

## Child domestic labour in Pakistan: a narrative review

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### Abstract

Child domestic workers are children who are hired to work in households by the owners for household chores. In 1996, up to 8.3% of all child labour cases in Pakistan involved domestic chores. Poverty is one of the most common and significant factors for child domestic labour in Pakistan. Studies have shown that if the parents are uneducated or do not value education, there is a high likelihood of children being involved in child domestic labour. Girls make up a large portion of child domestic workers compared to boys, and are more affected by child domestic labour. The victims of child domestic labour have to bear physical, mental and sometimes sexual abuse from the employers. Given these conditions, child domestic labour can be considered a form of modern-day slavery, with victims being children who may not be aware of their rights.

**Key Words:** Child labour, CDL, Child abuse, Physical health.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.47391/JPMA.21423>

### Introduction

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has defined child labour as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and dignity, which is harmful to their physical mental health and development, and deprives them of their basic rights.<sup>1</sup> In Pakistan, there were almost 3.3 million children involved in such labour when the survey was done in 1996. Out of them, 8.3% were involved in domestic labour. Unfortunately, ILO report in 2022 mentioned that Pakistan does not have the updated data of the children involved in domestic labour. However, estimated projections suggest that almost 12 million children are involved, and had increased up to 19% in 2022.<sup>2,3</sup> According to the Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2020-21, almost 26.32 million children aged 10-14

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**Submission complete:** 13-07-2024 **First Revision received:** 27-08-2024

**Acceptance:** 04-01-2025 **Last Revision received:** 03-01-2025

years were working including active child domestic workers (CDWs).<sup>4</sup>

A report by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), now known as the United Nations Children's Fund, defined child domestic labour (CDL) as children aged <18 years who work in other people's households, doing domestic chores, caring for children, and running errands, among other tasks.<sup>5</sup> These children's main responsibilities are cleaning the home, cooking, roof or furniture maintenance, gardening, and car washing. According to a not-for-profit organisation based in the United States, 200 million children are working in the world today, and 700,000 of them can be found involved in domestic labour in Indonesia, 559,000 in Brazil, 250,000 in Haiti, 264,000 in Pakistan, 200,000 in Kenya, 100,000 in Sri Lanka, and 53,000 in South Africa.<sup>6</sup> In Pakistan, a fragmented survey revealed that CDL is still hidden from society.<sup>2</sup>

CDL is considered to be the most terrible type of child labour because it remains hidden from society, as victims are working behind the wall of their houses in return for low wages or money which is many times paid to their families for expenses, or to recover the family debts. Many CDWs are working in households for just food, shelter and clothes provided by the owner for their limitless services.<sup>7</sup> CDL is very common in developing countries and it is considered a normal or practical learning skill for children which is sometimes challenging for the community to report.<sup>8</sup>

According to the UNICEF report, most of such children are aged 12-17 years, working for long daily hours, among which most of the population is girls, which diverts it towards the frightening domain of gender-based violence.<sup>2</sup> Child domestic work is considered in many parts of the world to be the worst form of child labour, as defined by ILO Convention 182. The government of Pakistan ratified the convention in 2001. This binds the government to tackle the issue of child labour by revising legislation and developing appropriate policies and plans.<sup>9</sup> Keeping all these facts in view, the current narrative review was planned to highlight the epidemiology, causes and effects of CDL on children in Pakistan.

## Epidemiology of CDL in Pakistan

Pakistan child labour survey revealed that the population increased from 3.3 million to 12 million, indicating a rise in CDL.<sup>2</sup> According to the ILO, around 264,000 children were engaged in CDL in 2004, and in 2015, this number had risen to 8.5 million in Pakistan, with girls making up the majority.<sup>10</sup> A report by the Bureau of International Labour Affairs mentioned that in 2022 child labour in this sector had increased up to 19% in Pakistan<sup>3</sup> CDL is more common in urban areas compared to the rural areas in Pakistan. Data collected between 2016 and 2019 indicated that Sindh and Punjab had a higher population of CDWs than Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Rapid household surveys of the big cities in Pakistan showed that in Karachi, located in the Sindh province, 31% households employed CDWs, followed by Lahore 28%, Rawalpindi and Islamabad 26%, and Quetta and Peshawar 22%.<sup>2</sup>

