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### **No way out for girl child workers**

Sarika (name changed) is a 15-year-old domestic help at a plush Cuffe Parade home. She lives with her mother and three siblings in an 80-sq-ft shanty in a slum nearby.

She works eight hours a day and earns Rs 1,500, and has the responsibility of bringing up her three younger brothers.

According to the recently released Mumbai Human Development Report, 40 per cent of domestic help in the city are girls under the age of 15, and their numbers are increasing at an alarming rate.

The report, compiled by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation and the United Nations Development Programme, adds that a substantial proportion of domestic help comprises girls, working for meagre wages.

The report quotes a 2000 study by Nirmala Niketan College, Marine Lines, which says domestic workers in the city number about six lakh, 80,000 of them full-time.

“Abuse, generally verbal and to an extent physical, sexual exploitation and the absence of health and safety standards are marked features of their labour process and labour relations,” the report says.

About 158 million children between ages 5 and 14 are engaged in child labour globally, says a UNICEF survey – which means one out of every six children in the world works for a living.

By Indian law, those employing a child aged under 14 can be booked under the Child Labour Act, and when above 14, under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection Act 2000). "The solution is more social than legal. Citizens must be sensitised to understand that employing child labour kills the child in the girl, and it is illegal," said Rebecca Gonsalves, an advocate who specialises in child labour issues.

"The official data on child labour is highly underestimated. If one considers children working in local trains, bus stops, grocery shops, shoe-shine boys, newspaper vendors, waste pickers, hawkers, vendors, domestic workers, baby sitters, coolies, helpers in shops, the real picture will emerge," the report adds.

Also disturbing is the manner in which a mother who works as domestic help takes her girl child as unpaid assistant, finally leading the child to becoming a domestic servant, the report says.

"For a permanent solution, children should be educated, not just sent to rehabilitation centres. There must be a uniform method of following up on them so they don't go back to working," says a member of a leading NGO that fights for children's rights, requesting anonymity.