[**Domestic exploitation**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1606152/domestic-exploitation)

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ON Jan 30, Lahore police registered a case against a family for the murder of a 12-year-old employed as a domestic worker at their residence. Investigation reports revealed the child was deprived of food and water for several weeks and subjected to physical violence at the hands of the employer on numerous occasions prior to her death.

The most disconcerting aspect about this morbid incident is that it remains a fairly common occurrence. A quick Google search reveals numerous incidents taking place just since 2019, with victims frequently being underage girls. And these are the cases that receive some media attention — which means they’re taking place in large urban centres and are visible to existing patterns of reporting. The scale of physical violence and coercion against domestic workers that doesn’t end in death would be much larger and significantly harder to estimate.

Working conditions in personal and community services — of which domestic work is an integral subcomponent — should be of considerable concern to anyone interested in the politics and socioeconomic dynamics of poverty in the country. Domestic workers in Pakistan form a considerable portion of the informal economy; estimates suggest the sector’s workforce to number around 4.5 million individuals, with the vast majority finding themselves in exploitative and vulnerable employment. In terms of the gender breakup, Labour Force Survey data categorises domestic work as part of personal and community services, which comprises of 60 per cent women. There is also significant incidence of child labour (employment of individuals under the age of 14) in this sector. Typical occupations under domestic work include cooking, cleaning, laundry services, and child and elderly care.

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Official statistics likely under-record the actual prevalence of domestic work in the economy, given its fluid and often ephemeral nature. Anecdotal accounts suggest that there is high turnover, with new urban migrants often using it as the first form of employment, given its relatively low credential and skill requirement. As was the case in the gruesome incident recounted at the start of the piece, high-demand cities like Lahore often serve as sites of inward migration by domestic workers from neighbouring districts, or from village settlements being engulfed by higher-end residential real estate developments. The surplus of rural labour produced by structural transformation in agriculture taking place across the country finds domestic work as its first (and often only) outlet.

Little surprise then that while the economy remains mired in protracted phases of stagnation, the personal and community services sector has increased its share in total GDP by just 4pc since the early 2000s.

Despite the scale of the sector, and its associated labour problems, there is very little regulation surrounding it. As detailed in my piece on the informal economy a fortnight ago, it was as late as 2013 that the Domestic Workers (Employment Rights) Act 2013 was passed but it only applied to workers within the legislative jurisdiction of parliament, ie the Islamabad Capital Territory. The province of Punjab passed its own version of the act, the Punjab Domestic Workers Act, only in 2019, which finally provided a regulatory definition of the sector itself as section 2 (g) and (h) defined respectively the act of domestic work and who constituted a domestic worker.

Yet the passage of these acts has not changed working conditions in the sector in any substantive way. Despite instituting a minimum wage condition and a working cap of maximum eight hours of work per day, various grievance and redressal mechanisms instituted under these legislations either remain unestablished or untested. These are significant challenges in a sector that is marked almost entirely by informal and transient employment contracts.

The root of regulatory gaps, as well as the continued nature of exploitation in the sector has to be analysed from a political perspective. The state will be compelled to act in favour of a segment on the back of its ideational and political incentive structure. Ideologically, various tiers of the Pakistani state apparatus are not committed to the eradication of exploitative work. The national developmental narrative — regardless of how successful it is — is one of growth, not inequality or equity.

Similarly, political incentives to act on this issue are also completely absent. The employment and exploitation of domestic workers is a pervasive phenomenon among households in both upper and middle-income segments. The 12-year-old murdered by her employer last month was working at a house located in a middle-income locality, not in an elite residential enclave. This means that while there is pervasive moral outrage on media reports of extreme violence and brutality, there is little self-reflection on the underlying practices that provide conditions for such incidents to take place. Simply put, the exploitation of domestic work — through long and ad hoc hours and low pay — is a deal that works in favour of a significant segment of society.

As is so often the case with entrenched inequality, the only glimmer of hope — and a very faint one at that — comes from associational politics of the workers themselves. In Punjab, the Domestic Workers’ Union was registered by the Department of Labour Punjab under the Punjab Industrial Relations Act (2010) in 2014. The union continues to work with the Labour Department and has helped develop the template for a model employment contract. It also participates in the workings of various labour federations at the provincial and national level.

As of now, its organisational penetration is extremely low. There are currently only a few hundred members, most of whom are women keeping in line with the overall profile of the sector. While the baseline at this point may not be enough to cause substantive change, increased unionisation and representation remains the only plausible way to impact the regulatory and societal practices around this sector.

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