## Nature of CDL in Pakistan

CDL can range from a positive and peaceful environment for the CDWs to their worst nightmare. It all depends on the nature of the employers, which is why it is considered the worst form of labour. CDWs usually do full-time jobs or stay at the home of a third party. They are bound to work all the time without specific time for the rest. About 80% of the CDWs are forced to work during festivals and are not allowed to visit their home, which is why the workplace becomes traumatic for them and many of them want to leave the job.<sup>10</sup>

The mean age of a child in Sindh who starts working as domestic labour is 11.1 years, as mentioned in an ILO report, with children in some areas start working even at the age of 5 years. In Islamabad and Peshawar, the mean age of such children is 12 years.<sup>2</sup> The employers take advantage of their situation and hire them on meagre wages and sometimes do not even pay them. In Karachi, these children were hired for only PKR3,330 monthly, according to a 2017 report. The average salaries of CDWs in Pakistan are low, with only 29% earning up to PKR1,000, 57% earning between PKR1,000 and PKR2,000, and only 14% earning more than PKR2,000. It was also found that 14% of the children are working with no income for their relentless services. These salaries are handed over to them or their families. Salaries are low in KP Balochistan and rural areas compared to the urban areas in Sindh and Punjab where payment is a little higher.<sup>2</sup>

CDWs are allotted a place for rest and taking food by the employers, typically on the floor of the bedroom, kitchen, parking lot, or some corner of the lounge. They are kept isolated from the employer's family members and may

even be locked up when the family is not at home, which is considered modern slavery.<sup>11</sup> They are not allowed to play with the employer's children. Usually, the food and clothes given to them are leftovers, or sometimes they have to work without food for the whole day. Heavy punishment and hunger are common conditions that the CDWs face in everyday life; they are beaten with sticks, hands or any hard object whenever they make mistakes.<sup>12,13</sup>

Alternatively, some studies also highlighted that many children in Pakistan have good food, clean resting areas, and the freedom to go anywhere within the home of the employer. They have enough food from the employer and even play with the other children. In Pakistan where CDL is common, good behavioural and environmental support is also given to CDWs by many employers.<sup>2</sup>

## Causes and factors that support CDL in Pakistan

### Socioeconomic factors and poverty

Poverty is one of the most common and important factors for CDL in Pakistan. In 2006, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reported that almost 23.9% of the people in Pakistan were living below the poverty line. Later, the poverty ratio increased to 34%.<sup>14</sup> The parents or the guardians of the child forces them to earn from a very young age, depriving them of their rights to education and basic needs. In 2011, 82% children were involved in CDL due to poverty. The family is unable to provide or the economic condition of the country is so bad that parents are forced to opt for CDL.<sup>15</sup>

### Lack of education

Lack of education is another reason for CDL. Studies show that if the parents are not educated, or if they do not value education, there are high chances of their children getting involved in CDL.<sup>16</sup> A study in Peshawar mentioned that 65% of the CDWs were out of school just because of their families' economic conditions. Moreover, almost 60% of the CDWs were illiterate, 20% had primary education, and only 18% had been to middle school among all CDWs.<sup>15</sup>

### Migration for a better future

Rural areas of Pakistan are way backward and underdeveloped compared to the urban areas. Schooling, transportation and trading are compromised due to the poor infrastructure and lack of resources. For this reason, families migrate from rural areas to urban areas where they need money, food and shelter to survive.<sup>17</sup> Children from these families are often involved in child labour. Most children prefer to go for domestic labour so that

they may get food and shelter at the place of the employer even on low wages.<sup>2</sup>

