

Socio-Cultural and Economic Origins of Child Domestic Work: Case of Analamanga, Madagascar

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Abstract—In a context where child domestic work plays a crucial economic role within disadvantaged households, this article examines the socio-cultural and economic origins of this practice in Madagascar. It first explores how children are mobilized as economic actors to address their household's financial vulnerabilities, before analyzing the impact of parental education levels on the transmission of norms that encourage early labor. The study then highlights the beliefs and perceptions associated with the usefulness and normalization of child labor. Based on field research conducted with 1,000 children and 130 households in the Analamanga region, the analysis combines quantitative and qualitative methods to identify the key determinants of the phenomenon. The results reveal that structural poverty, low parental education levels, and socio-cultural norms interact to reinforce the use of child domestic labor.

Keywords— Child domestic work, structural poverty, child economic mobilization, parental education level, socio-cultural norms, financial vulnerabilities.

I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of child domestic labor represents a major development challenge, both globally and in Madagascar. According to the joint ILO and UNICEF report, 160 million children were in labor situations in 2020, of whom 39% performed domestic tasks (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). In Sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 27% of children aged 5 to 17 are engaged in forms of work, mainly domestic, increasing their vulnerability in both educational and social spheres (UNICEF, 2020). In Madagascar, the MICS6 survey conducted by INSTAT and UNICEF in 2018 (published in 2020) reveals that 13% of children aged 5 to 17 regularly participate in household chores within their homes (INSTAT & UNICEF, 2020).

In line with the Convention concerning the Worst Forms of Child Labour (Convention No. 182) adopted in 1999 by the ILO, “child domestic labor” refers to all household activities performed within their own home or that of a third party, formally or informally, by individuals under the age of eighteen, and likely to harm their health, education, or development (ILO, 1999).

On a socio-economic level, household poverty appears to be the most decisive factor: nearly 80% of Malagasy households live below the extreme poverty line (\$2.15 USD/day) and resort to child labor to alleviate financial burden (World Bank, 2025). Simultaneously, the primary education completion rate was only 62% in 2022, limiting

adults' capacity to support and value their children's schooling (UNESCO, 2023).

Cultural norms also play a key role: in many Malagasy communities, assigning domestic chores to children from a young age is perceived as a rite of socialization and a means to strengthen family cohesion (INSTAT & UNICEF, 2021). This perception promotes the early learning of domestic roles at the expense of time needed for education and leisure, which are essential to a child's development.

However, while research highlights the importance of economic factors and cultural perceptions, it often remains confined to broad analyses and does not adequately differentiate between these two dimensions in the specific case of the Analamanga region. This limitation prevents a clear understanding of the interaction between beliefs that promote the socializing role of domestic labor and the immediate need for income within disadvantaged households. It is in this context that this article proposes an original reflection on the socio-cultural and economic origins of child domestic work, aiming to enrich academic understanding and inform targeted intervention strategies.

The research is thus based on the question: “What are the factors promoting child domestic labor in Analamanga?” The hypothesis to be tested is that household poverty, low parental education levels, and cultural norms are the main determinants of this practice.

The aim of this article is therefore to uncover the socio-cultural and economic origins of child domestic labor. This will be examined through the lens of our investigations conducted with children and various stakeholders involved in combating child labor, including families, local authorities, and NGOs.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1-Study Area

The survey was conducted in the Analamanga region (Madagascar): a densely populated urban and peri-urban area, representative of national socio-economic dynamics and particularly affected by child domestic labor.

Selection criteria: socio-economic representativeness (urban/peri-urban disparities, widespread poverty); high concentration of households employing children for low-cost services; presence of NGOs (UNICEF, ILO) and local structures facilitating access to data.

Target population: Child domestic workers: The survey focused on children aged 5 to 17 engaged in domestic work, identified with the help of NGOs and local authorities.

Sending households: Families that sent their children to work were interviewed to understand the underlying causes of this practice.

