

# Domestic Child Labor in Brazil from a Racial and Gender Perspective

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## Abstract

Child domestic labor, characterized by the engagement of children and adolescents in domestic work, has been a persistent issue in Brazil. This phenomenon intersects with various social dimensions, including gender and race, creating a complex web of inequalities and injustices. This article focuses on the underlying reasons for the higher incidence of Black girls engaged in domestic work, highlighting the interaction between racism, gender, and class. The research aims to contribute to the development of effective policies and interventions to eradicate child labor and promote equal opportunities regardless of gender or race. The method used is the multiple-dialectical one, appropriate to the foundation of human rights as historical cultural processes of individual emancipation. The method used in this work is the multiple-dialectic method, the most appropriate methodology for the foundation of human rights as cultural processes of emancipation of the subject. The object of study, in the conception of the multiple-dialectical method used in this article, conceives human rights in historical mutability that deny the stability, statics and rigidity of phenomena. The first part of the study analyzes theories that address the exploitation of domestic work by capital. The second part explores the interconnection between child domestic labor and gender, highlighting how boys and girls are differentially qualified for the labor market from an early age. The third part examines individual mechanisms of intimidation stemming from a culture that normalizes racial hierarchy. In conclusion, formulating public policies for children and adolescents requires political-administrative decentralization and popular participation. This approach enables children to achieve full development in respectful and dignified environments that uphold their fundamental rights.

## Keywords

Domestic, Child, Labor, Gender, Race

## 1. Introduction

In the Brazilian context, domestic work has a history deeply rooted in family structure and cultural patterns. Historically, Brazilian families have resorted to domestic child labor to meet domestic needs and ensure the reproduction of the workforce. This practice has been sustained by social, economic and gender inequalities, in addition to a culture that normalizes the participation of children in this type of activity.

Social and economic aspects play a fundamental role in the perpetuation of child domestic work. Poverty, lack of educational opportunities, lack of public policies aimed at protecting children and gender inequality are some of the factors that contribute to the labor exploitation of children and adolescents. In addition, the racial issue is also intrinsically linked to this reality, since black children face greater vulnerability and exposure to domestic work.

The overall objective of this article is to reflect on the underlying reasons for the higher incidence of Black female children and adolescents engaged in domestic work. It highlights the interaction between racism, gender, and class, resulting in evident occupational discrimination where non-productive attributes such as race and gender lead to exclusion or limited access to valued positions in the labor market.

Understanding the underlying ideology of domestic work, its interconnection with the social acceptance of child labor, and its impact on the lives of young workers goes beyond a purely theoretical perspective. It is essential to comprehend how factors like gender and race shape and perpetuate this reality. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the formulation of more effective policies and interventions to eradicate child labor and promote equal opportunities for all children, regardless of their gender or race.

The proposed methodological approach embraces human rights, including the rights of children and adolescents to a protected childhood, from a critical perspective committed to social change. The assumption is that increased access to various goods that ensure a dignified existence is crucial for achieving social change. The multiple-dialectical method is employed in this study, as it is more suitable for grounding human rights as cultural processes of emancipation, ensuring the “right to have rights.” According to Krohling (2014), human rights are subject to historical changes that reject stability, staticity, and rigidity.

To develop this study, Ricardo Antunes’ (1999) theory serves as the theoretical framework. In the first part of the article, it demonstrates the exploitation of domestic work by capital, as hiring someone for household tasks creates the necessary conditions for workforce reproduction.

The second part of the article establishes the interconnection between child domestic labor and gender, revealing that boys and girls are differently qualified and prepared for the labor market from a very young age within the productive and reproductive spheres influenced by social constructions.

The third part of this article analyzes informal individual mechanisms and

practices of intimidation, such as verbal and non-verbal humiliations and aggressions, stemming from a culture that naturalizes racial hierarchy.

Finally, the conclusion highlights that the formulation of public policies for children and adolescents should involve political-administrative decentralization and popular participation through coordinated networking. It is crucial to recognize the childhood of all children, regardless of social class, gender, or race, with a clear sense of shared responsibility. This approach enables children to achieve their full development and live in suitable environments characterized by respect and dignity, where their fundamental rights are observed.

During the colonial period, domestic work in Brazil was strongly linked to slavery. Black and indigenous girls and women performed domestic chores, taking care of children and tending to the needs of farm and home owners.

