

Decent Work for Ugandan Domestic Workers: Findings and Recommendations for Funders

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I sleep at midnight and wake up at 4am. Look at how you are going to fall in the hot charcoal stove when you are cooking because of lack of enough sleep.

17-year-old female domestic worker

A large proportion of Ugandan children are employed as domestic workers in Uganda and Kenya and both child and adult domestic workers face exploitative working conditions. To identify potential interventions to improve their situation, scoping research was carried out from August through October 2022 by ICF International, Makerere University, and Pan African Christian University, with support from the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation. This mixed-methods study sought to explore the drivers of child labor in domestic work, working conditions, and aspirations of domestic workers. In this brief, we summarize the methodological approach and present findings and recommendations in three main areas: prevention of child labor in domestic work, protection of domestic workers, and transitioning domestic workers into education or other work. We conclude with suggestions for future research.

Prevention

While no recent studies provide reliable estimates of the number of Ugandan children involved in domestic work, it is widely agreed that the use of child labor in domestic work in Uganda and Kenya is pervasive. There have been non-representative studies suggesting that children form a substantial proportion of the domestic work labor force. For example, a survey involving 2,270 young domestic workers in 10 regions of Uganda revealed that 44 percent were under the age of 18 years.¹ In addition, interview and focus group participants broadly agreed that child labor in domestic work is extremely prevalent.

Supply-side drivers of child domestic work

The reasons for the prevalence of child labor are varied, but in this research, poverty consistently emerged as the primary factor driving children to enter domestic work. While the specific reason cited by a worker might differ—for example, the inability to pay school fees or the loss of a parent—almost all of these specific reasons were rooted in poverty.



You may see that there is no money at home, no food, and the situation is not good. And you are the eldest child, and you realize you need work to be able to take care of your siblings.

16-year-old female domestic worker

Interventions are needed to address the root causes of child labor in domestic work, including:

- ▶ **Targeted poverty reduction interventions for families.** Raising household incomes, for example, through cash transfers, agricultural improvement programs, skills training programs, and seed grants for small businesses, could prevent child domestic work.



WE RECOMMEND TARGETED INCOME-GENERATION PROGRAMMING TO HELP FAMILIES SUPPORTING ORPHANS AND CHILD-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS.

- ▶ **Targeted interventions to keep vulnerable children enrolled in school.** We recommend education campaigns that seek to increase access to school, increase school retention, and encourage re-enrollment. Programs to cover school fees (which are common in Uganda²) and incentivize school attendance may help to prevent child domestic work.



PROGRAMMING COULD IDENTIFY CHILDREN AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT AND PROVIDE SUPPORT BEFORE CHILDREN LEAVE SCHOOLING TO PREVENT ENTRY INTO DOMESTIC WORK.

Interventions described above to address root causes need to be implemented broadly and sustained for longer-term success. In the immediate future, children will continue to enter domestic work in large numbers. We therefore also recommend preventative harm mitigation programming in the form of awareness-raising campaigns in sending communities to increase knowledge of the rights of domestic workers and where to seek help if needed. In border areas, these campaigns could emphasize the importance of obtaining the appropriate documentation before traveling to Kenya for work and where to turn for help once workers are in Kenya.

Demand-side drivers of child domestic work

Another driver of child labor in domestic work is widespread employer preference for hiring children. Many employers prefer to hire child domestic workers because they can pay them less, and they believe that children are more compliant and less likely to know or demand their rights. Although the employment of children under age 16 is illegal in Uganda, and the minimum age of employment in hazardous work is age 18³, there is little enforcement of these laws as they pertain to domestic work. In the absence of sanctions for violating child labor laws, employers have little disincentive to hire children in domestic work. There is also little social pressure to discourage the hiring of child domestic workers because the employment of child domestic workers is normalized in many communities in Uganda and Kenya.

- ▶ We recommend **awareness-raising campaigns led by community and religious leaders in cities and towns where domestic workers are concentrated** that focus on the illegality of child labor and the harm caused by child labor in domestic work as a potential means to raise the social cost of employing children.
- ▶ We recommend **peer-to-peer outreach among employers of domestic workers.** Some domestic workers described employers who treated them with respect, followed labor laws, and supported them in pursuing their aspirations.

Interventions could create forums encouraging such employers to discuss with their peers the reasons for their choices and their perceptions of the effect, such as lower turnover and improved efficiency.

Protection

- ▶ Child and adult domestic workers often work excessive hours per day, with two-thirds of survey respondents working more than 48 hours per week and half working 7 days per week.
- ▶ Two-thirds of survey respondents reported that their employers made them do dangerous work without protective gear, most commonly working with harsh chemicals.
- ▶ Employers use various means to exert control over workers, including verbal abuse, physical abuse, preventing workers from leaving home or compound, withholding salary, and withholding food.
- ▶ Domestic workers are also frequent victims of sexual abuse, particularly female domestic workers and live-in domestic workers. In addition to abusive work environments, domestic work is one of the lowest-paid jobs available and often comes with irregular payment.

