

How old is your house help?

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What often begins with the promise of a better life, education, or an opportunity to earn money to support their impoverished families in rural areas has become the reality that is often closer to modern-day slavery.

The fight of Uganda against child labour has been going on for years and seems to be getting tougher and longer. Domestic servitude is one of the most insidious and hidden forms of child labour in Uganda, where children, predominantly young girls, are exploited as domestic workers or “house girls” in private homes.

This practice falls under the definition of the worst forms of child labour, according to the International Labour Organization Convention 182 due to its hazardous and exploitative nature.

Domestic servitude, especially of children, is normalized in society through a complex web of cultural traditions, economic necessity, and social justifications that deliberately obscure the reality of exploitation.

NORMALIZATION OF CHILD LABOUR

“I am looking for a young boy or girl to do so and so”. It is rarely viewed by the general public as the illegal and abusive form of modern slavery that it is.

The “child fostering” myth is one of the most powerful normalizers. The exploitation is often disguised as a traditional practice of child fostering, or placing a child from a poor rural family with a wealthier urban relative or acquaintance.

The promise is that the child will receive food, shelter, and sometimes even an education, in exchange for light chores.

In reality, this often becomes a pathway to severe exploitation and the child is denied education and subjected to heavy labour.

Socialization into gender roles has also contributed to this normalization. For girls, domestic work is commonly rationalized as preparation for adulthood, marriage, and motherhood.

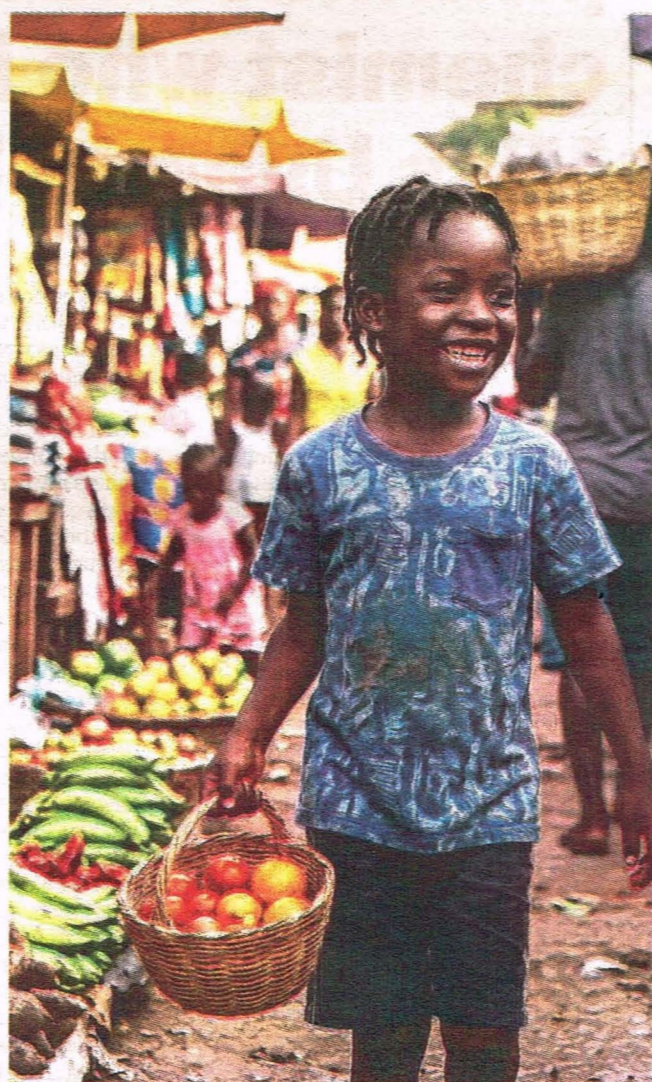
Employers, and sometimes even the child’s own parents, view the heavy, continuous chores as necessary training to make the girl “hardworking” or “resilient.”

This gendered norm contributes to the high rate of girls in servitude.

“I prefer working with children between ages of 12 to 16, because they are easy to manage. When you get her when she is about 12, you can work with her for six years before she grows up to become defiant,” an individual searching for a house help argues.



