



CHAPTER 10

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Child Domestic Workers in Ethiopia

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Background

Child domestic work, the most common form of child labor globally, is considered a kind of modern-day slavery (Black 2002; UNICEF 1999). There are an estimated 17.2 million child domestic workers in the world, and the vast majority are girls (ILO 2012). Domestic work keeps children out of school, confined to the home, socially isolated, and burdened with excessive domestic duties (Black 2002). Their movements and how they spend their time are strictly controlled by their employers. Younger domestic workers are often preferred by employers since they are easier to control and manipulate, and they demand little or no pay (HRW 2006).

Domestic work is done by many girls in Ethiopia, especially those who migrate from rural to urban areas. In a study of nearly ten thousand young people in six regions, 37 percent of working urban girls were found to be engaged in domestic work (Erulkar et al. 2010) that is characterized

by extremely low pay or no pay at all, and in which the working hours and work burdens make the occupation exploitive in many cases. The same study found that among adolescent women who were rural-to-urban migrants, 67 percent entered the world of work as domestic workers. A study in Addis Ababa found that domestic workers work an average of sixty-four hours per week for a mean monthly wage of USD 6 per month (Erulkar and Mekbib 2007). A significant number of former domestic workers, the vast majority of whom are female, report being sexually abused in the context of work. Furthermore, emerging studies indicate that domestic workers are at significantly higher risk of nonconsensual sex compared to their counterparts who are not engaged in domestic work (Erulkar and Federe 2009). In addition, migrant girls who are new to the city frequently find positions as domestic workers through job-placement brokers who act as go-betweens and place prospective workers in families seeking house help. Recent research among brokers in Ethiopia found that they can be both supportive of newly migrating girls and also exploitive. A number of brokers admitted to sexually abusing migrant girls before placing them in homes as domestic workers (Erulkar 2020).

Under the Labor Law in Ethiopia, children under the age of fifteen are prohibited from working and those aged fifteen to seventeen are considered young workers. They may work a maximum of seven hours per day and are prohibited from working before 6:00 a.m. and after 10:00 p.m. They may not work on rest days or public holidays and are prohibited from specified dangerous forms of work, such as mining and working in quarries, electric power plants, or sewers and tunnels (Federal Negarit Gazette of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2019). Domestic work, however, is not governed by the Labor Law but by the 1960 Ethiopia Civil Code. The Civil Code gives domestic workers relatively little protection and allows their work conditions to be regulated “by the conscience of the employers” (Gebremedhin 2016: 41). In addition, Ethiopia has not ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) 2011 Domestic Workers Convention No. 189, which includes minimum labor standards for these workers.

The first case of COVID-19 was identified in Ethiopia in mid-March 2020. By the end of July 2020, Ethiopia was home to over fifteen thousand cases, with the vast majority located in the country’s capital city, Addis Ababa (Worldometer 2020). In early April, the Ethiopian government declared a State of Emergency that included the closure of schools, the

banning of large gatherings and sports events, a reduction in the allowable number of passengers on public transport, and the prohibition of reducing the workforce or the termination of workers who were governed by the Labor Law, among others (Embassy of the FDRE, UK 2020).

