

Child Domestic Work as Intimate Labour: Towards relational protection

Jonathan Blagbrough and Tsion Degu

Abstract

Child domestic work (CDW) is typically considered through narrow labour or trafficking framings that do not fully explain how harm and protection are produced inside employing households. Drawing on the learnings from a Freedom Fund project in Ethiopia, this short article argues that CDW should, instead, be addressed by paying closer attention to household hierarchies, everyday care practices, and the role of employers and employers' children in shaping the lives of child domestic workers. We argue that three shifts are needed: researchers should measure dignity and belonging alongside harm; programme designers should engage households, including children, as part of change efforts; and policymakers should connect household-level change to legal recognition, regulation, and social protection.

Keywords: child domestic work, intimate labour, employing households, children's agency, dignity, belonging, Ethiopia

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Introduction and Framing

Child domestic work (CDW) is commonly approached as a child labour issue and, in some cases, as child trafficking or domestic servitude.¹ These framings do not fully explain how risk, harm, and change are manifested inside employing households. Many child domestic workers' lives are shaped not only by hours, pay, and tasks, but also by relational questions: who they eat with, where they sleep, whether they are spoken to with respect, whether they can contact their

¹ N Klocker, 'Struggling with child domestic work: What can a postcolonial perspective offer?', *Children's Geographies*, vol. 12, issue 4, 2014, pp. 464–478, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2013.827870>.

families, and whether they are treated as workers, dependents, or something ambiguously in-between.

A relational lens, which focuses on how household relationships and everyday social practices shape children's experiences of work, care, exclusion, and protection, does not soften the reality of abuse or suggest that harmful arrangements should be accepted. Rather, it helps explain why generalised legal and policy responses are often insufficient in protecting children in these situations. Many children enter domestic work through kinship obligations, rural-urban migration imperatives, or family strategies tied to schooling, survival, or delaying marriage.² Yet these same relational arrangements can expose them to dependence, exclusion, and exploitation, especially when employers present poor treatment as care or opportunity. A relational perspective therefore complements, rather than replaces, labour and protection frameworks by showing how exploitation is sustained or challenged through everyday household practices.

Definitional and measurement problems reinforce these policy blind spots. Live-in child domestic workers are often poorly captured in national surveys,³ and kinship placements may be described as 'help' or 'chores' rather than work.⁴ Responses centred only on awareness-raising, raids, or removal can miss the realities of children whose lives are embedded in households and communities.⁵ Likewise, treating formal schooling as the only meaningful route out can overlook adolescents' own priorities, including safety, family contact, dignity, and manageable working conditions.

This short article outlines the value of a relational lens to CDW, then uses the Freedom Fund's Ethiopian Nigat ('Dawn') project to show what this looks like in practice, before drawing out three implications for research, programme design, and policy.

² Freedom Fund, *Child Domestic Work: Summary framing paper*, Freedom Fund, 2021, <https://freedomfund.org/our-reports/child-domestic-work-summary-framing-paper>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ R Musizvingoza, J Blagbrough, and N S Pocock, 'Are child domestic workers worse off than their peers? Comparing children in domestic work, child marriage, and kinship care with biological children of household heads: Evidence from Zimbabwe', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 19, no. 12, 2022, pp. 7405, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19127405>.

⁵ P Olayiwola, "Killing the Tree by Cutting the Foliage Instead of Uprooting It?" Rethinking awareness campaigns as a response to trafficking in South-West Nigeria', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 13, 2019, pp. 50–65, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201219134>.

A Relational Lens on CDW

Understanding CDW relationally means starting from the everyday politics of age, gender, status, and belonging within employing households.⁶ Children may be described as ‘like family’, while sleeping separately, eating leftovers, working long hours, or having little say over their lives. Such a framing can hide exploitation, but it can also reveal where change is most likely to happen: in household routines, in relations between adults and children, and in the social norms that govern who deserves rest, privacy, food, schooling, and care.⁷

Research has shown that relationships between child domestic workers and employers’ children can be ambivalent but important.⁸ They are often unequal and shifting rather than straightforward friendships, yet they can still affect comfort, mobility, access to information, and emotional support. For that reason, employers’ children should not be treated as peripheral to interventions. They can reinforce household hierarchies, but they can also help disrupt them.

