=10) said they preferred adult workers between the ages of 20-40 years, explaining that children needed continuous supervision and more training than adults. At the same time, some indicated that they preferred domestic workers between ages 14-16 years (n=4) and workers with little or no prior experience (n=7) because they were easier to train. Nine employers said they favored live-in workers because they were available at all times and theft was less likely. Employers expected domestic workers to have basic skills in domestic chores, such as in cooking and household chores (n=5), expected the girls to have good manners and communication skills (n=4), be able to read and write (n=3) and know how to care for their children (n=3). For several, it was important that girls could keep private family issues confidential (n=3), be obedient and not talkative (n=2) and show initiative (n=3). Several mentioned they wanted workers to have good personal hygiene (n=2), avoid wasting things (n=1), and to take pride in their work (n=1).

2. What are the challenges of employing children to carry out domestic work?

Eleven employers said they were concerned about home security. Nine also complained about workers who seemed lazy or reluctant to do routine tasks, who ignored employers' instructions and who left their job without giving any notice. Several employers (n=6) mentioned problems with dishonesty, such as not admitting mistakes or theft. Some employers noted that the children sometimes ignored their jobs and instead played with other local children and watched a lot of TV. They said that children were easily bored by watching over children in the household and were thus unreliable for childcare. Other complaints included head-lice, scabies and bed-wetting, especially among younger workers. Importantly, because employers were supervising and accommodating these children in their homes, they noted that they felt responsible to act as the guardian for their child worker, which complicated the employer-worker relationship.



3.

What types of services or training for child domestic workers would be desirable to employers?

Fifteen employers said they wanted their workers to learn better housework skills (n=15), ten mentioned vocational training for girls' career development (n=10), and five suggested basic literacy and numeracy skills. Some employers also suggested that workers should have safe opportunities to socialise (n=4). Employers suggested the need for caring skills such as basic care for the elderly and childcare and first-aid (n=3). Some employers also mentioned soft skills-building around time management, good attitudes, communication skills and good personal hygiene. When asked whether they would permit their domestic workers to participate in external education or training activities, five agreed that would be feasible, provided the girls were over 20 years old, were interested in these activities, and their hours did not overlap with busy times in the house. For example, classes might be held approximately one to two hours during evenings

or weekends. Employers stressed the importance of making any classes easily accessible by making them free and geographically close to the employer's home or home-based or online. They recommended courses should be self-paced and facilitated by a mentor. One employer expressed concerns about whether children would really have the energy or motivation to genuinely participate. A few employers noted potential challenges such as children running away after class, falling into bad company or communicating with others, which might make it difficult for employers to control their behaviour. It is notable that two employers worried that once workers gained better skills they may quit. Additionally, they said that to deliver these types of education or training services, organisations must be responsible for the safety and well-being of the young participants and accountable to the employer, including helping to mediate employer-worker relationship, as needed.

4.

How do employers recruit, pay and give leave to child domestic workers?

Sixteen employers recruited their child domestic workers through friends or relatives or through connections with previous domestic workers. Three employers hired their worker through a broker or an agency. Monthly wages ranged from 50,000 to 150,000 MMK (\$33 – \$100 USD). Two workers were supported for school fees and one received in-kind (food and accommodation) without salary. Nearly half of the employers said their workers communicated with family daily or

whenever they wanted. Six employers indicated their worker spoke with family once per week or every two weeks. Employers explained that the children generally returned home between once and three times per year, especially during Thadingyut, Thingyan festival, a hometown pagoda festival and summer holidays when schools are closed.

Implications and Conclusions

Findings from this scoping study describe a range of employers' perspectives on the benefits and challenges of having a child domestic worker. Importantly for the purposes of our *Invisible Girls* research programme and future interventions, most employers indicated that they could imagine circumstances in which training or education might be useful and feasible for girls who are working in their households. They identified some educational and training areas that might be beneficial to them as employers or for the girls, such as: basic literacy and numeracy; improved housework skills; childcare skills; communication skills; knowledge about their own reproductive health, general health and protective measures from violence. Several employers mentioned economic and social empowerment and possible vocational training. Most employers did not support formal schooling. If alternative education was made available for child domestic workers, these services they should be free, should be very well-explained, in their homes or in their neighbourhood and scheduled when the young worker has finished her tasks and the employer is home from work.

These findings will be used to inform future interviews with former child domestic workers and a household survey of employers. Results will also be shared with local service providers and used to co-develop pilot education and training interventions with child domestic workers.

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