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There should be a law that should allow us to at least get out of the gate. We are not animals to stay in the cage forever. We are not allowed to get out of the gates.

15-year-old female domestic worker

Organizations focused on the rights of domestic workers⁴ should continue in advocating for the Governments of Uganda and Kenya to improve the legal framework and enforcement of laws applicable to domestic workers.

They should also continue to build awareness of their own existence among domestic workers; fewer than 8 percent of survey respondents were aware of any groups or unions supporting domestic workers. These groups should continue to raise awareness of rights among domestic workers and help to build solidarity within the sector.



ONLY

38%

OF RESPONDENTS WERE ALWAYS PAID ON TIME

23%

WERE RARELY OR NEVER PAID ON TIME



<8%

FEWER THAN 8 PERCENT WERE AWARE OF ANY GROUPS OR UNIONS SUPPORTING DOMESTIC WORKERS

There is a need for additional programs to protect domestic workers:

- ▶ **Support domestic workers to seek legal redress when their rights have been violated.** Employers violate labor law with impunity partly because domestic workers often do not know where to turn for help or how to navigate the available avenues for justice. Most survey respondents reported having had problems with their employers, but only one respondent reported the issue to the authorities. Interventions that provide advocates and legal aid to domestic workers are urgently needed to help domestic workers access justice. If domestic workers begin to access avenues for justice on a significant scale and employers begin to fear prosecution, there may be a shift toward better treatment overall for domestic workers.
- ▶ **Help aspiring adult labor migrants acquire appropriate documentation, including a work permit, before traveling to Kenya.** Kenya has various laws and regulations that can benefit all employees, including domestic workers and migrants; however, it is necessary to have a work permit for most of them to be applicable. Interventions should target the eastern areas of Uganda that border Kenya that provide the majority of Ugandan domestic workers in Kenya. There is also a need for awareness raising among employers in Kenya to encourage formalizing work arrangements with migrant domestic workers.

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They can even take two months without paying me. [...] Now where can I report [my boss]? I have no where I can report because even if I report, I will not be helped, and she will just fire me.

30-year-old female domestic worker

- ▶ **Target interventions for Ugandan domestic workers in Kenya.** Due to their isolation and lack of knowledge, Ugandan domestic workers in Kenya are exceptionally vulnerable to exploitation. Ugandan workers in Kenya reported being threatened with violence, being verbally abused, and being threatened with dismissal at higher rates than workers in Uganda.

► **The Ugandan government should improve the regulatory framework and enforcement of relevant laws** through the following initiatives:

- Conduct regional consultations regarding proposed legal changes to build consensus.
- Allocate budgets to increase the number of labor officers⁵ and to ensure their training on the specific situation of domestic workers.
- Create a toll-free line or online report submission system to report concerns easily and quickly—for example, an adaptation of existing platforms such as Sauti,⁶ Uganda’s child abuse helpline.
- Sensitize local government stakeholders on the issues of domestic workers. With sufficient resources, identifying and monitoring domestic workers employed in their jurisdictions could become part of the mandate of local leaders. This would also require the development of a comprehensive monitoring and documentation framework through consultation with local council leaders, domestic workers, employers of domestic workers, and recruiters of domestic workers.
- Improve cross-border monitoring between Uganda and Kenya. Enhanced tracking would allow the government to better support the well-being of domestic workers in neighboring countries and ensure that domestic workers in Kenya have proper documentation.

Transitioning out of Domestic Work



I want to go back to school to have a brighter future like my fellow age mates.

14-year-old female domestic worker

The study found that many domestic workers have aspirations beyond domestic work. Ninety percent of the respondents were out of school, and nearly all indicated they would return to learning if they had the opportunity. Many told researchers that domestic work does not allow them to fulfill their dreams of going back to school, starting up businesses, having regular income flow, and caring for their families.



90%

NINETY PERCENT OF THE RESPONDENTS WERE OUT OF SCHOOL, AND NEARLY ALL INDICATED THEY WOULD RETURN TO LEARNING IF THEY HAD THE OPPORTUNITY.

We recommend interventions to support transitioning of domestic workers through educational and economic empowerment programs, including:

- **Access to educational opportunities for domestic workers.** Those who wish to attend formal school could be supported through payment of school fees and associated costs, and training programs could be made available to interested domestic workers. In parallel, we recommend public awareness campaigns to encourage employers of domestic workers to support workers to attend school and training programs.
- **Formation of savings and credit cooperative organizations (SACCOs) for domestic workers in Uganda and Kenya.** While domestic workers as a whole have very little disposable income available, these organizations may give some domestic workers the means to save enough to pursue opportunities outside of domestic work. **Seed funding for small businesses to help domestic workers access alternative employment.**
- **Financial assistance to elderly or incapacitated domestic workers to allow them to retire with dignity.** The low wages paid to domestic workers greatly limit their ability to save meaningfully for retirement. Potential mechanisms include expanding the Ugandan Government’s Senior Citizen Grant program, which provides cash transfers to the elderly, and increased compliance with the 2021 amendment to the National Social Security Fund Act, which obligates all employers to contribute to the fund for all employees every month.

