

Violence against children and child labour in Uganda: what evidence exists?

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Executive summary

National estimates in Uganda suggest that 18% of children aged 5 to 17 years are engaged in child labour. There has been limited research on the relationship between violence and child labour.

Key findings

- There are limited quantitative data exploring the relationship between violence in childhood and child labour, but data suggest that experiencing violence in childhood is associated with both children working and being in hazardous work
- Young people described childhood vulnerabilities as a reason for working in childhood
- Domestic workers are at particularly high risk of violence
- There are negative health consequences of working in childhood and trafficking



Policy recommendations

- **Labour market:** raise awareness and strengthen enforcement of child labour laws; strengthen inspection systems to ensure all employers are following standards; and formalise the employment of domestic workers including their registration, given their high risk of exposure to violence.
- **Education:** provide working children with the skills that they need, and develop strategies in skills training institutions to support and provide life skills to victims of child labour.
- **Targeting children and community structures:** raise awareness of child labour among children within schools, and ensure participation of all stakeholders to address socioeconomic issues.
- **Secondary prevention:** ensure trafficked young people and those in the worst forms of child labour have access to comprehensive health and social services.



Introduction

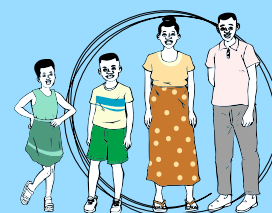
Child labour is a significant challenge in low- and middle-income countries, depriving children of their childhood potential and dignity, and harming their physical and mental development¹. Child labour poses challenges to achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Target 8.7.

National estimates in Uganda suggest that 18% of children aged 5 to 17 years are engaged in child labour². Most of these children work in agriculture, though other sectors include construction, mining, manufacturing, domestic service, street work and commercial sexual exploitation¹. Child labour has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact of the pandemic on household income, together with school closures and a lack of investment in social protection, has pushed children into hazardous work²⁻⁴.



18% of Ugandan children aged 5 to 17 years are engaged in child labour

Three in four Ugandans aged 18-24 years experience at least one type of violence - physical, sexual or emotional - during their childhood



What makes Ugandan young people vulnerable to poor work outcomes?

In Uganda, vulnerable young people are more likely to be engaged in hazardous work. This may result from being in disadvantaged situations or having limited social support which can in turn lead to interrupted schooling and difficulties in transitioning from school to work. Some of the most vulnerable include children living in slums who are unable to attend school⁵, those affected by poverty, parental illness or death, and substance misuse, as well as children who have experienced violence.

Three in four Ugandans aged 18-24 years experience at least one type of violence - physical, sexual or emotional - during their childhood⁶. Those who experience violence in childhood and adolescence are more likely to experience negative consequences in later life including physical and mental health problems, poorer educational outcomes, unhealthy behaviours, future experience and perpetration of violence and poor socio-economic outcomes⁷⁻¹⁰. There has been less research around violence and its association with child labour.

We carried out a study to examine the relationship between **violence in childhood and adolescence** and **child labour**. In this study, we used existing data from international and Ugandan surveys, and interviewed young people and others involved in employment and skills training in Uganda, as well as survivors in post-trafficking assistance services. A full description of the study methods can be found in a separate [methods brief](#).

The Government of Uganda defines child labour as children aged 5-11 years engaged in any economic activity; children 12-13 years doing work other than light work beyond 14 hours a week⁹; or children 14-17 years involved in hazardous forms of labour or working for an equivalent of 43 hours or more in a week¹¹.

ILO defines the worst forms of child labour as¹²:

- All forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict
- The use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances
- The use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties;
- Work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

Trafficking: the use of force, deception or coercion for the purposes of exploitation¹³.

Results

1. There is no published research from any LMIC on how childhood violence may lead to child labour

Longitudinal studies examining the relationship between violence in childhood and work outcomes are almost exclusively from high-income countries, with no studies from lower-middle- or low-income countries, and no studies exploring the relationship with child labour. International and national surveys that collect good data on violence against children, such as the national Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS), do not capture children's working situations in enough detail to allow us to define child labour.

2. Violence in childhood is associated with children working and being in hazardous work

Because of the challenges around defining child labour in available data sources, the study explored the relationship between experiencing violence in childhood and working in childhood. Using cross-sectional data means that it is not possible to know if violence is a cause or consequence of working in childhood. However, there were important associations.