Employers: Households employing child domestic workers were included to analyze their perceptions, expectations, and behaviors.

Partner organizations: NGOs such as UNICEF and the International Labour Organization (ILO), as well as local associations, provided key information and facilitated interviews.

Local authorities: Heads of **fokontany** (administrative neighborhoods) and other community leaders contributed to the survey by sharing their perspectives on the local management of this issue.

The Analamanga region thus provides a relevant framework for analyzing the interconnections between socio-economic fragility, cultural norms, and child labor. The results of this study can serve as a basis for recommendations adapted to local realities and applicable to similar contexts in Madagascar.

2.2- Sampling

The sampling for this study was designed to accurately represent the phenomenon of child labor in the Analamanga region. It aims to understand the socio-economic and cultural factors that encourage it and their effects on children.

The decision to include 1,000 children in this study was based on a structured approach in collaboration with several NGOs. These children were identified based on specific criteria, such as involvement in economic activities (including domestic labor), age (6 to 17 years), and limited or no access to education. Selection was carried out in several urban and peri-urban areas, focusing on zones where child labor is most prevalent, according to data collected by partner NGO.

The survey was conducted in collaboration with the following NGOs, active in child protection and possessing deep knowledge of local communities: UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) / ILO (International Labour Organization) / Aina, Enfance et Avenir / Enfants de Tana / Graines de Bitume / ASME (Sister Emmanuelle Association) / Grandir Dignement / ONG Avotra / Ong Zazakely / ONG Bel Avenir.

- 135 households: These families were interviewed to understand the economic motivations and constraints

driving them to involve their children in economic activities.

- 20 employers: Households or businesses employing children were included to explore their practices, perceptions, and expectations regarding child labor.
- 10 NGO: The involved organizations shared key data and testimonies to contextualize the information gathered.

Selection criteria

- **Geographic criteria:** Sites were selected in various urban and peri-urban neighborhoods of Analamanga, where child labor prevalence is particularly high.
- **Socio-economic criteria:** Children from families living below the poverty line or facing specific vulnerabilities were prioritized to analyze the link between poverty and child labor.
- **Work-type criteria:** Children engaged in domestic, agricultural, or informal work were targeted, as these sectors are most affected by the phenomenon.
- **Organizational criteria:** The selected NGOs were active in the study areas and had significant experience in combating child labor.

Sampling collection methods:

Surveys: Structured questionnaires were administered to all target groups to collect quantitative data on their socio-economic conditions and perceptions.

- **Semi-structured interviews:** In-depth discussions were held with children, households, employers, and NGO representatives to gather qualitative testimonies.
- **Participant observation:** Field immersion enabled direct observation of children’s working conditions and interaction with local communities.

NGO and local authorities provided data and facilitated the identification of target populations.

III. RESULTS

3.1-Children as Economic Actors in Disadvantaged Households

The analysis compares the daily income and expenses of three types of households in Madagascar based on the presence of working children: none, one, or two working children. It evaluates the economic impact of child labor on the household’s financial balance through a comparative study of the net financial outcome according to the number of children involved.

TABLE 1: Comparison of family incomes with and without working children

Daily household income	HOUSEHOLD 1	HOUSEHOLD 2	HOUSEHOLD 3	OBSERVATION
	Only the father and mother are working	FATHER/MOTHER + 1 WORKING CHILD	Father/Mother + 2 Working Children	
Daily income in Ariary	5000 AR	7000AR	9000AR	Each of these 3 households consists of 5 people. 5000ar = Total daily income earned by a couple. 2000 AR = Daily income earned by one child
Daily expenses	6000AR	6000AR	6000AR	
Household financial balance	DEFICIT 1000AR	SURPLUS 1000 AR	SURPLUS 3000AR	

(Source: Author 2024)

The results show that a household where only the parents work earns a daily income of 5000 AR, which is lower than their daily expenses of 6000 AR, resulting in a 1000 AR deficit.

When one child contributes to economic activity, the household's daily income increases to 7000 AR, resulting in a financial surplus of 1000 AR after expenses.