With the end of slavery at the end of the 19th century, many black girls and women migrated to cities in search of domestic work as a means of subsistence. This mass migration increased the demand for domestic workers and established a persistent pattern of exploitation and low wages. Black women, in particular, were relegated to invisible, low-paid and often undervalued jobs.

## **2. Notes on Domestic Labor in Brazil**

During the colonial period, domestic work in Brazil was strongly linked to slavery. Black and indigenous girls and women performed domestic chores, taking care of children and tending to the needs of farm and home owners. With the end of slavery at the end of the 19th century, many black girls and women migrated to cities in search of domestic work as a means of subsistence. This mass migration increased the demand for domestic workers and established a persistent pattern of exploitation and low wages. Black women, in particular, were relegated to invisible, low-paid and often undervalued jobs.

Throughout the 20th century, domestic work in Brazil was marked by asymmetrical power relations. Domestic workers, mostly black and poor women, faced precarious working conditions, long hours, lack of labor rights and systematic discrimination. The absence of specific regulations for the sector perpetuated the invisibility and vulnerability of these workers.

However, despite legislative advances, many challenges remain. Gender inequality and racial discrimination are still present in the context of domestic work in Brazil. Domestic workers continue to face low wages, lack of adequate social protection and social stigmatization. Social relations in Brazil were forged in a slave-owning structure, excluding black workers from the development process, maintaining obstacles to opportunities opened up by capitalist labor relations, building a “subproletarian” within labor relations.

It was only in 2013 that Constitutional Amendment 72 (Brasil, 2013) was approved, guaranteeing domestic workers rights such as limited working hours, paid vacation, overtime pay, and social security contributions. This significant achievement was a milestone in the struggle for better working conditions and recognition of the dignity of domestic workers.

## 2.1. Domestic Child Labor

Child labor refers to any form of work performed by children and adolescents below the minimum age allowed, as determined by each country's legislation. In Brazil, work is only permitted for individuals who have reached the age of 16, except in the case of apprenticeship, where the minimum age is 14.

In Brazil, domestic child labor is prohibited due to its inclusion in the list of Worst Forms of Child Labor (Decree No. 6, 481, 06/12/2008). This list, known as the TIP list, is a classification proposed by the [International Labour Organization \(1999\)](#) in Convention 182, adopted by several countries, which defines the worst forms of child labor.

According to [the ILO \(2023\)](#), not all work performed by children should be classified as child labor. The term "child labor" is defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, and dignity, and is harmful to their physical and mental development. It refers to activities that: are mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous and harmful to children; interfere with their education; deprive children of the opportunity to attend school force children to leave school prematurely; or require them to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work ([International Labour Organization, 2023](#)).

In its most extreme forms, child labor involves enslaved children, separated from their families, exposed to serious risks and illnesses, and/or left to fend for themselves on the streets of major cities, often at a very young age. To determine whether work is considered "child labor," a series of factors need to be assessed, including the child's age, the type and hours of work performed, and the conditions under which it is carried out.

The main reasons for including domestic child labor in this list are the exposure of children to risks related to work accidents and the physical, moral, and psychosocial harm caused to the children and adolescents subjected to it. The work has perverse consequences for the physical, psychological, and intellectual development of individuals who start working before the appropriate time. The child loses early access to family life and moments of play, which are essential activities for child development ([International Labour Organization, 2023](#)).

There are various perspectives to understand child domestic labor, with economic, cultural, and political aspects being the most evident and contributing to the understanding of this phenomenon. Economic causes are often identified as one of the main determinants of child labor, including domestic work performed by children. The condition of poverty and low family income serves as a stimulus for the involvement of children and adolescents in this type of work, as the survival of the family depends on the collaboration of all members ([Custódio, 2006: p. 94](#)).

Undoubtedly, poverty is the fundamental cause, albeit not exclusive, of all child and adolescent labor. The difficulties of survival and the need to supplement resources through women's work drive children towards domestic child

labor. Poverty is a result of economic policies that generate and perpetuate conditions of inequality and social marginalization, concentrating wealth in privileged segments of the population (Custódio, 2006: p. 94).

In Brazil, the majority of the impoverished population has always started working at a very young age. Child labor is used as a complement to adult labor and has therefore been undervalued. In addition to low wages, the incorporation of children and adolescents into domestic work is linked to another attractive factor: informality. Domestic child labor takes place outside the bounds of legality, in informal conditions that reduce costs for the utilization of this type of workforce. Moreover, it is generally shielded from monitoring and regulatory systems as it occurs within the confines of the home (Custódio, 2006: p. 96). Child labor is highly attractive to employers since these young workers seldom assert their rights, lack representation in labor unions, and rarely demand better working conditions, as their exploitation is disguised by the outdated practice of charity.

