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Behind closed doors: Public and private views on child domestic work in urban Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

Background: There has been little evidence on how public perceptions of child domestic work influence work conditions, employment and living arrangements for young workers.
Objective: This study in urban Myanmar explores public views and attitudes on child domestic work to consider the implicit and explicit work arrangements between households and child domestic workers.
Participants and Setting: We conducted a cross-sectional survey with 1072 adult participants from Yangon and Mandalay urban townships.
Methods: We analysed attitudes estimates toward child domestic work among different subgroups. We conducted bivariable and multivariable regressions to examine factors associated with perceptions about responsibilities of host households towards child domestic workers in urban Myanmar.
Results: Sixty per cent of study participants reported knowing households with child domestic workers. When asked about working conditions, most participants stated that they themselves endorsed aspects of safe, decent work and young workers' engagement in education and training, but suggested that community beliefs are much less liberal. Many participants believed that child domestic workers are subjected to harmful conditions, including that these children are not likely to participate in educational activities, receive holiday breaks, or have their safety and well-being prioritized. These beliefs were associated with: older age (≥30 years), being female, belonging to the host household, having awareness of child domestic work, having higher education, and having a lower household income.
Conclusion: Our findings underscore the need to promote child-centred work and private work arrangements, combined with interventions that foster the safety, well-being and promising futures for youth in domestic work situations.

1. Introduction

Child domestic work receives limited attention relative to its global prevalence. Recent global estimates suggest that 17.2 million children (aged 5–17 years) are engaged in child domestic work, of whom more than two-thirds are girls (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, 2013). In Myanmar, broad estimates suggest that there are approximately 11,371 child domestic workers, which represent approximately one-sixth of the total 60,000 child domestic workers in Southeast Asia (Pocock, N.S., Zimmerman, C, 2019). With increasing dialogue on child labour and human trafficking, concerns for child domestic workers have grown. Child domestic workers are defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as children and young people under the age of 18 years who engage in domestic work outside the home of their own family for remuneration (whether paid or unpaid) (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, 2013). Somewhat distinct from other types of child labour, these young workers are relatively invisible because they work in private homes. Moreover, they are rarely considered part of the workforce nor are they treated as members of the host family, regardless of possible blood relations (Klocker, 2011, 2012). Especially in low resource settings, domestic work is a widely accepted practice that is generally considered an unskilled, informal job associated with low social status (Bosmans et al., 2016; Jensen, 2014; Tomei, 2011).

Evidence on the harms and potential benefits of child domestic work in low-resource settings is varied (Gamlin et al., 2015). While most

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evidence focuses on the risks and negative impacts such as neglect, verbal, physical and sexual abuse, and labour exploitation, some studies have also suggested the potential benefits for youth, including school enrolment, improved nutrition, new skills and exposure to urban settings (Thi et al., 2021). To improve safeguarding for child domestic workers, an important question to answer is: what influences child domestic workers' working and living conditions and their health, safety and longer-term development (Thi et al., 2021). Current evidence suggests that individual and household characteristics influence on the physical and psychological well-being of young workers (Blagbrough, 2023; Gamlin et al., 2015).

However, there is less evidence on how public attitudes and social norms about child domestic work influences the relationship between household hosts and young workers (Gamlin et al., 2015; Thi et al., 2021). Substantial research shows how public attitudes and social norms influence people's behaviour (Friedkin, 2010; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). For instance, a multi-country global study on public attitudes towards migrant workers indicated that the general public believed that migrants were a threat to the host society despite the absence of evidence of higher migrant crime rates that led to constrained worker rights (ILO & UN Women, 2019). To date, few studies have examined public attitudes about child domestic work. However, a prior survey in Myanmar indicated that a majority of the general public endorsed protection laws for domestic workers (ILO, 2019). Despite the public's support of decent work conditions for domestic workers, surveys showed that employers provide few work benefits and are reluctant to accept labour inspections (ILO, 2019; ILO & UN Women, 2019). Findings from these studies suggest how behaviours are influenced by social norms – both injunctive norms (what others approve or disapproval of) and descriptive norms (what others actually do) as well as their own personal moral standards (White et al., 2009). For example, behavioural studies demonstrated the independent influence of group and individual norms on bullying behaviours and recycling behaviours (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; White et al., 2009). Yet, there has been very little evidence on public and private attitudes about the treatment of child domestic workers.

Initiatives to address complex social phenomena such as the ambiguous arrangements found in child domestic work require exploration that goes beyond individual employer attitudes, and also captures the ways that implicit (or explicit) social norms affect relationships and processes through which people (e.g., employers-workers) interact (Dyer, 2000; Seabright et al., 2021). Intersectional biases are particularly important for an informal sector like child domestic work that is rarely governed by more formal (explicit) institutional contracts and regulations (Tomei, 2011). Nevertheless, little work has explored public perceptions, expectations and justifications of the social and work arrangements that underpin child domestic work, or the implicit or explicit agreements about children's rights and obligations in exchange for their household services and/or labour.