A household where two children work earns a total daily income of 9000 AR, corresponding to a 3000 AR financial surplus.

These results highlight a direct relationship between the increase in the number of working children and the improvement of the household's financial balance. The addition of one working child leads to a 2000 AR increase in daily income, and this trend continues with a second working child.

However, it is important to note that daily expenses remain constant at 6000 AR across all three types of households. This suggests that the improved financial balance is solely due to increased income and not to reduced spending.

The results indicate a significant dependency between the presence of working children and the improvement of household finances. The increase in the number of economically active children leads to a notable rise in daily income, enabling a transition from a deficit to a surplus.

Identifying the factors that influence the use of child labor and its long-term consequences on family and societal dynamics requires further in-depth analysis in the discussion.

3.2-Parental Education Level

As part of this study on child domestic work in Analamanga, it is important to consider the parents' level of education, as it can influence decisions regarding children's schooling or labor. To analyze this dimension, we classified parents according to their level of education (no education, incomplete primary, complete primary, etc.) and conducted a comparative analysis of the proportions. This method highlights possible correlations between low education levels and reliance on domestic child labor.

Data analysis reveals that a significant proportion of parents, particularly mothers (45.9%) and fathers (38.5%), have no education.

The majority of parents fall between no education and incomplete primary education (74.1% of fathers and 76.3% of

mothers), which may be a determining factor in the use of child labor.

TABLE 2: Education Level of Parents of Children Working as Domestic Workers in Madagascar

Parental Education Level	Number of Households (Fathers)	Proportion (%)	Number of Households (Mothers)	Proportion (%)
No education	52	38.5	62	45.9
Incomplete primary education	48	35.6	41	30.4
Complete primary education	21	15.6	18	13.3
Incomplete secondary education	10	7.4	8	5.9
Complete secondary or higher education	4	3.0	6	4.4
Total	135	100	135	100

(Source : Author 2024)

Only 3% of fathers and 4.4% of mothers have completed secondary or higher education, reflecting limited access to education within this population.

A negative correlation is observed between parents' education level and the presence of child domestic workers in a household: the lower the parents' education level, the higher the likelihood that a child will work as a domestic servant.

The results thus indicate a strong correlation between low parental education levels and the prevalence of child domestic labor. Statistical analysis reveals a significant dependency between these variables, highlighting the major influence of parental education on family economic dynamics.

3.3-Beliefs and Perceptions Related to Child Labor

We present here a distribution of 1,000 domestic child workers according to five recruitment methods, reclassified into two main origins: socio-cultural and economic.

These results come from a cross-sectional survey of 1,000 children placed in domestic service, complemented by semi-structured interviews with their employers to clarify the motivations and perceptions associated with each recruitment method.

TABLE 3: Classification of Child Domestic Worker Recruitment Methods According to Their Socio-Cultural and Economic Origins in Madagascar.

Origin	Recruitment Method	Number of Children	%	Description
Socio-cultural	Recruited by relatives	400	40%	Parents or relatives entrust the child to another family, often for economic reasons and trust in the family environment.
Socio-cultural	Community networks	150	15%	Recommendations come from neighbors, friends, or other community members, based on the belief that domestic service fosters discipline and social integration.
Socio-cultural	Promises of education/employment	100	10%	Children or their families are attracted by promises of access to education or vocational training.
Economic	Paid intermediaries	250	25%	Agents or recruiters are involved in placing children in exchange for payment.
Economic	Spontaneous offers	100	10%	Struggling families directly contact employers to offer their children, motivated by immediate income needs.
	Total	1000	100%	

(Source: Author 2024)

The socio-cultural recruitment methods (recruited by relatives, community networks, promises of education/employment) account for 65% of the cases, reflecting the prevalence of beliefs and perceptions that value domestic work as a means of socialization, learning, and academic or professional advancement.

