



## Domestic Servitude in Pakistan: A Qualitative Study

Khuram Shahzad Warraich<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The present study focuses on the domestic servitude problem in Pakistan. As a result, victims working in private families are humiliated and ill-treated. The study has critically explored the regulation of legislation and policies for slavery and forced labor within private homes or houses to stop artificial disasters. Moreover, the research has reviewed existing international frameworks, national laws, and policies to address the issue of domestic servitude. The qualitative study was conducted, and documents were analyzed. The result found that a number of policies were adopted to address the issue of child labor in Pakistan. The prominent step was the National Policy and Action Plan to Combat Child Labor (NPPA), which calls for the instantaneous abolition of the most awful forms of child labor. In conclusion, there is a dire need to make domestic servitude-specific legislation and develop a code of practices for the workers working in domestic settings. It is recommended that family support of such families be started through the cash transfer mechanism of the EHSAAS program, the flagship welfare program of the federal government.

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### Introduction

Domestic laborers have become a requirement for every household in Pakistan. As the world progressed towards civilization and modernization, domestic servitude changed its pattern but still existed throughout the world (Ray & Qayum, 2009). Women, particularly teenage girls, are forced to do household work for low pay in unhygienic conditions (Hennegan et al., 2019). For instance, Van Doorn (2017) found that labor rights are violated during domestic servitude. As per an International Labor Organization (ILO) study, there are around 264000 underage workers in Pakistan (Detho, 2023). Several authors concluded that domestic servitude has become a global challenge and labor rights are infringed at every stage of life (Pucheta & Namgoong, 2025; Sedacca, 2024). From the above discussion, the study purpose that the current legislative and policy framework is mandatory for the domestic servitude and especially their labor rights in Pakistan.

### Research Questions

1. What is domestic servitude, dynamics, and its major determinants?
2. What are existing international and national framework mechanisms to address domestic servitude?
3. What are the key legislative recommendations to propose solution for overcoming domestic servitude?

### Literature Review

The ILO estimates that at least 67 million individuals work as domestic workers globally, excluding children. Women constitute around 80% of home workers. The ILO assesses that a greater number of girls under the age of 16 are employed in domestic assistance than in any other category of child labor. Some local workers are itinerant professionals from other countries or regions, primarily migrating from rural areas to urban centers. For some individuals, home employment is one

<sup>1</sup>MPhil in Public Policy, Ripah University Islamabad. He can be reached at Gmail: k.warraich452@gmail.com

of the only options available to support themselves and their families (Yusifli & Fenwick, 2022). Domestic labor is poorly managed and undervalued. In many countries, domestic workers are not regarded as 'laborers' but rather as informal 'assistance' and are excluded from national labor regulations. They often despise identical guarantees from many professionals, such as legal contracts, minimum wage, holidays, healthcare, social security, and maternity payments. In countries where national labor laws protect local professionals, the demand is inadequate, and these protections have not been translated into training opportunities (Trebilcock, 2024).

Two major questions arise while dealing with the issue of domestic work. Primarily, the demand side of the issue is to be elaborated to understand it systematically, and secondly, what causes a person to opt for domestic work itself. Along with the pace of urbanization and rapid industrialization, demand for domestic work can be witnessed. The induction of females into the modern job circle created a vacuum of domestic labor. So, the demand arises for domestic workers. In itself, domestic work is different than the work performed anywhere else in the market. It's a job setting of a very personal and private nature. Domestic workers become very familiar with the people in the house. Nothing can be concealed from them, be that a commodity or value of the house. It causes a lot of inconvenience for the employees. That's why a need for domestic workers arises to lessen these apprehensions (Vidal et al., 2016). Employers like using young girls as domestic workers due to their susceptibility to control, abuse, coercion, and exploitation for little or nonexistent remuneration. Secondly, there are multiple reasons for domestic work. Poverty is one of the major drives behind domestic work. Family breakups, loan burden, addicted parents, physical and sexual abuse, and siblings already working in this domain are a few prominent causes of domestic work. Family breakups and physical and sexual abuse in their own families were common causes, as were issues such as alcoholism. Ladies prefer them over adult maids because they don't want to share with their husbands. They fear that maidservants may steal their husbands (Guarnizo & Rodriguez, 2017).