### **Birth rate and family size**

The average size of the family in Pakistan is 8. High population growth is the main problem, and the average family has a large number of children which leads to financial instability within the family.<sup>18</sup> CDWs have to give up on their necessities and work for hours to provide for their families.<sup>19</sup>

### **Social acceptance of CDL**

CDL is socially accepted in Pakistani society. Parents feel that child labour is the best way to utilise children's time for the benefit of the families. Moreover, the privileged families make the condition worse by hiring these children despite their lower age because of low-scale wages they have to pay. This encourages society at large to bring more children under CDL.<sup>2</sup>

### **Inactive child protection**

Governmental bodies and departments are responsible for the protection of child rights. There are laws or conventions on child labour in Pakistan, which clearly state that children aged below 18 years are not allowed to work as labour.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, the child protection system is not well-organised, especially in the rural areas of Pakistan. CDWs have to bear the physical, mental and sometimes sexual abuse, or even death, at the hands of the employers, but the relevant bodies and departments are not really bothered.<sup>21</sup> Most of the time the local bodies or tribal organisations have to take action against the perpetrators. Moreover, child protection agencies are not well-recognised in society, and people are mostly unaware of the helpline numbers or the contact information of such agencies.<sup>22</sup>

### **Child trafficking and bondage**

CDL functions on the basis of a direct hiring by individuals or through brokers who act as intermediaries between employers and families. This practice of arranging and placing children is considered child trafficking, as it involves the transfer of children from one location to another based on the demands of the employers. Typically, children from rural areas are brought to urban areas within the country or even across international borders. Child trafficking is prevalent in both domestic and international contexts, with children being trafficked from poorer countries to wealthier ones. These children are often treated as slaves, and are obligated to follow the instructions of the brokers and sometimes the employers for an indefinite period of time.<sup>10</sup> In Pakistan, for example, female children are trafficked to destinations in the Middle East, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE),

Kuwait and Qatar, for domestic labour or participation in inhumane sports. Despite being illegal in Pakistan, child trafficking continues due to prevalent poverty and economic condition of the country. The penalties for child trafficking in Pakistan range from 7 years to 14 years of imprisonment.<sup>23</sup>

### **Gender inequality in CDL**

CDL is considered safe and culturally acceptable for women and girls in Pakistan. CDL is more diverted towards girls than boys, not only in Pakistan but around the world. An estimated, 4.4 million girls and 2.8 million boys are involved in domestic work.<sup>2</sup> It is reported that in Pakistan, 85% of the domestic labourers are girls. In Punjab, 7.8% of girls were involved in CDL compared to 1.8% of boys in 2017. In 2018, 14.7% of girls in Sindh were involved in CDL compared to 4.4% of boys, and in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), 10.7% of girls were involved in CDL compared to 2% of boys.<sup>2</sup>

The female population is usually dragged into domestic labour at a very early age. One study reported that girls start working with their mothers or family members from the age of 5-7 years, before starting to work independently at age 10. Girls are mostly deprived of education and other basic rights, so they take care of homes and children for the rest of their lives. In some areas, it is considered beneficial for women because it is perceived that they will learn basic household chores for their future married life.<sup>24</sup> Mostly girls are involved in babysitting, house-cleaning, cooking and maintaining the furniture compared to boys who are engaged in outer domestic jobs, like gardening, buying groceries, and car-washing. Girls are paid lower wages compared to boys. Most of the owners pay low or no wages to female CDWs and promise to provide money at the time of their marriage, which, according to research, is a toxic tactic to avoid payment. Under this practice, the female CDWs are bound to work and stay in their employer's house as a prison until it is time for their marriage. Further, at the time of marriage, employers making excuses is not a rare phenomenon.<sup>25</sup>

Families prefer male children to have education, while females are forced to work at different houses and learn cooking from a very young age. Education of the female child is considered a bad investment in most areas in Pakistan. Most of the female CDWs start working at an early age due to which they do not receive any skill or education, eventually getting converted into helpless beings for life.<sup>26</sup> In conservative families, like those in Peshawar, parents usually force female children to work inside the house as they do not prefer females going out and doing other things or jobs.<sup>27</sup>