The Ethiopian Nigat Project

The Freedom Fund’s Nigat project in Addis Ababa was designed around this relational insight. Implemented over three years with local partner organisations, it worked with employers, employers’ children, schools, *iddirs* (neighbourhood associations), and *woreda* (district)-level actors to improve the living and working conditions of child domestic workers and to strengthen local protection and reporting pathways. A key component was a participatory school-based curriculum for employers’ children, aimed at building empathy, strengthening child rights awareness, and encouraging action within households, schools, and communities. The project also worked through neighbourhood structures and local duty bearers to strengthen local accountability, while supporting child domestic workers’ own participation and voice. In contrast to more conventional interventions focused primarily on identification and removal from CDW, the programme aimed to sustainably improve children’s everyday living and working conditions by engaging directly with the relational and social environments shaping their experiences.

⁶ N Klocker, ‘Negotiating Change: Working with children and their employers to transform child domestic work in Iringa, Tanzania’, *Children’s Geographies*, vol. 9, issue 2, 2011, pp. 205–220, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2011.562381>.

⁷ Freedom Fund.

⁸ J Blagbrough, ‘Not-Quite-Friendship: Exploring social relations between child domestic workers and the children of employing families’, *Children’s Geographies*, vol. 21, issue 2, 2023, pp. 347–360, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2022.2067742>.

Evaluation of the project used longitudinal qualitative methods, including Photovoice with child domestic workers; interviews with child domestic workers, employers, and employers' children; and discussions with wider stakeholders. This approach was important because it allowed children to define what meaningful change looked like in their own lives. Their priorities extended beyond conventional child labour indicators and included sleeping safely, eating properly, being treated with respect, staying in touch with family, and having support to attend school.⁹

Households reached by the project reported several improvements in child domestic worker well-being. Children described better sleeping arrangements and mealtime inclusion, while the evaluation also documented reductions in verbal and physical abuse, less social isolation, and improved relationships with employers and employers' children. School enrolment increased substantially through both formal schooling and alternative basic education options adapted around domestic responsibilities. However, important challenges remained. Many children still worked long hours, averaging about eight hours per day (reduced from nine), while informal arrangements persisted, with many children receiving little or no direct pay or having earnings transferred to their families. These patterns were especially evident in lower-income households, where employers' own economic pressures reinforced continued reliance on children's labour.

The project's broader lesson is therefore not that household-level change is enough, but that it matters. For the children involved, dignity and belonging were not secondary issues; they were among the clearest signs that life was becoming safer and more liveable. Measuring whether a child is still working tells us something important, but it does not tell us enough. Research and evaluation need to capture whether and how children are resting, eating, learning, being heard, and experiencing a meaningful reduction in fear and exclusion.

Conclusion: Towards relational protection in child domestic work

The Nigat project offers a useful roadmap for relational protection in child domestic work—which, like other forms of intimate labour, blurs conventional boundaries between work, care, family, and exploitation. First, for researchers and evaluators, children's own priorities should shape what counts as change. Indicators of dignity, belonging, family contact, and reduced isolation should sit

⁹ N Kram-Brooks and T Mersha, *Ushering Change and Transforming Lives: An evaluation of the Nigat project to shift household attitudes and norms towards child domestic workers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*, Freedom Fund, 2025, <https://www.freedomfund.org/news/ushering-change-transforming-lives>.

alongside more conventional concerns such as working hours, pay, and schooling. Second, for project designers and implementers, interventions need to work inside the household as well as around it. This means engaging employers and employers' children, using schools and community structures to challenge harmful norms, and creating space for child domestic workers to define and advocate for the changes that matter to them. Third, for policymakers, household-level improvements need to be backed by stronger formal protections. That includes recognising domestic work in law, clarifying standards for adolescents in domestic work, and linking vulnerable households to wider social protection so that responsibility for change does not rest on behaviour change alone.

Approaching CDW through a relational protection lens does not mean lowering the threshold for what counts as harm. It means seeing more clearly where harm is reproduced, how children themselves understand change, and why durable protection requires attention both to structural regulation and to the intimate social worlds in which child domestic workers live and work.

Jonathan Blagbrough, PhD is co-founder of Children Unite, a collective of children's rights advocates, researchers, and practitioners. Jonathan's research explores the effect of labour, migration, and exploitation on children, with a focus on child domestic work. Email: jonathan.blagbrough@childrenunite.org.uk

Tsion Degu is a Programme Officer at the Freedom Fund in Ethiopia, with extensive experience in survivor-centred interventions. With a background in psychology and social work, Tsion leads initiatives to reduce domestic servitude and end the exploitation of child domestic workers in Ethiopia. Email: tdeg@freedomfund.org