In this paper, we hypothesise that public attitudes and social norms about the role and obligations of child domestic workers and of host households set and enforce the terms of child domestic work arrangements. Moreover, we suggest that these attitudes and expectations vary by age, gender, and knowledge of child domestic work in their vicinity (Kochan, 2020). This study is part of a larger programme of intervention development research and aims to: (1) examine attitudes towards child domestic work among different population sub-groups; and (2) investigate factors associated with participants' own opinions and their perceptions of the community's opinions about responsibilities of host households towards child domestic workers in the urban context of Yangon and Mandalay, Myanmar.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study design, setting and population

This paper is a cross-sectional analysis of survey data from Yangon and Mandalay urban townships of Myanmar. Study population includes individuals aged between 18 and 59 years at middle or upper socio-economic status (determined by monthly household income) from Yangon and Mandalay urban townships. Eligibility criteria were based on the assumption that child domestic work is prevalent among middle-aged populations residing in middle- or upper-class urban households who are current or future host households or familiar to child domestic work in their neighbourhood.

Myanmar has over two-thirds of its 51 million residents living in rural areas, while 18.4 million people (31 % of the total population) reside in urban areas. Among the major cities in Myanmar, Yangon and Mandalay are home to over 10 % of the overall country population. Both cities contribute to 30 % of Myanmar's GDP in total, which is estimated to increase to 50 % in 2030 (Kim, 2018; Prosperity, 2018). It is projected that the city's population will reach 12 million in Yangon and exceed 4 million in Mandalay by 2040. The rising trend of urbanisation with expanding population causes significant strain on the infrastructure and services of these cities (Kim, 2018; Prosperity, 2018).

2.2. Data sources and data collection

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), Myanmar in partnership with a local research firm, Aventura Research Myanmar (ARM) (formerly Kantar) fielded the survey and collected the data. We identified eligible participants from ARM's nationwide research panel that contains 85,000 respondents across different age and socio-economic categories. In total, we recruited 1072 participants using random proportionate sampling. The sample size was representative of the targeted urban population of 7,303,948 as per the 2014 census (margin of error 3 %; 95 % confidence level). The field team consisted of 25 interviewers and 4 supervisors. The team underwent training over four days and data collection took place between August to September 2022 in Yangon.

We administered structured questionnaires in Myanmar language, the predominant language in the study areas by Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI). All questionnaires were translated from English into Myanmar and we then used consensus translation (Sumathipala & Murray, 2000) to ensure consistency in the definitions and meaning across languages. Pre-tests (n = 4) and pilot testing (n = 29) of the survey were conducted to ensure survey effectiveness and accuracy. Pre-tests were conducted with the mock participants to check the length, logic flow, information completeness and language readability of the survey. Then, pilot interviews were conducted via phone call among respondents from project targeted areas. The survey was modified based on experiences from pretesting and pilot testing and analysis of pre-test and pilot dataset although there was no major revision to the questionnaire.

2.3. Measures, variables and definitions

The data was collected using the Nfield data collection platform designed for CATI in challenging environments. Variables included participants socio-demographic characteristics and their knowledge, attitudes and perceptions towards child domestic work. In this study, attitudes refers to feelings, beliefs and actions towards a particular topic and perceptions refers to participants' view regarding host responsibilities towards child domestic workers (Pickens, 2005). Host household was defined when participant's household has had or is currently having a live-in child domestic worker. Education status of participants was categorised into (i) secondary education and below – participants who completed high school and below (ii) post-secondary – those who achieved diploma, bachelors, master's and PhD degrees (iii).

monastery/vocational/kindergarten– those who attained monastic or vocational education and (iv) none.

2.4. Ethics

We secured formal ethical clearance from both Institute Review Boards of Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM). We obtained verbal informed consent by reading descriptions of the study and study implications. The interviewers proceeded with the interviews only when participants provided verbal approval. Participants were reminded of the confidentiality of the interview, that they could decline to answer any of the questions they did not want to answer, and that they can stop the interview at any time. Participants were asked permission to record the interviews for quality improvement purposes.

2.5. Statistical analysis

Data were extracted from Nfield into Stata/SE 17 for Windows. We used descriptive statistics to characterise the study population and to compare the differences in proportions by gender (female/male), age (18–29 years versus 30–59 years), and host households versus non-host households. Categorical variables were compared using chi square test to investigate differences in attitudes toward child domestic work in different subgroups. Bivariable and multivariable logistic regression analyses were performed to explore the association between independent and dependent variables.

Independent variables considered for the model included socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, education, region, occupation, last month's household income) and child domestic work-related knowledge (awareness of families with child domestic workers, intermediaries, being a host household, and intention to employ a child domestic worker in the future).