The next topic will analyze the origins of the history of child labor exploitation in Brazil.

## **2.2. Genesis of Children Labor in Brazil**

Not only were adult indigenous people exploited for their labor by Portuguese colonizers in the 16th century during the extraction of Brazil wood, but children were also involved. Initially, while the exchange system of insignificant items for white men (such as mirrors and fabrics) in return for the precious wood was in place, there was no reason for the indigenous people to refuse since the work was voluntary, and the exchange was consensual (Ferreira, 2001: p. 60).

However, as the indigenous people began to realize the disparity between the small gifts received and the time and effort required for the exchange, they started returning to their villages. In response, the Portuguese initiated mechanisms to forcibly capture indigenous people for domestic work as well as in fields and plantations, with the assistance of Catholic priests under the justification of conversion and catechism of the indigenous people. This same process occurred in ancient civilizations from various regions of the world, aggressively plundered by foreign invaders at the expense of their culture, tradition, and customs (Ferreira, 2001: pp. 61-71).

Although indigenous children already had responsibilities in dividing tasks within their families and tribes, assisting and accompanying adults, colonization introduced a substantial difference: children's labor no longer represented the moment in which the indigenous community taught practical and symbolic aspects of life to new members of the tribe, in a process of including the child in the productive and symbolic world of adults, such as hunting, fishing, and preparation for rituals, as part of their cultural identity construction (Ferreira, 2001: pp. 61-71).

The plight of enslaved African children was even crueler. The slave trade favored adult males, which is why the percentage of Africans under the age of ten

who were disembarked at that time was around 4%. Just as few adults reached the age of fifty, few children reached adulthood. Before reaching the age of five, half of them seemed to be completely orphaned; by the age of 11, eight out of ten. The enslaved child learned a trade from the age of four: “Little Gastão, for example, already performed light domestic tasks on the farm of José de Araújo Rangel at the age of four. Gastão had barely started walking and already had a master.” (Goés & Florentino, 2013: p. 184)

By the age of seven, an enslaved African could be worth up to 60% more than at the age of four, and by the age of 11, up to twice as much, already working and valued as an adult. By the age of 12, boys and girls carried their profession as a surname: Chico Roça, João Pastor, and Ana Mucama.

The value of a slave, as they were commonly called, depended on gender, age, and general health conditions. But miscegenation also influenced the hierarchy of the captives. The price of a Creole slave was higher than that of an African slave. Slave owners believed that Creoles were more intelligent, as they were more “trained” (Goés & Florentino, 2013: pp. 184-185).

It was possible to observe two categories of working children: the “crioulo” and the African, both offspring of slavery. The insertion of children into work was accompanied by punishments and castigations. Although public punishments were reserved for parents, the young captives suffered daily humiliations, such as being forced to crawl on all fours, pretending to be horses: “There she is, mounted, receiving lashes from her owner. If Gilberto Freyre is right once again... the life of enslaved children closest to the master’s family was very difficult.” (Goés & Florentino, 2013: p. 186)

With the abolition of slavery, the debate about the “problem of abandoned or delinquent minors” began. Previously, every slave owner had to ensure that their slaves did not escape and pose a threat to the “law-abiding citizens.” The sight of children roaming the streets, dirty and malnourished, was an inconvenience for the inhabitants of small towns. Work was seen as the best way to “occupy” these children. It was already known, based on the experience of slavery, that working children caused less trouble as they did not engage in political matters and easily adapted to various activities. Just as they caused less trouble, they also yielded more profit since their wages were lower (Goés & Florentino, 2013: p. 186).

With the advent of the Republic, there arose the need to prepare the population to boost the national economy through the training and disciplining of industrial and agricultural workers. Charitable asylums were transformed into institutes and vocational schools. These institutions received boys who wandered the streets. The policy aimed to reorganize cities by segregating boys and girls in irregular situations, with the goal of transforming them into workers for the developing country (Passeti, 2013: pp. 348-351).

Assistance, which was previously provided by the Holy Houses of Mercy during the colonial period, became the responsibility of the “Roda dos Expostos” in 1726. This institution received abandoned children in urban areas, a practice that lasted until 1950. Within the institution maintaining the “Roda,” children

carried out domestic work, justified by charity, starting from the age of 7. The government subsidized the “Rodas” and encouraged the acceptance of abandoned children by families, who then became known as “created children” (Veronese & Custódio, 2013: p. 21). The accepted children were required to provide services to the new family in exchange for food and shelter.