Child labour is rampant in markets



It is normal for children in Uganda to labour in markets and homes (AI-generated photo)

WHO IS AT RISK?

Child labour remains a significant development challenge in Uganda, considering that that the country has one of the youngest populations in the world.

Globally, the estimated number of children engaged in child labour is 138 million by the International Labour Organization. Africa has the highest prevalence with one in five children engaging in child labour. The number of children (aged five to 17) engaged in child labour has been on a worrying upward trend, raising from approximately 14 percent in 2016/17 to 39.5 percent (6.2 million children) in the 2021 National Labour Force Survey (excluding household chores), as children from poor families mainly face this challenge.

The vast majority of child labour in Uganda is concentrated in the agricultural sector with 80 percent of working children. The worst forms of child labour include hazardous work in sand mines and stone quarries, working in street economy (vending, scavenging) and domestic servitude.

THE CHALLENGE

With such established statistics, these other forms of child labour are easier as we see several UNICEF and government initiatives to address the issue. Domestic servitude remains a concealed and intrinsic form of child labour that is hard to challenge due to its nature; it is a hidden and invisible form of labour carried out behind the closed doors of private homes.

First of all, the difficulty in obtaining

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had no single penny. I didn’t need the money at first, but when I got my first period, I needed the money to buy pads, but I couldn’t, so I resorted to other means.”

ESCAPING HOME LABOUR TO LABOUR UNDER OTHER PEOPLE

For this reason, children tend to escape hard labour at home by running away for better solutions.

Children who grow up in domestic servitude often develop a view of the world shaped by trauma, isolation and a distorted sense of self-worth.

Their self-worth is tied to work, their value is defined entirely by their productivity on how well they cook, clean, or care for the employer’s children. Even after being rescued, these deep-seated worldviews complicate their transition back into society.

The ingrained belief that their only value is their labour, combined with limited education, makes them highly vulnerable to being re-exploited or transitioning into other forms of hazardous work, such as transactional sex, when they face economic

umber of children actice is hard. ighly informal, occurs in the private most impossible s and labour or. a a cultural ig a young relative ber live and help blurs the line : “light work” and stic servitude.” ften isolated, with with their families , making them ents, researchers, s. m Mbarara by my f 10 to come and rrant/takeaway perates at night, midnight, or 1am ne used to be very e up and it was ars saving me. I the beginning. rs, she conceived baby girl, and I duties at the age escaped domestic g this period, er and my heart ne the baby cried, : I was going to be g her cry.” is tough, but the fact that my ld me, it aches for Shs 80,000 a always sent to my of the month. I

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hardship as young adults.

For Sarah who also escaped an abusive home at the hands of her father’s sister, life became hard at an early age.

“I ran away from my aunt’s home to look for a job. I was tired of doing all the house work for free, yet I could be paid for it. My first job was being a waitress in a bar, which was hard working all night and half the day,” Sarah said.

“People were concerned about a young girl working in a bar, so I left after being chased by my boss, only after a week. Then, I got a job as a waitress in a local restaurant,” she said. “I cannot think of doing any other job other than being a house maid or a waitress. That is what I can do best.”

Child labour compromises children’s education, limiting their rights and their future opportunities, and putting them at risk of physical and mental harm. It is also a consequence of poverty and lack of access to quality education, pushing families to send their children to work and perpetuating inter-generational cycles of deprivation.



A child harvests sugarcane

Uganda’s National Legal and Policy Framework

The Government of Uganda has adopted laws and policies to align with its international commitments (ILO Conventions 138 and 182).