The Biruh Tesfa for All Program for Marginalized Girls in Ethiopia

Biruh Tesfa for All is a program that operates for extremely marginalized and disadvantaged girls in poor urban areas of Ethiopia. Its design was based on the results of research conducted in very poor and slum areas (Erulkar et al. 2006; Erulkar and Mekbib 2007). The program addresses life skills and the deficits in the lives of the most marginalized girls, including the lack of access to education. It provides safe spaces for these girls, offers them adult mentors, and fosters friendship networks. Through the program, adult female mentors are recruited from low-income project communities and trained to facilitate sessions on basic education and life skills. Following training, mentors recruit girls for this program by going house-to-house in their neighborhoods to identify ten- to nineteen-year-old girls who are out of school. By applying the recruitment criterion of targeting female adolescents who are out of school, the project captures many girls who are in domestic servitude, as well as girls with disabilities. House-to-house recruitment methods also allow mentors to negotiate girls' involvement in the program, especially with gatekeepers, such as employers of domestic workers, who may resist their taking part. Once recruited into groups, girls meet in local facilities, including government schools after hours, that serve as safe spaces. Where needed, facilities are improved and renovated to be accessible to girls with disabilities. Once in safe space groups, girls receive informal education, learn life skills, and are given referrals for other services. Previous evaluations have found that the program is associated with significant improvements in friendship networks, knowledge of HIV and AIDS, the use of HIV-related and other health services, and improved literacy and numeracy (Erulkar and Medhin 2017; Erulkar et al. 2013; Temin and Heck 2020). From 2006 to 2016, the program reached over seventy-five thousand child domestic workers, rural-to-urban migrants, and girls with disabilities in many urban centers of Ethiopia (Erulkar and Medhin 2017).

Founded in 2018, Biruh Tesfa for All works as a follow-on to the earlier Biruh Tesfa project, with emphasis on achieving measurable improvements in literacy and numeracy and increased focus on inclusive education



Figure 10.1. A mentor teaches girls in Addis Ababa about hygiene.
Photo: Zeleman Productions.

that is high quality, effective, and sustainable. Previous Biruh Tesfa projects used community-based mentors exclusively. However, Biruh Tesfa for All engaged a mix of lay mentors and recent graduates of teacher training colleges in order to ensure that literacy and numeracy goals for girls in the project were met. The project now includes a mix of teachers and mentors, in about a one-to-four ratio. In addition, the project includes focused accommodation of girls with disabilities by providing assistive aids and inclusive teaching for girls with special needs. Based on registration data, half of all Biruh Tesfa for All participants have never been to school, two-thirds were migrants to the area, and one-quarter self-identified as child domestic workers who, on average, reported doing seventy-eight hours of domestic work per week. In February 2020, new safe space girls' groups had recently started meeting in three project cities in Ethiopia—Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, and Shashamene. The following month, in March 2020, the groups were suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures in Ethiopia. As a result of this, project researchers designed a descriptive, qualitative study to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child domestic workers in the program.

Methods

This is a qualitative study that collected information from project beneficiaries and mentors in the Biruh Tesfa for All program. In-depth interviews with beneficiaries and mentors took place over the telephone to avoid face-to-face contact in order to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Interviews took place with respondents in all three project sites in Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, and Shashamene. In all, twenty-four in-depth interviews divided equally among the sites (eight in each) and between beneficiaries and mentors were undertaken. While Biruh Tesfa for All beneficiaries are aged from ten to nineteen, we interviewed only girls in the fifteen-to-nineteen age range. We excluded those aged ten to fourteen because of the ethical issues involved in interviewing populations who are very young and who are already extremely vulnerable, such as child domestic workers. In our experience, ethical review committees do not approve of interviewing vulnerable adolescent children.

We developed a discussion guide for the interviews. Topics included asking respondents to describe their communities; to indicate their knowledge of COVID-19; to discuss any preventative measures or changes in behavior as a result of the pandemic; and to talk about the impact of the pandemic on themselves, their communities, other girls in the program, or other girls like them generally. We also solicited suggestions for improvements to the program and on how to support beneficiaries and mentors in the context of the pandemic.

Selection for interviews was meant to be somewhat representative of beneficiaries and mentors in the program and to reflect their overall profile, based on registration data reflecting their age, migration, and (dis)ability status. Research staff for this study analyzed the demographic profile of beneficiaries and mentors using registration data for the project. Site-based program officers were given guidance on selecting respondents based on different profiles including age, education, migration, and (dis)ability. They were instructed not to select the best-performing beneficiaries or mentors and not to contact respondents themselves, in case their involvement led to biased responses during the interviews.

