

Domestic work is not for children

Last November, the Government of Cambodia convened a national consultation on decent work for domestic workers. At the end of the meeting, government, workers' and employers' organizations in the country agreed on the need for a new international labour standard extending social protection to those who work in the homes of others. The following article by Bill Salter, Director of the ILO Subregional Office for East Asia, was adapted from an earlier version published in a local newspaper.

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PHNOM PENH – 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 an 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 that 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 facing 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 Royal Government of Cambodia's National Institute of Statistics in the Ministry of Planning, concluded there were nearly 28,000 child domestic workers in Phnom Penh alone – or ten per cent of all children aged 7–17.

Domestic Work – Decent Work: A “smart guide” for domestic workers

This ILO guidebook promotes the rights and responsibilities of domestic workers. Initially published in Thailand in a variety of languages, it is aimed primarily at the domestic worker and explains the benefits and risks associated with domestic work while offering the worker advice on how to interact with her/his employer to achieve a mutually satisfactory working environment and system of remuneration and benefits for the worker.

Domestic Work – Decent Work is published in Burmese, English, Karen, Laotian, Shan and Thai, and is being disseminated by ILO constituents within the trade union movement and partners from civil society organizations. The guide is also being adapted and published in Cambodia and Lao PDR for domestic workers within those countries and is available for adaptation and dissemination in other countries as well.

The International Labour Organization is working to raise awareness about child labour and its negative impact on society. Through the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), the Royal Government of Cambodia and the 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, and that is 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, ignored by laws that govern workplaces and denied the social protection and working conditions other workers have come to rightly expect.

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.

There is, however, some cause for optimism.

Cambodia has ratified the two ILO Conventions on the abolition of forced labour (the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105), and in 2008 a new anti-trafficking law entered into force – instruments that afford protection to domestic workers of all ages from the worst forms of abuse. The Royal Government of Cambodia has also ratified the International Labour Organization's Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) 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. Indeed, domestic work has been identified as one of 12 unacceptable and hazardous forms of work from which children must be removed with urgency.

As we approach the International Labour Conference this June – and the general discussion on standards setting for domestic workers – let's all remember that domestic work is real work. It's work for adults that requires proper compensation, time off and 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.