

Which situation is worse? Is it abusing children for the commercial sexual gratification of adults, or beating and torturing children who have been forced to work as domestic slaves?

It's a question I had to ask myself when I read the Phnom Penh Post's recent story about the 11 year old girl – a domestic servant – who was reportedly trafficked into the home of a Phnom Penh couple, and then allegedly tortured with pliers, whips and electrical wires – leaving as many as 200 scars across her young body.

When it comes to child abuse – surely this is about as bad as it gets. Sadly this is not the first time I've seen reports like this. A 17 year old Burmese girl was nearly killed by her employer in Bangkok and a Vietnamese girl was beaten regularly by her domestic employers in Hanoi.

It's been suggested the Cambodian girl's torture lasted for at least a year – and possibly much longer – until neighbours intervened and contacted the police. The couple has been refused bail – so has the girl's so-called 'guardian' who is accused of selling the girl as a domestic servant. All three are now awaiting trial on several charges including human trafficking.

Unfortunately, child domestic workers are all too common in Phnom Penh. An ILO supported survey in 2003, conducted by the National Institute of Statistics, Ministry of Planning, concluded there were nearly 28,000 child domestic workers in Phnom Penh alone – or ten percent of all children aged 7 – 17.

The International Labour Organization has been working with the Royal Government of Cambodia to raise awareness about child labour and its negative impact on society. Through the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), the Government and ILO have been able to demonstrate that with the right interventions, child domestic workers can be removed from work and rehabilitated into schools, and the entry of fresh children into child domestic work prevented. We are confidently working together toward the goal of a child-labour-free country by 2016. Considerable progress has been made and the situation is improving.

The fact that neighbours came forward to save this girl is an indication that the messages are getting through and Cambodians will not stand for this kind of abuse directed at children.

But there is another troubling aspect of this particular story, namely the systemic abuse of domestic workers in general – occupations that by their very nature involve vulnerability as the work is conducted behind closed doors in the homes of others. While this girl was clearly too young to be working anywhere, domestic workers of all ages are often marginalized by society (and the media), ignored by laws that govern workplaces and denied the social protection and working conditions other workers have come to rightly expect.

There is, however, some cause for optimism among domestic workers.

To its credit, the Royal Government of Cambodia has indicated it is serious about ending the worst forms of child labour. It has ratified the International Labour Organization's Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour and has developed a 2008 – 2012 National Plan of Action on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour – a plan that the ILO is supporting. Domestic work has been identified as one of 12 unacceptable and hazardous forms of work from which children must be removed with urgency.

Cambodia has also ratified the two ILO Conventions on the abolition of Forced Labour, and last year a new anti-trafficking law entered into force.

Furthermore, on the 27th of November the Government will convene a national consultation on decent work for domestic workers – a first step that could lead to an eventual international labour standard on extending social protection to those who work in the homes of others.

Domestic work is hard work. It is work often performed by women and work that frees up members of her employer's family so they can pursue and improve their own livelihoods. But far too often this hidden workforce and its labours are under-acknowledged and under-valued. Many domestic workers are physically and sexually abused and denied even basic human rights.

On the 27th of November, when Government, Worker and Employer organizations sit down with civil society organizations, let's remember that domestic work is real work. It's work for adults that requires proper compensation, time off, the right to stay in contact with others and is to be conducted in a safe environment.

And finally, let's all re-affirm that it's not work for children.