Domestic child labor is deeply interconnected with the legally unrecognized category of the “created child,” a child without resources who accepts domestic services such as ironing, cooking, housekeeping, and caring for the employer’s younger children in exchange for food and shelter, often without any remuneration.

### 3. Social Metabolism System

Through play, children share toys and meanings, enabling the development of their social behavior. They interact, teach, and learn different cultural aspects that are reinterpreted (Sawyer, 1997: p. 47).

According to Vygotsky (1989: p. 32), the so-called zone of proximal development opens up through play, leading the child to the next stage of development beyond their habitual behavior. Furthermore, play allows children to maintain a certain distance from what causes them suffering, enabling them to elaborate on complex situations that are not consciously confronted. Play is a form of communication, a moment when fantasies, anxieties, feelings, and conflicts can be expressed.

In Bezerra (2006: p. 99; INEP, 2003), working children and adolescents have impaired school performance. After two hours of work, the loss of income increases proportionally with each additional hour of work. Children and adolescents who only study learn more when compared to those who study and work. Bezerra’s (2006; INEP, 2003) research used the set of indicators available in the results of Portuguese language and mathematics tests, applied in public and private schools across the country, data from the National System for the Evaluation of Basic Education (Saeb), from the National Institute of Studies and Educational Research, referring to 2003, reaching approximately 300.000 students in the 4th and 8th (today 5th and 9th grades) grades of elementary school and the last year of high school. Among the conclusions reached in the analysis of the data from the 3 grades evaluated are that students who work at home suffer less and that young people who work more than seven hours a day between the two environments, the your residence and the one outside it, are the ones that have the greatest damage.

Domestic work is the category of workers that had its disengagement from the slave regime later. Recognition of domestic work as a professional activity only occurred in 1972, with Law No. 5859. Constitutional Amendment No. 72/2013 amended the sole paragraph of Article 7 of the 1988 Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil (Brasil, 2015), potentially expanding the role of rights applicable to domestic employees, such as FGTS, family allowance and additional for overtime. However, the domestic worker has not yet been equated with the



worker and remains a lower category. This is because Law n° 5.859/1972 elected, to characterize domestic service, the requirement “continuity” (Brasil, 1972), unlike the terminology adopted: “non-occasional”. The explanation for such discrimination is commonly attributed to the lack of intention to earn profit in the activities provided by the domestic worker, which is exploited by capital, since it creates the indispensable conditions for the reproduction of the workforce of those who hire their services.

It is, in fact, a fallacy strongly rooted in the slave culture, accustomed to relegating domestic services to individuals of lesser value on the social scale. Hiring a domestic worker makes it possible to extend the time (of the bosses) away from work, through the payment of a part of the wages received by the capitalist contractor. From this perspective, domestic work participates in the social metabolism system, converting free time, provided by domestic employers to employers, into consumption time for capital, or into time that is achieved by the media propaganda of the modern consumerism industry (Antunes, 1999: p. 101).

The discrimination of workers who provide domestic services, on the grounds that there is no profit motive, leaves a deep argumentative flaw, insofar as the service sector, that is, unproductive work, is part of a wide range of workers, including the sector of public services, banks, commerce, tourism, reaching the so-called third sector.

Domestic workers are inserted in what Antunes (1999) conceptualizes as class-that-lives-from-work, a term coined to “give contemporaneity and breadth to the social being who works” (Antunes, 1999: p. 101). The lack of equality between domestic workers, not included in the Consolidation of Labor Laws, intensifies and legitimizes social discrimination.

The aging of the population, the intensification of work and the emancipation of women and their entry into the productive world are important factors that justify the large number of domestic workers in Brazil, a demand that has grown. Brazil is the country with the largest population of domestic workers in the world in absolute numbers, according to a study carried out in 117 countries by the International Labor Organization (2012), with 7.2 million domestic workers, of which 6.7 million women and 504 thousand men.

The finding of a percentage of 93% of women among domestic workers demonstrates that, in the universe of the productive and reproductive world, there is a sexualized social production, through which men and women are induced, from the formation of their personality still in childhood, to assume differentiated social roles also in the labor market.

And among the workers of the “class-that-live-from-work” (Antunes, 1999: p. 101-102), the most precarious category is the domestic worker. Their work is used as a service without constituting a directly productive element, therefore not participating as a living element in the valorization of capital. These workers are consumed in use value and not in exchange value. In 2008, only 26.8% of all male and female domestic workers had a formal contract.