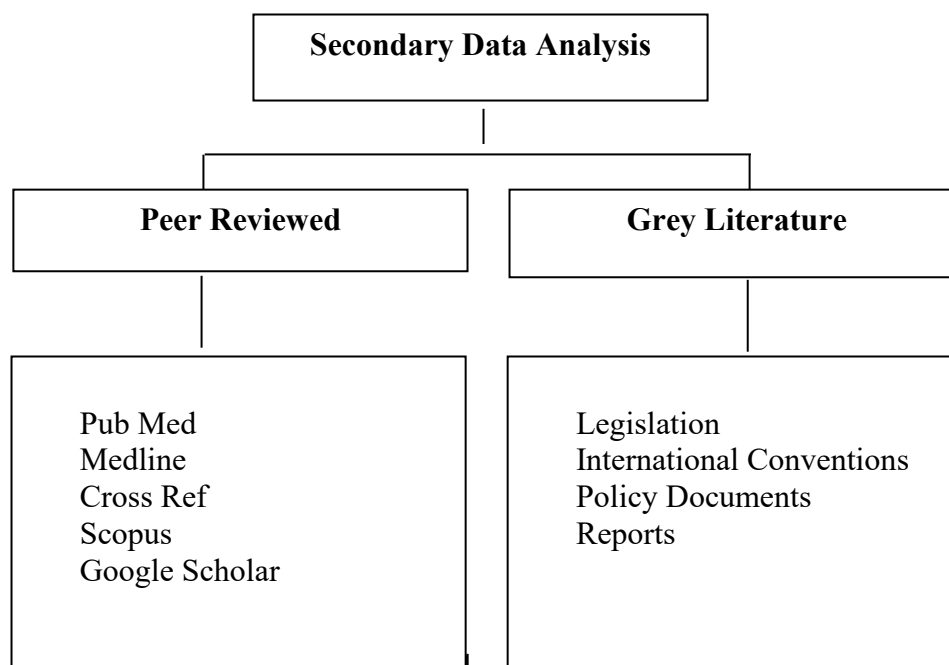
For example, Rehman and Azam Roomi (2012) found that cultural traits significantly influence the labor market. It is highlighted that in various societies, parents force their children to bound labor to learn different skills for their future lives. Parents advocate for their children to engage in employment, believing it to be advantageous for the acquisition of vocational skills. Furthermore, Phillips (2013) study unveiled that the root cause of labor is poverty. In culturally rigid societies, decisions about labor are dominantly taken by parents. In such societies children are not enough freedom to take decisions for their development. Poverty vicious cycle takes generations into domestic servitude. Conner (2013) households with more children and meager financial resources are more involved in domestic labor. Furthermore, parents work to able to manage household demands. Living in a joint family with a lot of children requires a lot of resources to live on. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, a higher ratio of girls children worked in families who have meager financial resources (Nazirullah, Rahman, et al., 2023; Nazirullah & Ullah, 2025). In many social structures, involving family members in labor is customary practice and they are facing food challenges (Nazirullah, Ullah, et al., 2023). Children, parents, and grandparents work together and they sometime punished for their behavior which effect their mind (Arman, 2025). As a result, Rehman (2025) found that parents are often engaged in domestic labor, and their children have unethical behavior and physical punishment.

## **Methodology**

The first part of the study has given an overview of domestic servitude, its types, and dynamics. Moreover, the statement of the problem, research objectives, and limitations of the study are explained in the first portion. Then, the methodology portion presented a detailed account of the research methodology, analysis, and write-up. After that, the third portion discussed the analysis and discussions in detail, and on the basis of this analysis, conclusions and recommendations were drawn.

For this study, the researcher examined secondary data collected through a desk review of existing literature on domestic servitude in Pakistan. A detailed literature review of the already exiting

information was analyzed. The grey literature and indexed authentic scientific publications were reviewed. Figure 1 indicates the sources that were used for desk study. Existing data has been analyzed while keeping the research objectives in view, and the final report has been prepared, which includes an introduction, literature review, methods, results, conclusion, and references.



### Limitations of the Study

This study has certain limitations. First, it is primarily concerned with secondary data available at public sources on domestic servitude. Second, it tried to understand the dynamics and major determinants that push victims into domestic servitude. Third, the major focus of the study was limited to Pakistan and primarily debated international and national framework mechanisms for addressing domestic servitude.

### Discussions and Critical Analysis

The paper analyzed previous literature review to generate critical discourse for the policymakers and legislative authorities.