Selected respondents were contacted by female research staff by telephone to request the interview. The initial call was used to explain the research, obtain informed consent or assent, and obtain permission to tape-record the telephone interview. We obtained informed consent from

young women who were eighteen or nineteen and underage girls who were emancipated minors (those living away from parents or guardians). Among underage girls living with their parents or guardians, we obtained informed consent from the parent or guardian and assent from the respondent. On the day of the scheduled interview, the respondent was asked if she had any additional questions about the interview or tape recording. If needed, the interviewer readministered informed consent or assent over the phone, certifying the respondent's verbal consent to be interviewed with the interviewer's own signature. The interviewer asked the respondent to locate a quiet place for the interview, out of earshot of household members and away from other background noise. The interview itself took between forty-five and sixty minutes.

During the call, the interviewer took handwritten notes that were later fleshed out using the tape recording, thus allowing the documentation of verbatim quotes. While conversations were in Amharic, all interview notes and documented responses were transcribed into English. Transcripts were analyzed to identify themes and patterns that emerged from the data, with illustrative quotations being used to highlight overarching themes. When direct quotations are used, the respondent category and location are cited; all names used are pseudonyms. Tape recordings were erased following completion of the transcription. Following the institution's policy on the storage of data, interview transcriptions will be retained on password-protected computers for five years, accessible to only a small number of study staff. The research received review and approval by the institution's ethical review board.

Results

Knowledge and Practice Related to COVID-19

The Biruh Tesfa for All program is implemented in very poor urban slum areas. When asked to describe their communities, mentors and girls alike described living conditions as crowded and unhygienic, with housing constructed with impermanent material. At the same time, many respondents remarked on the mutual support and cohesion of residents in these areas.

It's an overly crowded neighborhood. People are mostly daily laborers here. They make their income day by day. Homes are usually mud houses. About fifty people live in a single compound here. It's a very challenging area to live here, especially for your health. But I love that people think of each other here. People are

there for you in good and bad times. We are always there for one another. I don't like that people are not very clean here. I wish my community was more sanitary and wish people disposed of trash properly. (Mahlet, mentor, Addis Ababa)

Both mentors and girls alike reported significant levels of knowledge about COVID-19 and expressed concern about protecting themselves from the virus. All respondents mentioned the importance of wearing a mask, frequent handwashing and sanitizing, physical distancing, and avoiding crowded places. Respondents mentioned learning about COVID-19 mainly from media sources—radio and television—but also mentioned learning from other community members, and from their mentors and social media, although this was, however, also described as an unreliable source of information.

All respondents mentioned taking measures proactively to protect themselves, to the greatest extent possible. Given their economic circumstances, many respondents were forced to continue working, even if it put them at risk. Girls and mentors reported being the most afraid of contracting COVID-19 when on public transport or in a crowded market. Respondents noted that people who are poor face far more challenges regarding protecting themselves from COVID-19 than do those who are relatively better off, because they need to go on working.

Rich people have locked their doors and stay at home. They have everything they need. However, poor people don't have basic needs. The poor have to work. They are vulnerable to the virus. If poor people decide not to go out from home, how can they live? They have to leave the home. (Frehiwott, beneficiary, Bahir Dar)

For Fatuma, a mentor in Shashamene, “People are so poor they don't even have water to wash their hands, let alone soap. People are aware of the virus, but they cannot protect themselves from it. The reason for it is economic[s].”

The crowdedness of living conditions made prevention of COVID-19 extremely difficult. In particular, social distancing was said to be impossible because of the living conditions in these low-income communities. As Helen, a mentor in Addis Ababa, put it,

In our culture, social distancing is very hard, but I believe that to stop this virus, social distancing is very important. Regularly washing our hands is very important as well, we all live very close to one another so we should all wash our hands constantly. Most people earn a living by renting rooms in their homes. Let alone in one compound, many of us live together in one house. Our homes are extremely overcrowded so keeping our distance is nearly impossible.

While all respondents said that they themselves practiced precautionary measures against the virus, there was variation in opinions about whether their communities were practicing prevention adequately. To some extent, respondents from Addis Ababa described more adherence to prevention guidelines than respondents from the other two cities. This is probably because most COVID-19 cases are found in the nation's capital. Some felt that community members were adhering to protective guidelines, while others felt that members of their communities did not take prevention seriously.