And among the most precarious in this category is a subcategory, whose exploitation is even more demeaning, due to their exclusion, disguised as assistance: the child who works, often in exchange for a house, food and a few change; the one who is almost part of the family, or as if she were part of the family, a category that is not legally recognized as a “foster daughter”. They are underprivileged children who agree to provide domestic services such as ironing, cooking, cleaning the house and taking care of their employers’ younger children, in exchange for room and board, most of the time, without any remuneration.

In addition to the damage to school performance, children submitted to early work suffer other consequences, such as in the case of heavy physical work, which can cause early occupational diseases (bone deformations and muscle pain), and it is not possible to disregard that these children end up more susceptible to physical, emotional and sexual abuse; deficient living conditions; low or in natural wages; the lack of opportunities for emotional and social development; to problems related to low self-esteem and difficulties in establishing emotional bonds (ILO, 2012).

According to the study “Domestic child labor in Brazil: statistical analysis”, based on data from the continuous PNAD from 2016 to 2019, by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2020), between 2016 and 2019, there were a 22% reduction in the number of children and adolescents from 5 to 17 years of age who work as domestic servants, which is equivalent to 24,000 individuals. In 2016, the total number of children and adolescents in this situation was 107,539, while in 2019 this number decreased to 83,624 (Fnpeti, 2022).

When analyzing the regional distribution, the largest proportion of children and adolescents involved in domestic child labor resided in the Northeast region. However, there were distinct trends between regions: while domestic child labor decreased proportionally in the Northeast (from 34.5% of the total in 2016 to 31.6% in 2019) and South (from 15.7% in 2016 to 12.6% in 2019), in the Southeast (from 23% in 2016 to 27.2% in 2019) and Midwest (from 12.5% in 2016 to 14.2% in 2019) regions, there was an increase, maintaining stable in the North region (Fnpeti, 2022).

#### 4. A Matter of Gender

The activity of domestic child labor is mainly carried out by girls. In 2016, 90% of the children and adolescents involved in this type of work (or 96.6 thousand children and adolescents) were girls. This percentage decreased to 85% in 2019, 71.2 thousand (Ibge, 2020; Fnpeti, 2022). The predominance of girls as domestic child laborers reflects and perpetuates the traditional model of family organization and gender inequality, as they are responsible for household chores and the care of dependent and vulnerable individuals (Table 1).

In 2019, a total of 19.8 million (51.8%) children and adolescents, aged between five and 17 years old, performed household chores and/or cared for people, with a predominance of girls (57.5%) and in the age group of 16 and 17 years (76.9%).

**Table 1.** Estimation and distribution of the number of children and adolescents between 5 and 17 years of age who engaged in domestic child labor by gender in Brazil and Major Regions.

Year	2016		2017		2018		2019	
<b>In absolute numbers</b>								
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Brazil	10.960	96.579	13.456	81.503	8.032	89.289	12.417	71.207
North	1.589	13.662	2.490	11.466	685	13.161	2.328	9.701
Northeast	3.818	33.330	4.073	25.950	3.867	28.391	3.051	23.343
Southeast	2.925	21.863	2.702	20.264	2.304	23.257	2.969	19.808
South	774	16.135	786	11.807	585	16.561	1.029	9.517
Midwest	1.854	11.590	3.406	12.015	591	7.919	3.040	8.839
<b>In percentages</b>								
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Brazil	10.2%	89.8%	14.2%	85.8%	8.3%	95.7%	14.8%	85.2%
North	10.4%	89.6%	17.8%	82.2%	4.9%	95.1%	19.4%	80.6%
Northeast	10.3%	89.7%	13.6%	86.4%	12%	88%	11.6%	88.4%
Southeast	11.8%	88.2%	11.8%	88.2%	9%	91%	13%	87%
South	4.6%	95.4%	6.2%	93.8%	3.4%	96.6%	9.8%	90.2%
Midwest	13.8%	86.2%	22.1%	77.9%	6.9%	93.1%	25.6%	74.4%

Data sources: IBGE (2020); FNPETI (2022).

The PNAD 2019 survey demonstrates the negative impact of child labor on school attendance, as 96.6% of the total population of children and adolescents, aged five to 17, correspond to students, whereas, among children who work, the estimate is 86.1%. In the 16 and 17 age group, the difference is more evident, because while 85.4% of the total population in this age group attended school, only 76.8% of adolescents in child labor situations attended school (Ibge, 2020; Fnpeti, 2022).