### International Rights Framework

Article 32 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child mandates that state parties establish laws on the minimum age for employment, appropriate working hours, and other essential terms and circumstances. The ILO Conventions 138 (Minimum Age Convention) and 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention) elevated critical standards to address the issue of child labor. Conversely, Pakistan adopted ILO Convention No. 6 (Night Work of Young Persons (Industry) Convention, 1919), which stipulates that individuals under 18 years of age must not work during nighttime hours from 10 PM to 5 AM in any commercial or public sector enterprises. ILO Convention No. 15 (Minimum Age - Trimmers and Stokers Convention, 1921) stipulates that anyone under 18 years of age must not be employed as clippers and stokers on boats. In accordance with the ILO Medical Examination of Young Persons (Sea) Convention, the placement of any child or young person under eighteen years of age on any vessel is permissible solely upon the presentation of a medical certificate stating their fitness for such work, signed by a physician authorized by the competent authority. Likewise, Pakistan accepted the Forced Labor Convention of 1930, which mandates the eradication of forced or compelled labor in all its manifestations (Ishfaq et al., 2016).

### **Constitutional Provisions and Legal Framework in Pakistan**

In light of the constitutional provisions aimed at curbing the threat of domestic labor, Pakistan's constitution's Article 11 (1) and Article 11 (2) outlaw slavery and forced labor, respectively. Furthermore, those below the age of fourteen are prohibited from employment in any plant or mine. Several labor laws have established the minimum age for work. Following the 18th Constitutional Amendment, the enactment and enforcement of all labor-related regulations, including those concerning child labor, are solely in the jurisdiction of provincial governments. The Directorate of Labor under the ICT Administration (Ministry of Interior) has authority over the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT). According to the Rules of Business, 1973, the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis & Human Resource Development is tasked with monitoring labor laws from a worldwide standpoint, and numerous legislative mechanisms align with international obligations. Number of legislation have been promulgated to address the issue of child labour in general and domestic servitude in particular.

The Employment of Children Act of 1991 forbids the Employment of minors in certain professions and governs the working conditions for children, including domestic labor. The Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act of 1992 mandated the eradication of the bonded labor system to avert the economic and physical abuse of the labor class in the nation and related problems. Section 15 of the legislation established Vigilance Committees at the district level, consisting of elected representatives from the region, members of the District Administration, Bar groups, the Press, and recognized officials from Social Services and the Labor Department of the Government. The committee is tasked with advising the District Administration on the successful execution of the legislation, ensuring its correct enforcement, assisting in the reintegration of released bonded laborers, and monitoring the law's application. The Punjab Prohibition of Child Labor at Brick Kilns Ordinance, 2016, mandates the appointment of an inspector or the delegation of inspector powers to any individual for a specified local area. This individual may enter any location suspected of being a brick kiln, conduct examinations of the kiln and any required registers and forms, and gather evidence deemed necessary for the enforcement of this Act. Additionally, an examiner may file a complaint with the officer in charge of the local police station to initiate action regarding offenses under this Act and exercise any other powers essential for its implementation. District Vigilance Committees have been developed and established in every District of Punjab according to the Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act of 1992.

The Sindh Prohibition of Employment of Children Act, 2017, imposes a penalty of up to six months' imprisonment and a fine not exceeding Rs 50,000 for violators. If a kid is engaged in a dangerous occupation, the imprisonment may be prolonged by up to three years, accompanied by a fine of Rs 100,000. The ILO and the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands assisted the Sindh Labor Department in organizing a series of fundamental training sessions for the Sindh Labor Inspectorate. A training session was conducted in Karachi, where 120 officials from the Labor Department, employers, and workers received instruction on the fundamentals of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) and Labor Inspection. This legislation annulled the Employment of Children Act, 1991 (Act No. V of 1991) as it pertains to the Province of Sindh. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act, 2015, was enacted to abolish the enslavement regime in the KP. This statute mandates the appointment of inspectors to oversee and advocate for the advancement of liberated bonded workers. A person discovered engaging in bonded labor shall be subject to imprisonment for up to five years and a fine of no less than fifty thousand. This legislation annulled the Employment of Children Act, 1991 (Act No. V of 1991) as it pertains to the Province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Prohibition of Employment of Children Act, 2015, was enacted to outlaw child labor and to control the employment of juveniles in certain professions and procedures within the Province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The legislation prohibits the employment of children in any business, whereas children aged 12 and above may participate in light labor with their family for an aggregate of two hours daily.

### Labor Policies in Pakistan: Analytical View

Pakistan enacted six labor regulations in 1955, 1959, 1969, 1972, 2002, and 2010. The fundamental purpose of these regulations, which established the criteria for the development of trade unionism, includes safeguarding workers' rights, resolving industrial conflicts, and rectifying worker complaints.

