

## **Domestic Child Labor**

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*An informal verbal survey was conducted amongst doctor colleagues to determine the prevalence of domestic child labor in this important part of the middle class, which is expected to mirror the society's social mores. Eighty-three doctors were surveyed of which 72 employed domestic servants and 61.1% of these employed children younger than 14 years of age. No association was observed between this practice and the medical specialty or work setting of the employer. A follow-up telephonic survey, after the enactment of the law prohibiting this practice, saw decreased participation and low prevalence of the practice.*

**Key words:** *Child abuse, Domestic servants, Working children.*

According to 1991 census, there are 11.28 million working children under 14 years of age constituting 3.6% of the total labor force in India, although even these figures have been contested by workers in the field(1). In daily life, we seem to have a culture of child labor and it is so deeply ingrained in society that it appears perfectly normal to the majority when children work(2). At the administrative level also, child labor is considered a 'harsh reality' and the focus is on preventing the more 'exploitative' aspects of child labor like the employment of children in so-called 'hazardous industries'(2). Although poverty may have a role to play, a variety of non-economic factors are also implicated, especially the low cost of child labor. Intrigued by personal observations over the years, we conducted this study to determine the prevalence of domestic child labor among doctors.

### **Subjects and Methods**

We conducted an informal verbal survey of personal acquaintances among doctor colleagues between January 2006 and March 2006 in Delhi and Madhya Pradesh states to determine the prevalence of child labor in this group. A total of 87 doctors

were approached, of which four refused to participate. The remaining 83 were interviewed either by telephone (68 respondents) or personal interaction (15 respondents). The details noted included the qualification and work setting of the medical professional, the child's age, sex, place of work (home/clinic), and whether working full-time or part-time. No identifying information of the participating doctors was recorded.

### **Results**

Of the 83 doctors surveyed, 82.7% (72; 28 pediatricians, 44 general practitioners or other specialists) employed domestic servants. Of these, nearly two-thirds (44, 61.1%) were found to employ domestic servants younger than 14 years of age. In total there were 46 domestic servants (2 doctors had two servants each), the median age was 12.5 (range; 8.16-14) year and the male-female ratio was 1:1.66 (for the majority, however, the ages were guess-estimates by the servant/employer). Thirty-three (71.7%) of these were full-time domestic servants (staying with the employers for the major part of the year) and the rest were working part-time (staying with parents/relatives and returning to their home in

### What this Study Adds

- Employing children as domestic servants was common amongst the doctors studied.

the night). Of the part-time workers, majority(11, 84.6%) was employed at the clinics of the employer and the rest in the home. No differences were observed between the employment of child labor and, the medical specialty and the work setting of the employer (personal clinic/private hospital/ government hospital).

#### Discussion

Child labor has received considerable attention in India in recent years, both in the lay press and pediatric journals(3-5). Although quite a few studies have been done on child labor(6-9), the issue of domestic child labor has not been previously addressed. This study showed a high prevalence of child domestic laborers employed by medical professionals in two states in India. A high prevalence of child abuse among middle class parents has been reported previously also(10). The middle class is expected to be cultural barometer of a society's values, and the findings of this study thus suggest that employing domestic child workers may well have social sanction.

In a memorandum to all civil servants, the National Human Rights Commission (India) prohibited the employment of children below the age of 14 years as domestic servants. The Government of India subsequently amended the Central Services (Conduct) Rule, in 1999 to include these provisions. Professional bodies like the Indian Academy of Pediatrics or Indian Medical Association should give a thought to adopting similar resolutions to request members to discontinue this practice from their homes and work place.

Well after the completion of this survey, the Central Government amended the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 (61 of 1986), to also include employment of children as domestic servants under its purview. We therefore, conducted a follow-up survey in August 2006 after the information regarding the new law was in the

public domain. However, only 59 respondents participated and none reported employing a domestic servant below 14 years. The reasons for non-participation of many and, non-identification of even a single child labourer in the follow-up survey is for the readers to judge.

Many previous commentators have lamented the lack of action at the government level for abolishing child labor. Through this communication, we wish to bring to the notice of the pediatric fraternity, the extent of societal complicity in the propagation of this evil. All of us need to take appropriate action at personal level to at least stamp out this practice from our homes, before expecting statutory remedies to have any impact on this widespread problem.

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