## Effect of domestic labour on child health

### Physical health with nutritional deficiency

According to the ILO, child labour has long-term consequences for organ development and growth, including abnormal shaping of the bones, hearing loss and the increased tendency to absorb chemicals into the body.<sup>1</sup> The other consequences of nutritional deficiency include hormonal imbalance, which can affect mental and physical growth, irregular secretion of hormones, stunting, cracked lips, anaemia and mouth corner inflammations. Furthermore, owners of the child are mostly less concerned about the health and safety of the labourers which is why these children are more prone to injuries as they are forced to do jobs that they might be allergic to, or it may hurt them, like climbing the cupboard, cleaning the fans or cars. The study on the nutritional balance of the CDWs in Pakistan showed that about one-third of the children had abnormal body mass index (BMI) and almost 90% of the children were stunted as per the height-for-age calculations.<sup>12</sup>

### Mental health issues

Externalising disorders are judged by the community as disobedience, getting into fights, temperament disorder, and destructiveness. Internalising disorders are felt mainly by the victim, like anxiety, depression, shyness and withdrawal. These types of disorders can be seen in CDL victims due to food insecurity, abuse and poverty.<sup>28</sup> The victims of child labour remain isolated and keep working day and night which keeps them far from socialising and mental growth. These children are kept in constant vision and face frequent criticism that makes them feel scared and under-confident all the time. Girls are mostly the victims of this environment, and suffer a lot from this mentally abusive situation. This generates insecurities and trust issues among these children, and they struggle to build relationships in the future.<sup>10,13</sup> The victims sometimes believe that they are born to live such a life, and have no future other than just serving and doing domestic work.<sup>2,29</sup>

### Physical, sexual and psychological abuse

CDL often leads to physical, mental and sexual abuse. They are subjected to severe punishment, such as hitting, beating or withholding food, when they make mistakes. The work environment and conditions are abusive, with more than 50% of these children working in multiple households. Over 95% of CDWs are forced to work overtime, exceeding 7 hours a day. Owners often use sticks and slaps to punish them. As a result, child labourers often have scars and bruises, and suffer from various body aches or broken bones.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, female CDWs are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse or violence from their employers.<sup>30</sup> Many CDWs are forced to share sleeping spaces with other domestic workers, which increases the risk of sexual abuse, especially for female CDWs. Sexual abuse can take different forms, including engaging the child in sexual activities, oral sex, showing pornography, or voyeurism. Unfortunately, sexual abuse is often underreported due to societal pressure and cultural taboos surrounding the issue.<sup>4</sup>

### Mortality and morbidity among CDWs

Despite laws and conventions, the government in Pakistan is largely influenced by powerful individuals. The wealthy and the influential are often able to escape consequences even after committing serious crimes, while the poor and ordinary citizens bear the brunt of the country's disorganised system.

More than 140 cases of abuse, torture, rape and murder of CDWs were reported between 2010 and 2019 by a report released in January 2020 by the Institute for Social Justice (ISJ), the Hari Welfare Association (HWA) and the Pakistan Institute Of Labour Education and Research (PILER). Of the 140 cases, 96 were raped and 44 were murdered. Besides, 79% of the cases were from Punjab, 14% from Sindh, 6% from the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), and 1% from KP.<sup>31</sup>

Cases of physical, sexual abuse, and murder continue to persist. Zohra Shah, an eight-year-old CDW, was killed by her employers for releasing their caged birds. She was taken to the hospital in critical condition, showing signs of severe physical and sexual abuse.<sup>32</sup> In February 2019, 16-year-old Uzma was murdered and discarded in a drain in Lahore by her employers.<sup>31</sup> Nine-year-old Fatima Farriro, who was sexually abused after which she tragically succumbed to her injuries in August 2023, worked as a CDW at a spiritual leader's residence.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, there are instances like Tayyaba and Rizwana, who were subjected to brutal abuse by their educated and affluent employers and they underwent prolonged hospitalisation and rehabilitation.<sup>33</sup>