A National Policy and Action Plan to Combat Child Labor (NPPA) advocating for the immediate eradication of the most egregious methods of child labor; the gradual elimination of child labor across all sectors; educational alternatives to prevent children from entering the workforce; and psychological evaluation of children removed from labor environments. Following the enactment of the 18th Constitutional Amendment, the implementation of all labor-related laws and issues, including child labor, falls solely under the jurisdiction of the Provincial Governments. The following provincial labor policies are being enacted (Government of Pakistan, 2010). The government announced the Punjab Labor Policy in 2018. It elucidates the labor policy about 'social ills' such as child labor, bonded labor, racial prejudice, and inadequate health facilities in the workplace. Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) is a fundamental component of the Labor Policy 2018 introduced by the Punjab government. By requiring employers and enterprises to offer the necessary safety equipment and an adequate working atmosphere for their employees, the labor policy plan states that no compromise will be made on the health and safety requirements of employees at work. Humanizing enforcement by overhauling the inspection procedure can significantly assist the Punjab government in safeguarding industrial workers from illnesses and accidents. The Government of Sindh is executing the Sindh Labor Policy 2018, which comprehensively addresses the problem of child labor. This regulation prohibits child labor among domestic and freelance employees and guarantees minimum salaries for these workers. The KP Government prioritizes the eradication of the Child Labor Policy 2018 by implementing proactive measures, establishing a comprehensive database, eliminating the most egregious kinds of labor, ensuring the right to education, and rearranging current structures, including skill development agencies and social security programs. The present administration has also implemented its labor policy, which addresses the problem of child labor.

### Conclusion

Domestic work is one of the major contributors to the country's informal economy. Slave-like practices of domestic work are witnessed. The cases of abuse of domestic workers are often reported in the media. Domestic workers engage in numerous tasks in private homes that include cooking, cleaning, laundry, washing, etc. There is no set duty time for such workers, and most girls are engaged in this job. Girls are most vulnerable to physical abuse and exploitation in such circumstances. After a detailed analysis of the existing legislation and policy framework in Pakistan, it is concluded that there is no exclusive law on domestic servitude, but it also covers labor-related laws across the country. For effective enforcement of such laws, labor policies have been implemented since the inception of Pakistan. The policies provide appropriate parameters to mitigate labor, particularly child labor and domestic servitude. In light of the analysis, the following are key recommendations to address the issue of domestic servitude:

It is indisputable that workers cannot be recruited at a minimum age of employment; under the law and policy made by the government, underage recruitment of workers is also strictly prohibited. Ministries of Overseas Employment and Human Resource Development, in coordination with Provincial Labour Departments, may develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the employment of laborers. The district vigilance committees embedded in the labor-specific laws may be fully activated to monitor labor engagements in the establishments and households in compliance with the laws.

There is no exclusive law to address the issue of domestic workers, which should be tabled in the National Assembly. Without legal backup, the menace of domestic servitude could not be curbed. Lobbying may be started through relevant government bodies and civil society organizations (CSOs) to mobilize the legislature to start legislating domestic servitude.

The government should adopt a domestic workers' welfare policy as there is no system to regulate their duty work, leaves, and protection issues. Consequent to the 18th Amendment, provinces may adopt domestic workers' welfare policies in their provinces. These policies may include defining their work duration and leaves, providing compensation in case of injury and loss, and monitoring mechanisms and other necessary matters.

Those who hire domestic workers must follow the occupational safety and health procedures (a written agreement) with the full contribution of workers under the supervision of the relevant local government bodies to oversee such matters.

Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal has created 159 centers dedicated to the rehabilitation of children who labor. In these Centers, adolescents removed from labor are provided with free education and stipends, among other benefits. Over 15,000 students, former child laborers, have been enrolled in these Centers, and more than 5,000 students have already graduated. Over 4,500 of the pupils who passed have been enrolled in government institutions for further study. This model can be expanded by establishing additional schools or repeated by provincial governments to offer services such as changing schools for underperforming youths, apprenticeship programs for older youth, and arranging credit and earning opportunities for parents and legally working relatives.

Parents who engage themselves and their families in domestic servitude also require counseling services to rebuild their families. Provincial Social Welfare Departments may take the lead in mapping areas where a large population engages in domestic servitude, approaching such families, and conducting counseling sessions with parents to bring them out of this hazard once and for all. Poverty is one of the leading causes of domestic servitude and EHSAAS cash program can target these families who are working in private houses or homes.

**Author Contribution**

Paper Idea, Conceptualization, Design and Formatting was done by Khuram Shahzad Warraich. He is Corresponding Author and his Email is: k.warraich452@gmail.com

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