For the second part of the analysis, the dependent variables: perceptions regarding household responsibilities towards child domestic workers were assessed by asking personal opinions and the community's perceptions. We categorised the participant and community agreement variables into 'yes' when the participant 'mostly agreed', or participant responded that community 'mostly agreed' with household responsibilities in questions and 'no' when the participant 'mostly disagreed 'or participant responded that the community 'mostly disagreed' with the household responsibilities in questions. We excluded 'don't know' and 'neutral' responses from the binary variables. Four main outcome (dependent) variables were created: community mostly agree that child domestic workers go to training courses or school, have regular daily breaks or weekly day-offs and have their safety and well-being taken cared for. Community agreement on taking care of the safety and well-being of child domestic workers was coded (i) yes when participants responded that community mostly agree to pay medical care of child domestic workers or ensure that child domestic workers are safe and healthy as their own children and (ii) no when participants raised opposite opinions.

Independent variables with bivariable $p \leq 0.2$ and conceptually relevant variables were entered into the multivariable model. Adjusted odds ratios (aORs) and p-values were calculated for each independent variable. We did not assess factors associated with participants' perceptions regarding household responsibilities towards child domestic workers because number of observations who responded as "mostly disagree" was very few and was not entered into multivariable logistic regression model for most of independent variables.

3. Results

3.1. Knowledge of child domestic workers in their vicinity

The socio-demographic characteristics of the study population are summarised in Table 1. Notably, the majority (85 %) of participants were aware of households who currently have live-in child domestic workers, with half reporting to know more than three households with child domestic workers. Nearly 60 % knew child domestic helpers working for an income or shelter, and the majority of them (74 %) were employed in neighbours or acquaintances' households. When asked about intermediaries, 22 % knew the person who connected child domestic workers to the households. Most of the known intermediaries (48 %) were identified as participants' neighbours/acquaintances. Participants responded that child domestic workers were primarily recruited through acquaintances (57.3 %), followed by brokers (55.2 %). Approximately, 15 % of participants identified themselves as a host household, while 14 % expressed an intention to have a child domestic worker in the future.

Nearly two-thirds reported knowing child domestic workers who were female, while 28 % identified both female and male child domestic

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics and knowledge of child domestic workers within the study population (n = 1072).

Variable characteristics	Percentage (Number)
Age	
18–29 years	39.6 % (425)
30–59 year	60.4 % (647)
Highest education completed	
Secondary and below	45.5 % (488)
Post-secondary	51.2 % (549)
Monastery/vocational/kindergarten	3.2 % (34)
None	0.1 % (1)
Occupation categories	
Waged	32.6 % (350)
Self-employed	48.5 % (520)
Casual labour	0.7 % (8)
Students	3.3 % (35)
Retired/dependent	9.7 % (104)
Job seeker/unemployed	5.1 % (55)
Region	
Mandalay Region	29.4 % (315)
Yangon Region	70.6 % (757)
Last month household income	
Below 500, 000 MMK (US$238)	1.96 % (21)
500,001–850,000 MMK (US$ 238-$404)	40.1 % (430)
850,001–1,300,000 MMK (US$404-$618)	32.1 % (344)
>1,300,000 (>$618)	25.7 % (276)
Prefer not to answer	0.1 % (1)
Do you know any families who have ever had a live-in child domestic worker?	
No	15.4 % (165)
Yes	84.5 % (906)
Don't know	0.1 % (1)
Number of people you know who currently have a live-in child domestic worker	
None	1.4 % (15)
1–2	29.9 % (321)
3 or more	53.9 % (578)
Don't know	14.7 % (158)
Do you know anyone who has ever been a child domestic worker?	
No	40.1 % (430)
Yes	59.4 % (637)
Don't know	0.5 % (5)
Do you know any intermediary who has ever connected you to find a child domestic worker?	
No	77.8 % (834)
Yes	21.9 % (235)
Don't know	0.3 % (3)
Have you ever had help from a live-in child domestic worker?	
No	85.4 % (916)
Yes	14.6 % (156)
Have any of your children ever moved away to work as a child domestic worker?	
No	99.7 % (1069)
Yes	0.3 % (3)
Do you have the intention to have child domestic worker in the future?	
No	85.4 % (915)
Yes	14.4 % (154)

MMK is converted to USD per https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=300000&From=MMK&To=USD.

workers. The most common region of origin for child domestic workers was Ayeyarwaddy (52 %). Ayeyarwaddy region is the second most populated area after Yangon and highly climate vulnerable due to its geographic location. Since being hit by Cyclone Nargis in 2008, underdeveloped infrastructure and transportation and scarce job opportunities remain drivers of deepening poverty and migration (UNDP Myanmar, 2014).

Attitudes towards child domestic work: One-quarter to half of the participants said that the benefits of child domestic workers were that they are affordable, easy to hire, obedient and reliable. At the same time, other participants (8–45 %) described challenges associated with employing child workers, including the need for greater guidance, care

Table 2
Differences in child domestic work-related attitudes by age, gender, being host households and awareness of families with child domestic workers.