### Laws and convention related to CDL in Pakistan

Pakistan is signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 32 of UNCRC prohibits child labour and encourages protection against economic exploitation that harms a child's physical, mental, moral and social development, while also interfering with his or her education. Pakistan has also ratified the ILO conventions related to minimum age for employment and identifying it as the worst form of child labour.<sup>32</sup> The Constitution of Pakistan prohibits the

employment of children aged up to 14 in hazardous occupations in the provinces through the Punjab Restriction on Employment of Children Act 2016, the Sindh Prohibition of Employment of Children Act 2017 and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Prohibition of Employment of Children Act, 2015. The Employment of Children Act 1991 was amended in June 2020 to include domestic labour as part of one of the schedules. Punjab took the lead in passing the Domestic Workers Act, 2019, banning children aged <15 years from working as domestic help while allowing those aged 15-18 years to only engage in light work. Sindh does not have a specific law for CDL, but when the Sindh Child Protection Law was amended in 2021, child labour in domestic and commercial settings was included in the definition of child abuse, making it more than just a labour issue. In 2020, domestic labour law was passed in ICT as well.<sup>32</sup>

Pakistan is on track for the elimination of CDL. In Lahore, the National Commission on the Rights of the Child (NCRC) initiated the consultative process to discuss the Prohibition of Child Domestic Labour Bill 2024 by aiming to amend the Pakistan Penal Code, 1860, and the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898, to bring about transformative changes by strengthening legal measures against those involved in engaging children in domestic labour by making it a non-compoundable, non-bailable and cognisable offence. The bill proposes the insertion of a new section, 374A, that may criminalise the employment, recruitment, harbouring, transportation, or provision of a child below the age of 18 years for domestic labour. The punishment may include imprisonment ranging from two to seven years and a fine not less than PKR500,000.<sup>34</sup> Moreover in 2023, moderate advancement has also been made by Punjab's provincial assembly by passing the Punjab Home-Based Worker Act, 2023, prohibiting the employment of children aged <15 years in home-based work.

## Recommendations

The laws to eliminate child domestic labour in Pakistan are known to be unclear or have gaps, which is why it has been recommended by the Pakistan Law Commission to focus on the Employment of the Children Act, 1991, which should be updated and reviewed periodically. Moreover, urban and rural domestic labour is a 'hidden' menace, and, therefore, it is crucial to do the mapping of areas where people are less educated and less aware.<sup>21</sup>

The government should take action against employers who hire children for domestic labour, with CDL being banned, criminalised and classified as a non-bailable, non-compoundable offense in Pakistan. Additionally, all

laws related to children should establish a unified definition of a child as anyone aged <18 years. Education is a fundamental right of every child, and efforts should be made to provide free education to all children to ensure that no child is left behind. Parents should be educated on the importance of education and other basic rights, as well as the consequences of a large family. Even if a family is not financially stable, it should not deprive any child of the right to education, or force a child to work in hazardous environments.

Finally, the child labour survey in Pakistan, initiated in 2019, should be completed promptly. Key points to address include poverty alleviation, population control, birth registration, free and compulsory education, a functional child protection system, closing loopholes in existing laws, enforcing laws, and raising public awareness among employers, parents and traffickers.

## Conclusion

CDL is considered one of the worst forms of child labour and is seen as a type of slavery. Factors such as poverty, lack of family education, and social and cultural taboos contribute to children being drawn into CDL. This type of labour can lead to physical and mental health issues, with CDWs often facing physical, mental and sometime sexual abuse from their employers. While laws exist in Pakistan to protect children from CDL, the enforcement and strictness of these laws by governmental bodies are currently lacking.

**Disclaimer:** None.

**Conflict of Interest:** None.

**Source of Funding:** None.

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#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS:

**RSAG:** Concept, design, drafting and revision.

**KE:** Final approval and agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work.