Most people make fun of you when you wear a mask. They make you feel guilty about protecting yourself. They catcall and harass people for protecting themselves . . . To tell you the truth many people don't even wear masks . . . They only wash their hands when they eat. We shouldn't eat together anymore like we used to but people still eat together. People don't protect themselves here because they believe the virus is a myth. They don't think God would ever do this to Ethiopia. Even if it's here, it won't kill us. That is what people believe. (Abeba, mentor, Bahir Dar)

There is no prevention here. A lot [of] people aren't protecting themselves; I wouldn't be surprised if it spread here. A lot of people neglect the severity of the virus because they think the virus is a scam. They take the issue to religion and think that God won't let them be infected. (Aysha, beneficiary, Shashamene)

Some respondents described what has become known as COVID fatigue, since members of their communities relaxed precautionary measures as the pandemic went on. Abaynesh, a beneficiary in Bahir Dar, said,

At the beginning when the virus came up, people were somehow worried, but not anymore. People have now forgotten the virus and consider that it no longer exists . . . Very few people protect themselves from the virus or consider [protection] important . . . They even say that the virus does not exist.

Impact of COVID-19 on Child Domestic Workers

All girls and mentors described the economic impact of the pandemic on their personal situations. Many lost their jobs or had their incomes reduced substantially. Girls who relied on petty trade saw a dramatic decline in their business and income. Girls who had recently migrated from rural areas were described as being particularly vulnerable to the economic downturn brought about by the pandemic. Being new to the city, they were unaccustomed to life there, were socially isolated, and lacked safety nets, family, and other sources of social support. As Emebet, a mentor in Addis Ababa, put it,

Whatever the age, migrant girls will be economically challenged. They do not have a support system in the city most of the time, and they will have a hard time to have even one meal a day. Before Corona, many of them would stand outside of hotels and get leftovers from the hotel, but now the hotels are out of business and many are closed, and they might even be scared to eat leftovers now because of the virus.

Many girls in domestic work were extremely hard hit. Most domestic workers in the *Biruh Tesfa for All* program are recent migrants living away from parents and working for other low-income families in the project area. Most are live-in domestic workers who are provided with accommodation or shelter, as well as food, as part of their employment. Given that housing in such areas is generally very modest and limited, accommodation often amounts to a mattress in a corner of the living room or on the kitchen floor. As such, girls housed by their employers who lose their jobs are without accommodation and other sources of support.

During the pandemic, many residents in low-income areas lost their jobs or remained at home. As a result, their domestic workers were also let go, either because their employers could not afford to pay them or because household members remained homebound and were therefore able to assume domestic duties in the home. In addition, domestic workers were dismissed because they were perceived to increase the risk of contracting COVID-19.

Kidist, mentor, Bahir Dar, explained,

Let me tell you about a girl that comes here to wash clothes. I asked her recently why she stopped her other job and she said they fired her because they got scared that she'd bring the virus. The girl also said her former employer has all her kids in the house and out of school now, so they can help her with the household chores. The girls would rather stay unpaid and in the same home because they know no one will hire during this time . . . By the way, the employers of these girls are not well off or rich people. They are just desperate people who need someone to look after their children because they have to work as well. They pay them very low wages. So now when financial constraints arise because of Corona, I have no doubt in my mind that these employers will have to let the girls go.

According to Helen, a mentor in Addis Ababa,

I saw another girl a while back and she told me that two girls that she knows have been fired because the employers said they can't afford to pay them anymore. The majority of the girls we have [in the program] are maids. I saw one girl as well and she looked so bad. She looked so dirty; her hair was a mess. She looked really bad. You know, when the employers are not doing well, they take

it out on the girls. This girl I am telling you about looked so bad. You could tell she was out of it. She looked hungry as well.