Variables	Total	Male	Female	18–29 year	30–59 year	Non-host household	Host household
	N = 1072	N = 536	N = 536	N = 425	N = 647	N = 916	N = 156
When thinking about domestic workers and their future, do you think it is:							
An overall positive net effect	36.8 % (395)	**34.5 % (185)**	**39.2 % (210)**	**32.2 % (137)**	**39.9 % (258)**	**34.3 % (314)**	**51.9 % (81)**
An overall negative net effect	41.8 % (448)	**43.8 % (235)**	**39.7 % (213)**	**42.6 % (181)**	**41.3 % (267)**	**44.1 % (404)**	**28.2 % (44)**
No impact at all	16.8 % (180)	**17.7 % (95)**	**15.9 % (85)**	**20.2 % (86)**	**14.5 % (94)**	**16.4 % (150)**	**19.2 % (30)**
In general, when thinking about the working conditions of most young domestic workers, their work is							
Usually safe and acceptable	22.6 % (242)	21.8 % (117)	23.3 % (125)	**19.8 % (84)**	**24.4 % (158)**	**20.9 % (191)**	**32.7 % (51)**
Usually difficult and tiring	20.2 % (217)	22.9 % (123)	17.5 % (94)	**24.5 % (104)**	**17.5 % (113)**	**21.9 % (201)**	**10.3 % (16)**
Usually harsh and dangerous	8.1 % (87)	7.6 % (41)	8.6 % (46)	**6.8 % (29)**	**9.0 % (58)**	**9.0 % (82)**	**3.2 % (5)**
Can be safe and unsafe	49.0 % (525)	47.6 % (255)	50.4 % (270)	**48.9 % (208)**	**49.0 % (317)**	**48.1 % (441)**	**53.8 % (84)**
What should be the maximum number of hours child domestic workers work in a typical day							
No limit	6.2 % (66)	6.5 % (35)	5.8 % (31)	4.7 % (20)	7.1 % (46)	**5.7 % (52)**	**9.0 % (14)**
More than 10 h	7.1 % (76)	7.1 % (38)	7.1 % (38)	7.3 % (31)	7.0 % (45)	**8.0 % (73)**	**1.9 % (3)**
Fewer than 10 h	28.0 % (300)	28.4 % (152)	27.6 % (148)	28.0 % (119)	28.0 % (181)	**28.3 % (259)**	**26.3 % (41)**
Fewer than 8 h	57.6 % (617)	56.3 % (302)	58.8 % (315)	58.8 % (250)	56.7 % (367)	**56.8 % (520)**	**62.2 % (97)**
How many days should a child domestic worker get off per week?							
none	7.0 % (75)	6.5 % (35)	7.5 % (40)	**4.0 % (17)**	**9.0 % (58)**	**5.6 % (51)**	**15.4 % (24)**
one	56.1 % (601)	55.8 % (299)	56.3 % (302)	**53.4 % (227)**	**57.8 % (374)**	**55.6 % (509)**	**59.0 % (92)**
two	33.7 % (361)	34.3 % (184)	33.0 % (177)	**38.8 % (165)**	**30.3 % (196)**	**35.0 % (321)**	**25.6 % (40)**
More than two	3.3 % (35)	3.4 % (18)	3.2 % (17)	**3.8 % (16)**	**2.9 % (19)**	**3.8 % (35)**	**0.0 % (0)**
Tasks that child domestic workers should do							
House chores/run errands/cooking	89.7 % (962)	89.6 % (480)	89.9 % (482)	**92.2 % (392)**	**88.1 % (570)**	90.1 % (825)	87.8 % (137)
Domestic pet care	44.4 % (476)	**37.5 % (201)**	**51.3 % (275)**	**38.6 % (164)**	**48.2 % (312)**	43.6 % (399)	49.4 % (77)
Caring tasks	9.0 % (97)	10.4 % (56)	7.6 % (41)	10.4 % (44)	8.2 % (53)	8.8 % (81)	10.3 % (16)
Perceived salary of child domestic workers							
<50, 000 MMK – 100, 000 MMK (<23.8–47.6 $)**	57.6 % (618)	58.0 % (311)	57.3 % (307)	**49.6 % (211)**	**62.9 % (407)**	**59.2 % (542)**	**48.7 % (76)**
100, 001–300,000 MMK (47.7–143 $)	42.0 % (450)	41.6 % (223)	42.4 % (227)	**49.9 % (212)**	**36.8 % (238)**	**40.4 % (370)**	**51.3 % (80)**
Only food and accommodation	57.6 % (618)	58.0 % (311)	57.3 % (307)	**0.5 % (2)**	**0.3 % (2)**	**0.4 % (4)**	**0.0 % (0)**
Useful trainings for child domestic workers							
Housework, cooking	31.1 % (333)	**28.0 % (150)**	**34.1 % (183)**	33.4 % (142)	29.5 % (191)	30.2 % (277)	35.9 % (56)
Vocational training	75.9 % (814)	75.9 % (407)	75.9 % (407)	73.2 % (311)	77.7 % (503)	75.4 % (691)	78.8 % (123)
Education	30.7 % (329)	30.8 % (165)	30.6 % (164)	33.9 % (144)	28.6 % (185)	31.1 % (285)	28.2 % (44)
Communication/personal hygiene/basic literacy	32.5 % (348)	31.9 % (171)	33.0 % (177)	**36.0 % (153)**	**30.1 % (195)**	33.1 % (303)	28.8 % (45)
Childcare and elderly care	22.8 % (244)	**19.8 % (106)**	**25.7 % (138)**	24.7 % (105)	21.5 % (139)	23.3 % (213)	19.9 % (31)
Rights of households towards child domestic workers							
Ask to work at any time they need	52.8 % (566)	52.8 % (283)	52.8 % (283)	53.6 % (228)	52.2 % (338)	53.1 % (486)	51.3 % (80)
Pay them with accommodation and food, not cash	20.9 % (224)	20.9 % (112)	20.9 % (112)	**24.0 % (102)**	**18.9 % (122)**	**22.6 % (207)**	**10.9 % (17)**
Physically punishment for mistakes	13.8 % (148)	15.3 % (82)	12.3 % (66)	13.4 % (57)	14.1 % (91)	14.0 % (128)	12.8 % (20)

