

## **The Invisible workers Domestic Labourer Girls in Sudan**

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This paper will highlight the issue of girl child domestic work in Sudan. The paper will specifically focus on the conditions of girls work as domestic workers as well as look at the causes of girls' domestic work with relation to the legal framework that organizes this matter. The paper will also present four stories as told by children working in the domestic labour sector in Khartoum.

The majority of girls who are exposed to this pattern of work, are either rural girls who migrated with their families to urban centres and were, hence, sent to domestic labour to bring in more income for the family; or girls who were displaced as a result of civil conflicts occurring around the country and with no family members around them, so they end up living in the same place where they work, or with distant relatives.

I would like to mention here that, this paper is originated from a newspaper article that I have written last year in collaboration with my colleague Einas Mansoor for the Juba Post Newspaper, published and distributed in Sudan. The article was published as part of The Strategic Initiative of Women in the Horn of Africa-SIHA Network, series of newspaper releases to promote awareness of women and girl's rights.

### **Domestic Labour Children –Causes and Consequences:**

218 million children between the age of five and seventeen work in developing countries as estimated by The International Labour Organization (ILO). Many of those children work as domestic labourers; and the vast majority of them are young girls.

Millions of children around the world turn to domestic work as one of the few options available for them in order to provide for themselves and their families.



Abuses against domestic workers take place inside the homes and are hidden from the public eye. Therefore domestic workers are considered among the most exploited and abused workers in the world. The long list of abuses domestic workers undergo includes, physical, psychological and sexual abuses; forced confinement in the work place, no /or under payment of wages and excessive long working hours with no rest days. The worse cases the ILO has reported is that; women and girls are trapped in situations of forced labour or have been trafficked into force domestic work in conditions akin to slavery.

Children domestic work in Sudan has a long history, as it was associated with slavery practice. A practice that was quite common in many parts of the country, till it was ended gradually by the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to that time children were abducted and confined to different aspects of work. However, mainly girls worked inside the households in the provision of domestic services and often they were subjected to sexual exploitation by the men living inside the household.

Lately, and up to the present time within the wide range of Sudan cultures, girls/children domestic work is rather an acceptable reality that is not being questioned or discussed. Generally, for girls to work as domestic workers outside their family boundaries is mainly determined by the economic conditions and often the level of racial marginality of the girl/ child. In other words, children who come from the poorest backgrounds and at the same time their communities are racially alienated by the mainstream culture, are more vulnerable to become part of the domestic labour sector.

As of early 1980s, numbers of rural -urban migration and displacement has increased substantially in Sudan. This is mainly due to the armed conflicts that took place in the southern part of the country. The war created insecurity and economic distortion resulted in massive displacement, where communities from South Sudan, Nuba Mountains and South Blue Nile were largely affected and moved to the central parts of the country. Another important factor, which contributed to the vast rural- urban migration, is the fact that the subsequent governments of the Sudan emphasized a pattern of economic policies that lack interest in supporting rural communities. These two factors combined have led to the impoverishment of rural Sudan populations and left them no alternative but to leave their homelands in order to survive.



According to The UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR) 1999 -2000 statistics, Sudan displaced number is about 4, 5 million. However, if we add the new numbers of the displacement occurring as result of the current armed conflict in Darfur, as its estimated by the UNCHR, over 2 million people currently fled their homes in Darfur. These numbers will put Sudan on the top of the list as the country with the highest number of displaced persons in the world.

### **Who is Protecting Domestic Worker Children in Sudan?**

Despite Sudan being a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), there is no clearly visible sign of any activity by the Sudanese government or other ways to help children workers. Hence, in spite of the incassating international awareness of children rights; the issue of domestic worker in Sudan remains forgotten.

Although the Sudan **1997 Labour Code** comes with articles aiming at controlling what was called by the labour Code as "young persons' employment," most of these articles are practically ineffective, since they were not linked to any accountability mechanisms to support their enforcement. Yet, these articles remain as the only available legal framework that could be used to protect working children. In article 21:2, the Sudan labour Code is stating that it's forbidden to employ children under the age of 12 years old. The code goes on to say that, children are not allowed to work at night between 8:00 pm and 6:00 am. The Code also emphasizes children's entitlement to public holydays and medical care. However, nothing is mentioned in the labour code in relation to Sudan international legal obligations to incorporate the Child Rights Convention- CRC.

The only law that refers to domestic workers in Sudan is the 1955 Domestic act. The law which dates back to Sudan colonial period is disused and has not been updated since. Contracts are virtually unheard of in cases of children domestic workers in Sudan and it's up to employers to determine working hours as they see fit.