For Genet, a beneficiary in Shashamene,

A lot of us have been fired because people don't want to risk getting the virus from us, so I am sure girls are struggling. For instance, in the house where I used to work, none of them are working anymore so they fired me. I have been trying to find employment elsewhere and I haven't been able to find anything. I sent my sister back to our family [in the rural area] because I didn't want her to go hungry here with me. I'm contemplating going back myself because I can't pay rent anymore.

Because most domestic workers rely on their employers for a place to live, many prefer to endure any abuse rather than lose their accommodation during the pandemic. Some of the girls said that they would prefer to stay at work even if they were not paid, while mentors hoped that girls could withstand abuse and not being paid so that they could remain housed during the pandemic.

Yordanos, a mentor in Addis Ababa, said,

When life stresses the employers, they take it out on the girls. These girls don't have the time or resources to protect themselves from this virus . . . When the employers let the girls go, because they can't afford to pay them anymore, girls head to the streets . . . So, even when they're being treated badly and not getting paid, they take the abuse and stay with their employers. Because of the current environment, these girls stay even when they're being starved, beaten and abused.

Among domestic workers who retained their jobs, many reportedly had to risk contracting COVID-19 rather than members of the household doing so. Girls were reportedly sometimes not given the means to protect themselves, such as masks or soap. In addition, while domestic workers were previously confined to the household, during the pandemic they were sent out to do errands in the community and risk infection themselves.

We learned from Rahel, a mentor in Bahir Dar, that

employers will definitely not get their maids masks. They will probably tell them to wear a scarf but will not get them the protective equipment at all. People think of domestic workers as less than human. Employers only think of themselves. So, I think domestic workers will be the ones who get the virus first because of the lack of concern for their safety from their employers.

And Bayssa, a mentor in Shashamene, said,

I noticed how even my neighbors started sending just the domestic worker out to run all the errands and would keep themselves and their kids indoors. Little did they know that if the girl is infected, they'll catch the virus too. Instead of doing that, employers should take equal care of their workers, they should educate [them] and let the girls know about ways they can protect themselves from the virus.

Some girls returned to their rural areas of their own volition or at the request of their parents when news of the pandemic initially spread. Many girls reportedly traveled home for *Fasika* (Easter) in April and never returned. Some of the domestic workers who were dismissed had no choice but to return to their rural areas. Some dreaded having to go back because they were accustomed to life in the city. Gete, a beneficiary in Shashamene, exclaimed,

I don't want to go back to my hometown. I don't want to drink river water after drinking tap water. The people I used to work for were really nice, but we couldn't make it work and I had to leave. It hurt me psychologically.

The rates of COVID-19 infection are higher in urban areas of Ethiopia. Many mentors claimed that parents in the rural areas might not welcome back their daughters, for fear that they would bring the virus with them. Some explained that girls who return to the rural areas during the pandemic will be ostracized by society because of the transmission risk that people believe an urban resident represents. Many mentors also mentioned the risk of girls being forced to marry if they returned to rural areas.

Abebe, a mentor in Bahir Dar, expressed her concern, saying,

Going back to their families will be difficult because most rural people think the virus is in the city so they will not accept them if they go back. They will think they brought the illness with them. I think this will damage their mental health. The rural people will isolate these girls.

Mahlet, a mentor in Addis Ababa, said,

So, I was talking to one of the girls before the session started and she told me that she's from Amhara region . . . I asked her why she came here, and she told me she fled an arranged marriage. She said she used to beg when she first got to Addis Ababa and now she washes clothes for half the day and begs for the other half. So now, if this girl has to go back to her hometown, there is no question that she will be married off by her family.

Mentors presumed that, if they are not forced to marry, many of the girls who relocated to the rural areas will return to cities once the pandemic is over.