Chi-square test was used to compare categorical variables. Results≤0.05 were shown in bold. ** MMK are converted to USD per https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=300000&From=MMK&To=USD.
Participants who responded other (specify), none and don't know were omitted from the table because of fewer percentages

and protection, and time commitment. They also noted difficulties around recruiting, managing, and retaining young workers. While many participants (42 %) expressed overall negative effect of child domestic work, half of the sample highlighted its double-edged nature. Additionally, nine out of ten participants supported at least one weekly holidays and one in two suggested daily working hours of less than eight. Three-quarters of participants (75 %) regarded treating child domestic workers like one's own family as good treatment, while scolding, beating, shouting (85 %) was considered unacceptable. When asked about potential education or skills training, Table 2 shows that the majority (76 %) endorsed the need for vocational training, but some also cited other trainings that might improve children's knowledge and skills about housework, cooking, child and elderly care, as well as basic numeracy and literacy, communication and personal hygiene (see Table 2).

Differences in attitudes by sub-groups: There were variations in attitudes about child domestic work based on age, gender and whether the participant had been a host household.

Higher percentages of non-host households raised overall negative net effect of child domestic work and difficult and harsh work environments while host households were more likely to express that child domestic workers should have no weekly holidays compared to respective counterparts (see Table 2). The attitudes of older (≥30 year), female participants, and non-host households were more inclined to believe that caring responsibilities and running errands should be assigned to child domestic workers, compared to younger and male participants. Host households were more likely to believe that assisting with the family business was an acceptable task compared to non-host households.

When asked about options for improving children's future lives and livelihoods, younger participants were more likely to suggest non-domestic skills, such as communication, personal hygiene and basic literacy. Younger participants and host households were also more likely to endorse higher pay for child domestic workers.

3.2. Rights of households over child domestic workers

When asked about various rights of the host household, approximately half of participants (52.8 %) reported that hosts have a right to ask the child to work at any time they need them. Only a small percentage (approximately 20 %) said that it was acceptable to compensate workers with only food and accommodation, while individuals who identified as employers were more likely to believe that cash payments were necessary. When asked about physical punishment for mistakes, approximately 14 % of participants said it was acceptable.

Perceptions of host households' responsibilities towards child domestic workers: Table 3 shows that most participants favour child domestic workers attending training courses (93 %), school (87 %), having regular daily breaks and day-offs (99 %). While their self-observations were generous, they believed their community was much less magnanimous, declining to 59 %, 56 %, and 78 % respectively. Similarly, participants reported they would agree that child domestic workers' health and safety should be treated the same as their own children (98 % vs 84 %). Importantly, participants were more likely to say that they endorse children having regular communication with their family (98 %) versus their community's opinion (89 %). They perceived less of a difference between their own beliefs and general public opinion when asked an employer's responsibilities related to the workload, such as instructing young workers about their tasks and whether youth should be paid.

3.3. Factors associated with perceptions of a household's responsibilities towards child domestic workers

Table 4 provides an overview community perceptions on household responsibilities towards child domestic workers. Findings show that being female, of an older age, having a higher education with experience being a host household are less supportive of child domestic workers joining schools. Surprisingly, being older, having a higher income, having a higher education and reporting awareness of child domestic workers being badly treated were less supportive of the community allowing child domestic workers engaging in educational activities, having regular rest times and taking care of child domestic worker's safety and well-being.

Table 3
Perceived differences between participant perceptions and community perceptions on household (employer) responsibilities towards child domestic workers.

Household's responsibilities towards child domestic workers	Do you agree?	Does the community agree?[a]
Allow to attend training courses	92.7 % (994)	59.4 % (637)
Permit to attend school	87.3 % (936)	56.3 % (603)
Have regular daily breaks and days off	98.6 % (1057)	77.7 % (833)
Employer pays for medical care	99.2 % (1063)	88.9 % (953)
Ensure safety and health equal to their own children	98.0 % (1051)	84.0 % (901)
Support regular contact with biological family	97.9 % (1050)	88.8 % (952)
It is important to have clear work agreements	94.2 % (1010)	86.6 % (928)
Instruct how to do tasks	99.3 % (1064)	92.8 % (995)
Pay youth for their work	99.4 % (1066)	97.8 % (1048)

[a] Perceptions about community opinions that were offered by the participants. Neutral and don't know responses were omitted. Only "mostly agree" responses are presneted in the table.