Although the issues of children's rights has been mentioned often in the Sudan Interim National Constitutional of 2005, there are no clear mechanisms regarding how human rights treaties, including the Child Rights Convention



(CRC), will be incorporated into domestic laws and policies, or how the Sudanese courts will be able to integrate human rights treaties as part of the Sudan law.

Many questions arise with regard to children conditions in Sudan, mainly children's work in the domestic sector; a sector that is invisible even to social activists working on child rights issues. Most of the activists we talked to, stated that "there is no information available, which may illustrate clearly the conditions of children working in side the homes". The lack of information typically makes the possibility of provision of support and services to these children more complex and less attainable, mainly because they are mostly unseen. . On the other hand, this situation creates opportunity for exploitation and abuses to occur without being mentioned or taken seriously by the society and the law in Sudan.

### **The Invisible Work force: Girls Domestic Workers:**

The work of the large number of girls, who wash clothes, dishes and scrub floors, cannot be clocked by hours. Many are made to stay until they have finished all their tasks, or are told to complete a long list of tasks that can take the best part of a day or night to be done. Research findings from the Child Rights Institute in Sudan, UNICEF and the ILO, sadly demonstrates the fact that: Girls domestic workers are put into excruciatingly long hours, sometimes up to eighteen hours a day, with little or no time to rest. All the girls interviewed by the writer, work at least 9 to 10 hours a day. Some work up to 12 hours. Children working long hours risk health problems and are more prone to accidents even when engaged in work that would not normally be dangerous.

A recent ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) study, found that working long hours with no rest and recreation, or for socializing with peers, affects children mental, physical and intellectual development. The economic marginality and the need for cash on the part of these girls and their families seem to defy the reasons for them working in the first place. Most of them receive insufficient and extremely low pay, delayed pay or no pay at all.



The girls I talked to, receive an average wage of 2 Sudanese pounds per day, the equivalent of one US dollar per day; meaning that, economically, domestic labour can become a destructive cycle whereby the amount of pay does not match with the amount of work done.

The same ILO IPEC study found that child domestics perform the same amount of work as adult workers, which tend to suppress their physical capacity and stamina. In many instances the tasks performed by children domestic workers are inappropriate to their age and physical strength. These girls, and some of them as young as 8 years old, endure heavy lifting, exposure to toxic cleaning, chemicals and risk burns or cuts while performing domestic tasks. Regardless of numerous risks and exhaustion, some of these girls have to perform extra domestic tasks in their own homes once they return from work.

Many households around Sudan especially in urban centres employ girls of 12 years old and below as domestic workers always repeating the harmful myth that young children work harder and faster, turning a blind eye to the fact that, this is merely child abuse and exploitation. Young girls working as domestic workers are actually vulnerable to physical, psychological and sexual abuse not just as children but also as young women. The stories of beaten, belittled, sexually harassed and raped girls illustrate how domestic work exposes girls to violence. These girls do not work in the public domain; they are invisible to the public eye.

Girls working as domestic workers, need to be protected, they need access to support services such as legal aid, counselling and opportunity for education and more importantly for their voices to be heard. All of the girls I have talked to are unaware of any kind of law in place for their protection. They never heard of regulations protecting them as children, girls and workers.

These little girls working as domestic workers are children who were forced to sacrifice their childhood and their rights as children to provide for themselves, and their families, a role that was forced on them.



## **The Stories of the Children:**

### **Hawaya, 8 years old:**

When I was working in Bahri, the woman I worked for was so mean to me. One day she asked me to do something and I did not do it, so she pushed me down the stairs. I cried loudly and ran away to the place where my brother is working, I had fever and my head was hurting, they gave me Juice and Panadol. I never went back to that house again.

### **Naeema 10 years old:**

I was born in Khartoum, my mother died, I live with my aunt. I started working long time ago. I work, may be 10 or 11 hours a day, then I come home and clean my aunt's house. I get paid 2 sometimes 3 pounds a day. No one ever hit me; if they did I would leave straight away and never go back. It's really hard, but I have to work to look after my little brother. I just say Alhamdulillah every day.

### **Doria 12 years old:**

I work in houses since I was 10, the work takes long time, I don't go to school any more because I am always tired. I think I will be working all the time because I can get money for my family.

### **Fatima 10 years old:**

I had an argument with the woman I worked for, because she wouldn't give me more money. She told me that she fed me and gave me a place to sleep. I was crying and I wanted my money, I took a small table and ran away. The woman son caught me and tied my hand and feet with metal wire and then started to beat me with a hose. They let me go eventually. My hands were bleeding and when I went to the hospital they treated me, but sometimes I don't feel my right hand.

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