The suspension of the *Biruh Tesfa for All girls'* groups highlighted how critical the safe space gatherings were in the lives of domestic workers, recent migrants, and other marginalized girls. Virtually all the girls interviewed expressed the desire to resume attending the girls' groups. Many spoke of the program allowing them to make friends, have recreation time, and have a break from the grueling nature of their work. Many said that, in addition to building much-needed skills, the project gave them hope. For Emebet, a mentor in Addis Ababa,

During our time together, I noticed they [beneficiaries] would come to the safe spaces early and sit and play together before us mentors arrived. They would do each other's hair, they would speak together in their language, they would exchange information about how their employers treat them and the kind of homes they are in. I remember seeing the sadness in their eyes when it was time to go home. Now, this escape is gone, and their employers are bitter and anxious during this time. So, just imagine how they must be feeling right now.

Conclusion

Child domestic workers are among the most marginalized and disadvantaged girls and young women in Ethiopia and globally. This large but overlooked group of girls is generally made up of recent migrants from rural areas, on their own with little in the way of support networks, and with low levels of education or no education whatsoever. In many Ethiopian settings, they are reliant on employers for virtually all their basic needs, including food and shelter, in addition to their meagre incomes. The conditions of their work in some households are exploitive, abusive, and tantamount to modern slavery, yet they enjoy few protections under existing laws.

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected communities globally, especially those that are most disadvantaged. In Ethiopia, girls in domestic work are already at risk and vulnerable in many different ways that have only been amplified by the pandemic. Girls and young women who have managed to retain their jobs as domestic workers are frequently pushed to the front lines of the pandemic, forced to circulate in densely populated communities as they run essential household errands like buying food, while their employers remain confined to the home.

Many domestic workers described in this study have lost their jobs in the context of the pandemic, resulting in an instantaneous loss of income as well as of a place to live. Finding another job during the pandemic is ex-

ceedingly difficult. Some may be welcomed back by their families in rural areas and prefer to remain there during the pandemic, away from urban epicenters. Others risk an arranged, forced marriage if they return, or face being stigmatized and perceived as bringing the virus to their rural communities. Those who choose to stay in the city may end up living on the street or in other unsafe conditions. Previous research has suggested that domestic work is a slippery slope and feeder occupation to commercial sex work (or commercial sexual exploitation) (Population Council 2018). Although such cases were not reported in this study, transitioning to commercial sexual exploitation may be one of the survival strategies such girls resort to at this time.

Prevention and support programs for child domestic workers are critical, but remain small-scale and scattered, unlikely to reach the millions of marginalized girls who are absorbed into domestic work. The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on girls and young women in domestic work underscore the importance of targeted, evidence-based programs for special categories of marginalized girls who are not easily reached by mainstream programs. *Biruh Tesfa for All* is an example of an evidence-based, large-scale initiative that addresses the needs and realities of such girls. The program is designed to build girls' protective assets, such as friendship and mentoring networks; access to entitlements such as health and social services; communication skills; basic literacy and numeracy; financial literacy and life skills; and to address barriers to participation by engaging employers and other gatekeepers. Just as importantly, beneficiaries and mentors from this study described such programs as giving child domestic workers hope and a positive outlook for a better future.

Since the suspension of *Biruh Tesfa for All* safe space groups, the program is now reengaging with beneficiaries. Beneficiary girls initially took part in remote learning sessions for several months. During this time, beneficiaries were provided with workbooks and homework assignments by their mentors. Mentors later collected and corrected homework, providing feedback during the exchange of workbooks, as well as new assignments. During these exchanges, girls were also provided with personal protective equipment such as masks, hand sanitizer, soap, and some basic foodstuffs. While remote learning did not allow for intensive teaching and learning based on physical interaction in the classroom, it ensured that the program remained engaged and in contact with beneficiary girls. Ultimately, small group meetings resumed and included precautions such as physical distancing, mask-wearing, and the use of hand sanitizer. In



Figure 10.2. A Biruh Tesfa For All beneficiary does a job to benefit herself and her peers. Photo: Zeleman Productions.

addition, mentors started conducting periodic follow-up of girls, or welfare check-ins, and the program has hired counselors in each project site, offering girls counseling services either in person or by phone. Currently, 8,475 girls are taking part in the Biruh Tesfa for All program.

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