Future Research

There is still much to learn about the conditions of Ugandan domestic workers in Uganda and Kenya and how to improve these conditions. Research is also needed on the effectiveness of potential interventions.

- ▶ **Measure the scale of child labor and forced labor in this population.** Government officials who participated in this study emphasized the lack of evidence as a barrier to creating effective policies and legal advocacy. Large-scale studies that generate representative evidence can greatly enhance knowledge about and improve advocacy for workers.
- ▶ **Co-create strategies to persuade domestic workers to join solidarity groups.** Discussions with employers and domestic workers revealed that many domestic workers view domestic work as temporary employment rather than a long-term profession. This may present a barrier in expanding domestic worker participation in groups like DOWA, unions, and SACCO groups targeted to domestic workers. Future research is needed with workers, employers, and survivors to understand to what extent this is a meaningful barrier to participation and if so, to develop strategies for persuading domestic workers to join solidarity groups.
- ▶ **Identify methods to reach Ugandan domestic workers in Kenya.** Findings suggest that Ugandan domestic workers in Kenya are more isolated and have less communication with their families back home than workers who remain in Uganda. Future research should consider how best to identify and engage these migrant workers. For example, one possibility is through churches. When asked what they like to do for fun, twice as many survey respondents in Kenya compared to Uganda indicated church.

Methodological Approach

The study employed a literature review and primary data collection, including:

- ▶ 20 key informant interviews with representatives from the government and civil society organizations;
- ▶ 18 focus group discussions with employers of domestic workers, current and former domestic workers, and parents of domestic workers;
- ▶ 146 quantitative surveys with domestic workers, stratified for gender, age, and live-in and live-out status;
- ▶ and 2 stakeholder meetings, including one with

domestic workers and another with representatives from the government and civil society organizations.

Data collection took place in Gulu in Northern Uganda and greater Kampala, including the districts of Wakiso, Mukono, and Kampala. In Kenya, the study was implemented in Nairobi. Current and former domestic workers provided feedback on the methodology and analysis. Research design and instruments were approved by ethical review boards at ICF, in Uganda, and in Kenya.

Limitations

Samples were selected using non-probability methods and thus cannot be assumed representative of the population of domestic workers in Uganda or Kenya. In addition, the estimates likely underestimate the levels of exploitative conditions because the sampling method was less likely to reach the most vulnerable domestic workers, those hidden from the public and absent from social networks of domestic workers.



The opinions, findings, and conclusions herein do not necessarily reflect those of our funding partner the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation.

- 1 IDAY International, ANPPCAN, Uganda Children Centre, & National Council for Children. (2015). A survey on young and child domestic workers in Uganda. Kampala, Uganda: IDAY International and ANPPCAN. See also: <https://www.newvision.co.ug/article/details/111603/80-of-domestic-workers-in-kampala-are-children>
- 2 Omoeva, C., & Gale, C. (2016). Universal, but not free: Household schooling costs and equity effects of Uganda's Universal Secondary Education policy. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 50, 41-50; Republic of Uganda & UNESCO. (2016). National education accounts report Uganda: Working document. Kampala, Uganda: Republic of Uganda. Available at: http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/uganda_nea_report-2016-en.pdf.
- 3 Government of Uganda. The Children (Amendment) Act, 2016. Enacted: May 20, 2016. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/104395/127307/F-171961747/UGA104395.pdf>.
- 4 Including Platform for Labor Action; Domestic Workers Association (DOWA); Uganda Hotels, Food, Tourism, Supermarkets and Allied Workers Union; and Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Education Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers
- 5 "A Commissioner or District Labour Officer with the power to handle labour matters—can enter a workplace freely without having to notify the employer and inspect a workplace or investigate worker's concerns or reports and also offer guidance on matters of the law to workers. Workers may report issues relating to workplace abuse or harassment, poor working conditions, payment of salary or any other matters relating to their employment" see FIDA and HIVOS (n.d). Guide to UGANDA LABOUR LAWS. Available at <https://fidauganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Simplified-Labour-Laws-revised-final-mail.pdf>.
- 6 The Toll-Free Number 116 also known as the Uganda Child Helpline (UCHL)/Sauti was established in 2014 by the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) in partnership with UNICEF and other stakeholders. It was intended to encourage children and adults to report cases of child abuse and child rights violations. It operates a 24/7 service and is available to all telecommunications networks in the country. See details on; <https://mglsd.go.ug/uganda-child-helpline-116-2/>.