4. Discussion

This study is among the first to examine general public views on common informal domestic work arrangements and about the relationship between households and children charged with domestic work in their home. Although this survey did not set out to assess prevalence, findings suggest that child domestic work is common in these urban and peri-urban areas. Approximately 84 % of participants knew at least one household (30 %) with child domestic workers and over half (54 %) knew three or more such households which mostly are their relatives or neighbours. While many respondents acknowledged the existence of child domestic work, the majority support improved and safer work conditions (such as education access, fair work hours, and holidays).

The previous survey in Myanmar indicated strong public endorsement for decent work hours, regular and special holidays for domestic workers (ILO, 2019). However, this study found that individuals report themselves having more generous beliefs about what young people should receive in a host household, e.g., safe, supportive conditions, reasonable hours and participation in education, compared to their neighbours' attitudes. While this difference likely reflects a social desirability bias, it simultaneously suggests individuals do in fact understand what *should* comprise correct, fair ways to treat children in domestic work. Further, the consistency of their relatively negative impressions of community views suggests that the harsher community attitudes may more accurately reflect general public views on the position, roles and rights of child domestic workers. In a positive sense, participants' awareness of what is correct treatment might offer some promise for future interventions to change behaviours, if most people do understand, to a certain extent, what is fair for children.

In addition, this study identified varying attitudes based on employer status. Significantly higher proportions of employers endorsed the use of child domestic work, acknowledging an overall positive effect and safe and acceptable nature of child domestic work. At the same time, most

Table 4
Factors associated with community perceptions on household responsibilities towards child domestic workers.

VARIABLES	COMMUNITY MOSTLY AGREES			
	To allow CDW to join training courses (aOR)	To allow CDW to go to schools (aOR)	To allow CDW to have regular daily breaks/day-offs (aOR)	To take care of safety and well-being of CDW (aOR)
Age groups				
18–29 year	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
30–59 year	0.90	**0.65**[a]	**0.40**[a]	1.13
Gender				
Male	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Female	**0.70****	**0.63**[a]	0.74	0.65
Education group				
Secondary and below	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Post-secondary	0.89	**0.70****	1.10	**0.49****
Monastery/ vocational/KG	1.56	1.86	2.87	
Last month household income				
Above 1,300,000 MMK (618$)	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Below 5 L (238$)	0.88	1.62	0.58	0.95
500,001–850,000 (US$ 238-$404)	0.85	1.01	**0.58****	0.81
850,001–1,300,000 (US$404-$618)	1.02	1.15	0.71	1.20
Occupation categories				
Salaried	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Self-employed	0.75*	1.12	1.32	0.52*
Casual labour	0.64	1.54	0.62	**0.06**[a]
Students	0.85	1.58	0.52	0.70
Retired/dependent	0.89	0.90	1.24	0.60
Job seeker/ unemployed	1.02	1.64	1.30	
Do you know anyone who has ever been a child domestic helper for an income?				
No	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Yes	0.78	0.77	**0.45**[a]	0.69
Do you know anyone who has ever arranged to connect or find a job for a you?				
No	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Yes	1.03	0.87	1.28	1.09
Have you ever had help from a young person (under 18 years) living in your home?				
No	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Yes	0.70	**0.57****	0.68	2.20
When thinking about domestic workers and their future, do you think it is:				
An overall positive net effect	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
An overall negative net effect	0.76*	0.82	0.72	1.08
No impact at all	1.00	0.95	1.01	2.51*
Can you think of any household who treat their child domestic workers well?				
No	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Yes	1.06	1.17	1.11	0.76
Do you personally know any household whose child domestic workers are badly treated?				
No	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Yes	0.85	1.00	**0.61****	**0.47****

CDW – child domestic worker

[a] $p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$, MMK are converted to USD per https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=300000&From=MMK&To=USD.

were reluctant to agree to providing weekly days off. This finding is similar to employers' attitudes in other studies that found fewer employers in favour of decent work conditions, labour inspections and protections compared to the general public and to domestic workers themselves (ILO, 2019; ILO & UN Women, 2019) despite employers' self-reported provision of generous work benefits to domestic workers (ILO, 2015). These differences may be related to the social norms held by employers, as the study found that employers were less likely than non-employers to believe that others permit child domestic workers to join training courses or attend school. These perceptions reflect findings from UNICEF's survey on caregivers' attitudes towards child discipline in which parents or caregivers who used violent punishment were more likely to think that others practice the same or do not condemn such practice (UNICEF, 2017).

