This year’s World Day Against Child Labour calls for accelerated action to end child labour in domestic work. It is a reminder that an estimated 15.5 million children are employed as domestic workers – over 70% of which are girls – and that it is one of the least visible and most hazardous forms of child labour.

Child domestic work deserves urgent attention not just because of the numbers of children involved but also because of the hidden nature of the work and the hazardous conditions it often entails. Low pay and poor working conditions are the norm. Typically it also involves long working hours which interfere with schooling; cause isolation from peers, family and other support networks; and create total dependency on employers to meet basic needs. This makes child domestic workers particularly vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and even violence. In many countries in the region it is regarded as socially and culturally acceptable and because it takes place in private households it is often not considered ‘proper work’. This means that child domestic workers of legal working age are often not afforded the basic rights - such as minimum wages, days off and sick leave - to which they are entitled.

Worldwide, domestic work deprives millions of girls and boys of their right to education. Economic and social barriers to education and families’ reliance on the income children receive can be additional obstacles. Long working hours and lack of sleep mean child domestic workers who are able to attend school may be late, absent or unable to complete assignments. Deprived of an education, domestic workers are less likely to obtain decent work as adults and less likely to be able to break out of the cycle of poverty which underpins child labour.

“I start cooking at 4:00am and start cleaning the house. I do errands from 5:00am. In the afternoon, my employer allows me to go to school from 1:00 to 4:00pm. During rest time, my employer asks me to run errands sometimes, or put the child to sleep at around 8:00 or 9:00pm. It’s hard because I don’t get to study so I don’t come prepared for school the next day.”

Michelle, 13 years, female, child domestic worker, Manila, The Philippines

Source: ILO report "Ending child labour in domestic work and protecting young workers from abusive working conditions"

Although there are no statistics available on the numbers of child domestic workers by region, figures for adult domestic workers can provide a rough indication. According to the most recent estimates from 2010, around 41% of adult and youth domestic workers are in Asia. However, despite having more domestic workers than any other part of the world, a 2013 ILO report found that the Asia Pacific region continues to lag behind in terms of guaranteeing domestic workers basic work-related rights and protections, particularly relating to working time and minimum wages. One of the best ways to end child labour is to promote high-quality education and in the context of domestic work, particular focus needs to be given to girls’ education. When a girl is educated she marries later, has fewer, healthier children and is more likely to send her children to school. Educated girls
are also more likely to have better income as adults; each additional year of education boosts a person’s wages by 10%. For girls, the rate of return is as high as 15%.

In addition, ensuring access to quality education for child domestic workers requires the provision of flexible, non-formal education opportunities. Too often the inflexibility of traditional schooling means that child domestic workers are unable to attend school or are forced to drop out prematurely, typically with limited opportunities to return. Education is also not perceived as a realistic or attractive option for many girl domestic workers. Making schools more girl-friendly is an important step to ending child domestic work.

Today UNGEI calls for the following actions:

1) Ratification and effective implementation of ILO Convention No. 138 on the minimum age for admission to work and ILO Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour. These Conventions are crucial to protecting children from all forms of child labour, including child domestic work, because they establish the ages at which children can be legally employed and prioritise action to eliminate the worst forms of child labour. In addition, the ratification and implementation of ILO Convention No. 189 on decent work for domestic workers is an important step towards ensuring rights and better protection for young domestic workers of legal working age.

2) Provision of free, compulsory and quality education for all girls and boys at least to the minimum age of employment as well as targeted non-formal and second chance education opportunities for child domestic workers.

3) Enactment and enforcement of regulations that ensure all children can realise their right to education and the provision of decent work conditions and appropriate protection to young domestic workers who have reached the minimum age for admission to employment.

4) Increased and better quality data analysis on the gender dimension of child domestic labour. Collect and disseminate accurate sex-disaggregated data on child domestic labour at the national level to improve programme planning and implementation.