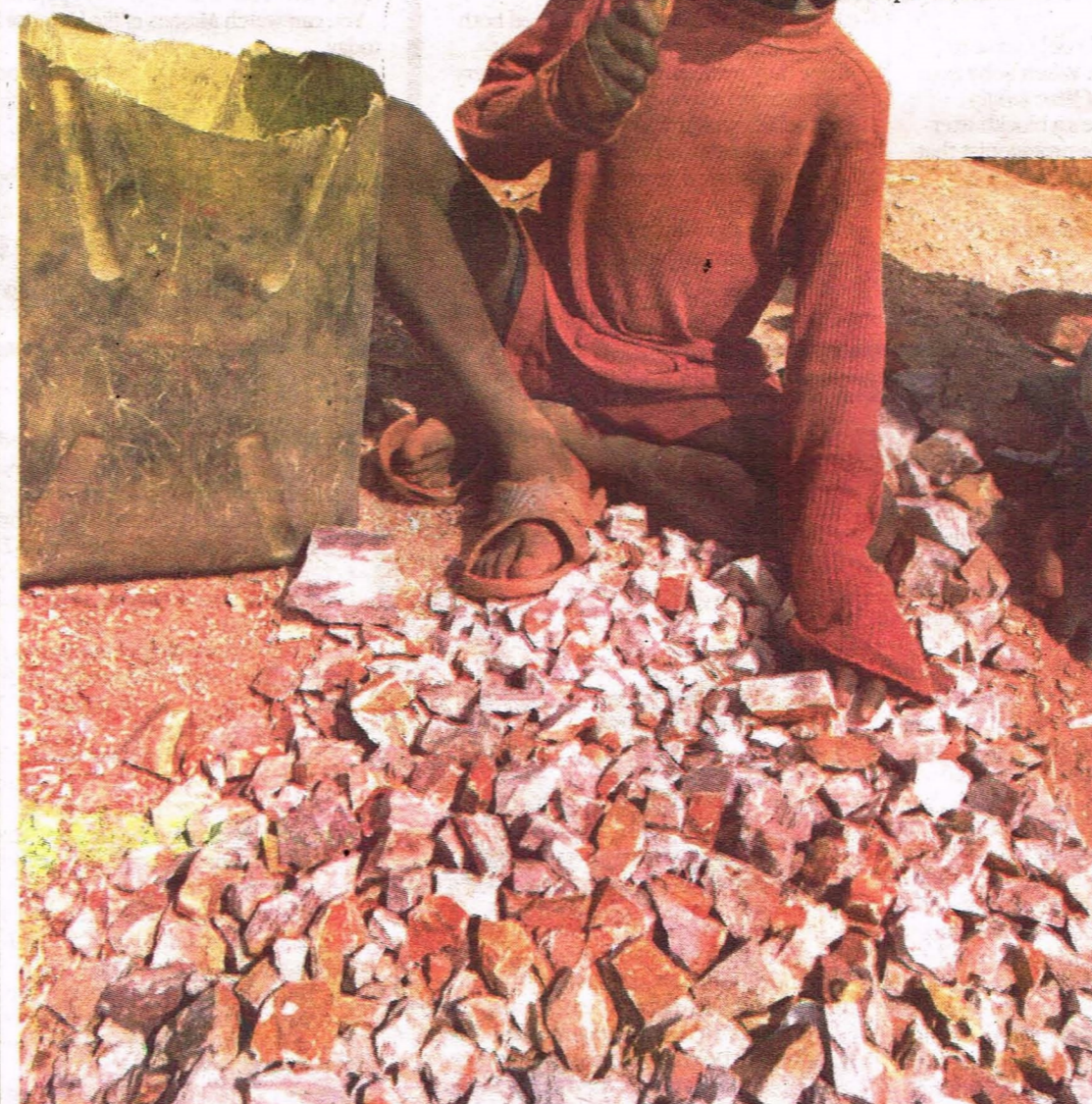
Legal Minimum Age: The Children (Amendment) Act and the Employment Act set the general minimum age for work at 16 years and the minimum age for hazardous work at 18 years.

National Action Plan (NAP): The country has implemented a National Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labour (NAP), which focuses on strengthening the legal framework, increasing access to social protection and education, and improving monitoring.

Now, the challenge lies in enforcement. Despite these laws, several structural challenges like poverty, enforcement gaps, and education barriers impede the effective elimination of child labour. Social rights advocates argue that the focus in Uganda should be on making this type of invisible exploitation visible and holding exploiters accountable.

In the meantime, let enforcement start with you, the reader.

How old is your help? Are you comfortable having someone’s baby taking care of your babies – even for a fee? Why don’t you take them back to school, at the least, now that there is universal primary and secondary education?



Children are often employed in mines and stone quarries