Furthermore, these findings shed light on the social contract for child domestic workers at community level, which generally comprises implicit agreements between multiple parties. Social contracts are broadly understood as an agreement to collectively enforced social arrangements and set an implicit standard to which everyone is supposed to freely agree (D'agostino, thrasher, & gaus, 2011). However, in reality, for child domestic work, power differentials by age, gender, socio-economic divisions (i.e., intersectionality) between children and host households undermine children's (and arguably their birth family's) decision-making and the possibility of informed and free consent to their arrangements (Baber, 2007; Jensen, 2014). The host household side understands they will have help with household tasks, usually in exchange for minimal or no cash payments (Blagbrough, 2021; Jensen, 2014). From the child's or adolescent's side, studies suggest that young people often enter these situations with very few expectations; they simply follow the adults' (parent, broker, employer) direction (Blagbrough, 2021; Jensen, 2014).

Additionally, for parents or guardians, they often believe that an advantage of child domestic work (especially for girls) is gaining domestic skills that will remove them from more difficult work (e.g., farming) and improve their marital prospects and future employment options (e.g., migration for higher paid domestic work) (Blagbrough, 2021). Further, children are often promised they can attend school while working, but many report that this never happens (Blagbrough, 2021). An additional unspoken contract often occurs between parents or guardians and the labour intermediary (person who arranges the placement), which frequently focuses primarily on fees, commonly leaving out the 'contractual' obligations of the *employer* to the child, such as fair work hours, tasks, time off, health and other care needs (Flores-Oebanda, 2006; Thi, A. M., Zimmerman, C., & Ranganathan, M., 2025). Because these obligations are generally very ambiguous agreements, they are substantially driven by the dominant social norms and intersectional inequalities (age, rural, often ethnic minority, poor) that characterise the disadvantages found among children in domestic work.

Study participants indicated that they believe child domestic workers should be treated like their own children or family members, which aligns with prior research from other contexts (Blagbrough, 2021; ILO, 2015). However, while this is what people *say* that they believe, in reality, these beliefs are rarely explicit in negotiations for their placement, and agreements with households seldom reflect any *mutual* obligations for each parties' interests. Emerging findings from a study with those who broker the child domestic worker placement arrangements (labour intermediaries) indicate that children seldom have a voice when determining work agreements, nor are they often informed in advance about their specific responsibilities or benefits–or employer obligations to them (Thi, A. M., Zimmerman, C., & Ranganathan, M., 2025).

Whatever the reality, the social norms that drive these work-care arrangements seem to be shaped by demographics and educational backgrounds, personal experiences and social interactions that influence community and individual interpretations (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011; Park, 2000). We found that certain groups were more likely to express community disapproval of child domestic workers' participation in education or training, their entitlement to daily rest times and weekly holidays, and the importance of ensuring their safety and well-being. Given the younger participants were more supportive about fair work conditions, it is possible that Myanmar's younger generation may be more receptive to messages about good treatment of children in domestic work (Slettli VK, 2017). For example, some studies of approaches that draw on 'positive deviance' have had positive effects in addressing certain health and social problems, such as childhood malnutrition (Vietnam), and school dropouts (Argentina) (Marsh et al., 2004; Wolfer

TA, 2019). In some contexts, certain individuals can serve as role models, inspiring and influencing peers towards the desired change. Although evidence regularly suggests the need for social contracts that create mutual agreements about safe and decent working environments, and fair treatment for child domestic worker (Blagbrough, 2021; ILO, 2017), there remains relatively few strategies to shift these public but silent agreements (Kyegombe et al., 2021).

4.1. Implications for interventions

There is little doubt that the best solution to reduce the harm of child domestic work is to avoid having children working at all and to ensure they are living in a loving, safe family home. However, for most families, sending children to be domestic helpers (whether with extended family or non-family members) is a common, and often useful, poverty alleviation strategy (Yunus, 2020). Thus, until low-income settings have good education and employment options for all children, child domestic work will remain a popular alternative. Moreover, analysis of data on the psychosocial health of child domestic workers in the Philippines compared to India and new findings from Liberia and Nigeria shows that some situations can even be beneficial for youth, enabling them to go to school, eat healthier food and socialise with peers (Gamlin et al., 2015; Keaveney et al., 2024a, Keaveney et al., 2024b).

This study has several implications for intervention options for youth in child domestic work. Findings on adult participants' self-reported beliefs versus their perceptions of their community's beliefs suggest the important difference between injunctive norms (desirable/expected behaviours) and descriptive norms (actual behaviours). Studies on injunctive norms suggest that interventions that draw on desired behaviours can have meaningful results, for example, improving patients' health outcomes by changing healthcare workers behaviours (Cotterill et al., 2020). However, in many behaviour change studies, terms of agreement are often made explicit. Among the many challenges with trying to tackle a 'social contract' for child domestic work is that no one makes the terms mutual or the conditions and responsibilities explicit. In general, the responsibilities and tasks of the child are imposed by the host, whereas there are no advocates (or oversight) for the hosts' obligations to the child.