The economic recruitment methods (paid intermediaries, spontaneous offers) represent 35%, illustrating a direct reliance on market mechanisms and families' financial needs.

The 30-point difference between the socio-cultural category (65%) and the economic one (35%) suggests an unequal distribution, statistically confirming the dominance of cultural determinants over purely financial factors.

The absence of a notable difference (0 points) between 'promises of education/employment' and 'spontaneous offers' (10% each) indicates that neither motivation prevails independently within their respective category.

The predominance of the socio-cultural category (65%) thus highlights a significant difference between cultural and economic origins in recruitment methods, emphasizing that beliefs and perceptions are an integral part of the determinants of child domestic labor.

These data confirm that cultural and social representations constitute a major and statistically predominant factor in the origin of child domestic labor, thus validating the hypothesis of a major impact of beliefs on the development of human capital and social mobility.

IV. DISCUSSION

This discussion interprets the findings of the study entitled "Socio-Cultural and Economic Origins of Child Domestic Labor." It compares the survey data with the initial hypotheses and previous research, highlighting the originality of the study while identifying its limitations and offering avenues for further analysis. Each section addresses a key indicator, following a structure of scope, confirmation (or rejection) of the hypothesis, comparison with existing literature, and identification of methodological limitations.

4.1-Economic Contribution of Children in Disadvantaged Households

The comparative income analysis clearly shows that including a child in the family's economic activity increases daily income—from 5,000 AR (a 1,000 AR deficit) in households where only the parents work, to 9,000 AR (a 3,000 AR surplus) when two children contribute. It can be concluded that child labor serves as an economic adjustment strategy to compensate for budget deficits.

These results confirm the hypothesis that, in a context of economic vulnerability, the involvement of children in household economic activities is seen as necessary to balance family budgets, despite its negative consequences on human development.

These observations are consistent with the work of Bourdillon et al. (2010), who noted that in Global South countries, families often resort to child labor to cope with financial shocks, even when it undermines children's education. Similarly, Guérin and Palier (2022) show that in

African cities where the economy is heavily monetized, children regularly participate in income-generating activities to support their families.

Conversely, the baseline survey on child labor in the SAVA region conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL, 2017) did not reveal a significant increase in household monetary resources, due to the predominantly subsistence nature of rural economic activities.

The analysis assumes fixed expenses and does not account for indirect costs, such as missed educational opportunities or health risks. To better understand the long-term impact of this strategy on families, future research should include a cost-benefit analysis over time.

4.2-Parental Education Level and the Use of Child Labor

The results show that a significant majority of parents (74.1% of fathers and 76.3% of mothers) have a low level of education (no formal education or incomplete primary education). This situation is closely linked to the presence of children employed as domestic workers, indicating that lack of education limits the families' economic opportunities and reduces the value placed on schooling.

These findings confirm our hypothesis that "low parental education level is a major determinant of child domestic labor." The statistical link between limited parental education and increased frequency of child labor validates that family education plays a protective role against child labor.

The 2020 ILO and UNICEF report shows that children whose parents did not complete primary school are nearly 50% more likely to be engaged in labor compared to those whose parents completed at least some secondary education.

In a study conducted in Latin America, Edmonds (2007) demonstrated that each additional year of a mother's education significantly reduces the amount of time her child spends working. This result, consistent with our own findings, indicates that the link between parental education and child protection is valid in many contexts, even if its impact varies depending on socioeconomic conditions.

These studies confirm and generalize our conclusion: parental education plays a key role in reducing child labor worldwide, although the extent of its effect depends on the socioeconomic and geographical context.

The quantitative approach used in this study does not allow for exploration of the parents' subjective motivations. It would be valuable to complement these findings with qualitative studies to better understand family perceptions of education and to identify strategies to improve access to quality schooling.

4.3-Beliefs and Perceptions Related to Child Labor

The analysis reveals that 65% of domestic child workers are recruited for socio-cultural reasons (family trust, community networks, promises of education), compared to 35% for purely economic motives (paid intermediaries, spontaneous offers). This suggests that, in the context of Analamanga, it is primarily the social representations of domestic work—perceived as a vehicle for socialization, discipline, and access to training—that shape the practice, more so than the financial urgency of households.