“My life has not been easy. At first I joined my father in farming maize, then later... he went and traditionally married a step mother, he took bride price in the form of cows, chairs and other things. So when he did that, I told him that I am not going to continue with farming, I am going to do my own things...I started an independent life, I started renting.”



Using data from VACS in nine low- and middle-income countries, the study revealed that, in most countries, children aged 13-17 who were working in the past year were more likely to have experienced physical or sexual violence in the past year than those who were not working. There were also associations between childhood violence and working in a hazardous site in the past year among young women (18-24 years) in Uganda and Nigeria, and young men in Kenya, Malawi and Zimbabwe.

Data from Uganda VACS specifically revealed that two in five boys and one in five girls aged 13-17 years worked for money in the past year. This was more likely among both boys and girls who had experienced sexual violence, and boys who had experienced physical or emotional violence.

3. Young people spoke about childhood vulnerabilities as a reason for working in childhood

Young people described different reasons for working in childhood, including death of their parents, physical and sexual violence by caregivers, neglect, parental alcohol abuse, parental divorce, extreme poverty and hunger.

“You know someone can pick you from your parents and you don't know where you are being taken but you are told there is a job and when you reach there you are given away to men and they use you as a prostitute” (Adolescent).



In more extreme cases, vulnerable children can also end up in situations of human trafficking and forced labour. Trafficked adolescents described traumatic experiences prior to trafficking and situations of forced labour.

“They would not give me food, they would harass me and even beat me, and they were not treating me like a child to their sibling” (Adolescent, trafficked nationally for domestic work at age 13).



4. Domestic workers are at particular risk of violence

For girls, domestic work can seem like an attractive opportunity to escape deprivation and violence, and earn money while living in secure accommodation. While this can be a good short-term solution for many, data from a cohort in Luwero revealed that young domestic workers are at a greater risk of workplace violence than young workers in other sectors, with 1 in 2 young girls employed in domestic work reporting violence in the workplace in the past year.

Speaking to young trafficked domestic workers confirmed this, with several young workers reporting physical or sexual violence by employers or members of the household where they were working, and all reporting emotional violence by employers.

“She would start abusing me and when she would get to the house and find that something is not in order, she would abuse me” (Adolescent, trafficked nationally for domestic work at age 13).



5. There are negative health consequences of working in childhood and trafficking

Working in childhood increases the risk of poor mental and physical health. The Uganda VACS analysis revealed that children who were working for money were more likely to have mental health problems. Research among trafficked adolescents¹⁴ has also highlighted occupational exposures and mental health consequences of hazardous work among adolescent girls. Children who work reported long shifts, poor living and work conditions, and workplace violence. They also described feeling hurt, sad, lonely, losing their appetite, having suicidal thoughts and attempting suicide as a result of their trafficking experiences.

“I used to cry most when I was washing clothes, the clothes were so many and they were for adults. At times I would stop washing, sit down and start crying but then I would say to myself that even if I cry, I will still wash the clothes” (Adolescent, trafficked nationally for domestic work at age 17)



Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from both study findings and discussions with members of the [project](#) network, which was formed to shape research questions and help interpret findings, and included young people as well as representatives from government, academia, development partners, NGOs and civil society organisations.

Labour market

- Raise awareness among employers about child labour laws and strengthen law enforcement through targeted efforts focusing on the justice and order institutions, including police, courts of law and community-based institutions that support identification and reporting of cases.
- Strengthen inspection systems to ensure all employers are following certain minimum standards, particularly since most children work in the informal sector.
- Formalise the employment of domestic workers including their registration, so that their terms of employment comply with relevant employment laws, particularly the Employment Act.

Education

- Assess the skills needed by working children and link them up to vocational education support to improve on their employability potential and productivity.
- Develop and implement strategies in skills training institutions to identify, withdraw, rehabilitate, and reintegrate victims of child labour into the schooling system, and provide life skills and lifelong learning and apprenticeship schemes.

Targeting children and community structures

- Raise awareness of child labour among children within schools, including their rights against exploitation, risk of trafficking, sexual violence at the workplace, and protection from hazardous work
- Ensure participation of all stakeholders in addressing socioeconomic issues at the household, community and sector levels that act as drivers for child labour, and enable social dialogue between them to ensure long-term impact

Secondary prevention

- Ensure trafficked young people and those in the worst forms of child labour have access to comprehensive health and social services to ameliorate health consequences

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