Although labour intermediaries arrange the placement, few ever advocate on behalf of the child's rights, privileges or care needs (ILO, 2017). Intermediaries may comprise an important resource to move from implicit social contract to make terms and conditions explicit, ensuring the child and parents know and agree to the terms (Yunus, 2020). Despite the exploitative actions of labour intermediaries (Busza et al., 2023; Yunus, 2020), some studies identified a supportive role of brokers, who assist workers to find decent work opportunities and protect young workers (Erulkar & Hailu, 2024b; Keaveney et al., 2024a). The potential protection offered by intermediaries suggests the need to explore the incentives, motivations and recruitment practices of intermediaries and how they might either safeguard or disadvantage workers and their work conditions. Moreover, in many contexts where government-led interventions are weak, society-led initiatives such as targeting to brokers and community members such as the "Safe Arrival" project in Ethiopia that can mobilize the social power of various agents to address safety and security concerns of young migrant workers upon arrival into cities (Erulkar & Hailu, 2024a, 2024b). Meanwhile, local bylaws were developed in Tanzania by working with community members, local authority and employers resulting in explicit work agreements, better work conditions and positive attitudes towards child domestic work (Emberson et al., 2020).

Given the findings on the perceived generational and gender differences in what participants view as correct behaviour, mobilizing young people and male advocates to influence their peers, parents and neighbouring communities might comprise a useful avenue to promote more child-centred social contracts for the future (Blagbrough, 2020; The Freedom Fund, 2019). Shifting towards a more child-centred social contract will benefit from changes in societal norms, especially around socio-economic inequalities and what people, especially the next generation of soon-to-be employers, believe are acceptable ways to treat children in these circumstances. Widely expressed attitudes about the roles and responsibilities of host households towards children in their charge may increase pressure on host families to treat these youth as youth versus mainly as workers (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011; Park, 2000). For instance, a study in Dhaka, Bangladesh showed that employer groups actively advocated for other employers to support child domestic workers' participation in educational activities outside the households (Black, 2002; Flores-Oebanda, 2006).

Nevertheless, the prospect of shifting the social contract solely by changing public attitudes without addressing social and environmental constraints, and with scarce resources will prove difficult (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011; LSHTM, 2023). To date, Myanmar, like other low-income countries, allocates a very limited budget for education and skills training opportunities even for youth who are *not* working (Blagbrough, 2020; LSHTM, 2022; Thorsen, 2012). Our study findings also strongly suggest that activities for working youth must be scheduled to times when youth can join–and youth will need outside advocates to ensure they have adequate time to study and/or socialise.

4.2. Strengths and limitations

To our knowledge, this is the first population-based survey to explore the attitudes and normative beliefs that the urban population in Myanmar hold towards child domestic work. The study sample is representative of the targeted urban population as per the 2014 national census with a margin of error of 3 % and a confidence level of 95 %. However, it is worth noting the limitations of the current study. With a lack of internationally validated measurement tools for child domestic work-related attitudes, the research team conceived their own survey questions guided by the earlier formative research with employers and literature review. Because these questionnaires were not tested and validated in other contexts, findings may not be generalisable to other cross-cultural settings given the influence of socio-cultural differences on people's behaviours (Park, 2000).

Perceived norms from this study offer information about collective norms about host families' behaviour and treatment to child domestic workers in the urban context in Myanmar. However, the survey did not identify opinions of reference groups who influence people or people seek social guidance for unspoken rules when dealing with child domestic workers (Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change., 2019) that is important in measuring social norms. Further research to detect important reference groups and their impact on individual attitudes and behaviours are necessary. In addition, we recognise that perceived norms do not always reflect actual prevalence of behaviours and possibility of other influential intersecting norms that the study failed to explore (Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change, 2019). Furthermore, taking self-reported responses may overreport socially desirable individual attitudes and behaviours (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011; Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change, 2019).

5. Conclusion

This study attempts to decipher the community-based social contract that underpins the conditions of child domestic work by examining attitudes of the public. Because the general public *do* seem to know what is better and worse for a child in domestic work, our findings suggest this is an opportunity to promote deeper acceptance of these attitudes and to stigmatise households who impose conditions that lead to poor child development. Importantly, current placements rely on implicit agreements, when there is a need to move beyond existing social contracts (usually unspoken) and make child-centred terms and conditions explicit in every placement. While in most child labour cases, it is not desirable for children to be working or living apart from their families,

until poverty can be alleviated for many resource-poor families and there is sufficient, high-quality rural education, we need to ensure that in whatever situation they are in, children are protected and can thrive.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Aye Myat Thi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Cathy Zimmerman:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Meghna Ranganathan:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Ethical approval and informed consent statements

We secured formal ethical clearance from both Institute Review Boards of Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM). We obtained verbal informed consent by reading descriptions of the study and study implications. The interviewers proceeded with the interviews only when participants provided verbal approval. Participants were reminded of the confidentiality of the interview, that they could decline to answer any of the questions they did not want to answer, and that they can stop the interview at any time. Participants were asked permission to record the interviews for quality improvement purposes.

Data availability statement

The data is not publicly accessible, but can be obtained upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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