These results validate the hypothesis that cultural norms are among the major determinants of child domestic labor. The predominance of recruitment methods based on trust and belief systems (65%) indicates that it is primarily collective norms—rather than a lack of resources—that legitimize and perpetuate this practice, thereby hindering the development of human capital and social mobility.

In their studies, Delaunay and Dutreuilh (2013) show that girls placed in urban settings are mostly employed as domestic workers in families with a high socio-economic status, while boys are more often recruited in rural areas for agricultural tasks. They also emphasize that, in cities, placements often rely on family or community networks, revealing a strong socio-cultural foundation for child domestic labor.

The same study by Delaunay and Dutreuilh (2013) also observed that in rural areas, children are generally sent to work outside the home for economic reasons, responding to local labor demands. This highlights a more frequent reliance on intermediaries or forms of paid labor, driven by subsistence needs.

These differences underscore the importance of place of residence (urban or rural) and recruitment methods in understanding the phenomenon of child domestic labor. In urban areas, it is often driven by socio-cultural logic, whereas in rural areas, it is more likely to result from economic constraints.

Our study is limited by its cross-sectional nature and by the fact that only employers were interviewed, which prevents direct access to the children's perceptions and the establishment of causal relationships. To address these limitations, it would be relevant to: Conduct a longitudinal study to track the long-term impact on educational trajectories; Extend the sample to include rural and peri-urban regions in order to evaluate spatial and methodological differences; include live interviews with children to learn about their experiences and motivations.

V. GENERAL CONCLUSION

This research, entitled *Socio-Cultural and Economic Origins of Child Domestic Labor*, aimed to identify and understand the main factors that drive the use of child domestic labor in the Analamanga region. It was based on a research problem anchored in the analysis of structural determinants—poverty, educational level, and cultural norms—and employed both quantitative and comparative approaches, in line with existing studies.

The central question: What are the factors that promote child domestic labor in Analamanga? guided a rigorous investigation that confirms the initial hypothesis: child domestic labor results from a complex interaction between immediate economic pressures, the weak educational capital of families, and the influence of cultural representations. Three major findings support this.

First, the analysis of household budgets shows that involving children in the domestic economy truly helps very poor households balance their expenses. Poverty thus becomes the direct cause of this labor, especially when no other economic alternatives exist.

Second, the study reveals that parents' low level of education, particularly that of mothers, is strongly correlated with the use of child labor. This link illustrates the vicious cycle of educational poverty, where one generation's lack of schooling compromises the educational prospects of the next. This finding confirms previous studies while offering a new specificity: a differentiated view of the role of both parents and a precise measurement of their influence.

The third factor that the study emphasizes is the role of societal attitudes in continuing child domestic work. Far from being solely an economic necessity, this practice is also the product of norms that value obedience, early responsibility, and community solidarity. Thus, 65% of domestic child workers are recruited based on trust relationships and educational promises, demonstrating that culture plays a fundamental role in legitimizing this form of labor.

However, this research has certain limitations. It is based on cross-sectional data, which limits the understanding of subjective perceptions. Additionally, the sample is predominantly urban, which restricts the applicability of the results to other regional contexts.

These findings pave the way for future research. It would be useful to follow the educational trajectories of domestic child workers over several years to see how their situations evolve. More in-depth surveys conducted directly with the children and their families could also provide a better understanding, as well as an extension of study sites to rural areas. Exploring forms of informal education that coexist with domestic labor would also be relevant, to better grasp the opportunities for transitioning toward full schooling.

In short, this research contributes to a better understanding of the roots of child domestic labor in a region deeply marked by poverty and structural inequality. It calls for a rethinking of intervention strategies by integrating cultural dimensions into efforts to combat this form of child exploitation, in a perspective of sustainable social transformation.

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