Among the children and adolescents who work part-time work that is detrimental to school performance, there are girls who are used to taking care of household chores and taking care of younger siblings, due to the cultural view that taking care of younger siblings and carrying out tasks Housework is a girl thing.

When we consider the group of child workers who have double shifts, “it becomes evident that the worst damage to performance, in both sexes, comes from the situation in which the student is divided between household chores and work outside the home, followed by the one in which the student only works outside the home” (Bezerra, 2006).

The higher incidence of female children and adolescents working double shifts, inside and outside the home, shows a mutual influence between gender and class, in the dimensions of gender as a constitutive element of social rela-

tions, anchored in the biological differences between the sexes, and gender as a power relationship. The preponderance of the dominant gender is presented as natural, and should not be faced or questioned: a boy's task, a girl's task (Antunes, 1999: p. 109).

Training for the labor market occurs in a social construction that begins in childhood. Girls learn housework from an early age: washing, cooking, cleaning and child care. At school, while the boys play soccer and cars, the girls are reserved for cliques, dolls and make-up.

The relationship between gender and class demonstrates that within the realms of productive and reproductive spheres, we witness the manifestation of a sexualized social construct. Men and women, shaped by their family and educational backgrounds, acquire distinct qualifications and skills as they enter the labor market. Capitalism, in turn, has adeptly exploited this uneven division of labor (Antunes, 1999: p. 109).

The constitutive divisions of the social order, as well as the social relations of domination and exploitation that were built around the concepts of feminine and masculine, form the contours of two distinct species of habitus, "in the form of opposite and complementary bodily hexis under principles of vision and division, which lead to classifying all things in the world and all practices according to reducible distinctions between masculine and feminine" (Bourdieu, 2002: p. 20).

The girl's education in household chores is a silent message, which directs her to tasks considered minor, less important, carried out in a private, internal place, in order to show her place in social life. The girl's fate will naturally be less than that of the boy, since "it is up to the men, located on the outside, the official, the public (...) to carry out all the acts that are at the same time brief, dangerous, spectacular". The girl's place is quite different, "being situated on the side of the humid, the low, the curved and the continuous", they see all domestic tasks attributed to them, that is, private and hidden, even invisible and shameful, "as the care of children and animals, as well as all the external work assigned to him by mythical reason". Women's space is limited, confined, it is the village, the house, the language and, for this reason, they "are condemned to give a natural foundation to the minority identity that is socially assigned to them" (Bourdieu, 2002: p. 22).

In Brazil there is a very ingrained culture of maintaining domestic workers. The incorporation of technologies that ease day-to-day tasks is much slower than in other countries. An example of this is the dishwasher. Those available in the Brazilian market are much smaller and of lower quality than those found in consumer markets in developed countries. This detail did not go unnoticed by Angela Davis (2013), for whom a substantial portion of domestic women's tasks can be incorporated into the economic industry (Davis, 2013: p. 159).

The Western capitalist culture, influenced by the legacy of slavery and the practice of employing individuals for domestic tasks, is not immutable. As Davis (2013: p. 159) argues, "technologically advanced cleaning engineering could rapidly and efficiently accomplish what today's housewife does in a laborious and

primitive manner.”

Capitalism is against the industrialization of domestic work. In countries with great social differences, the profit from the industrialization of domestic activities would be lower than the gains arising from the economic circulation of the service sector. In the words of Davis (2013: p. 160), “socialized domestic work implies large subsidies from the government, with the aim of ensuring accessibility for working-class families, whose need for such services is most obvious”.

Despite the growing insertion of women’s work in sectors considered more valued in society, it is still common to associate female identity with objects considered to be part of the domestic universe. Among the sexual fetish accessories are typical maid uniforms.

Davis (2013) reports that work outside the home has always been a reality in the lives of black women, because “as a direct consequence of their work outside the home, as “free” women no less than as slaves, housework it was never the central point of black women’s lives” (Davis, 2013: pp. 163-164).

Both in the Brazilian reality, portrayed by Florestan Fernandes (2013), and in the reports by Davis (2013), black women have always presented a strong identity, far from the submissive image of dedicated wives imposed by industrial capitalism, because “they had to transform themselves into forts for their families and communities that needed their strength to survive” (Davis, 2013: p. 164).

Non-white women often were, and continue to be, forced to neglect their own condition as mothers and care for their families, in order to replace mothers and wives of other families.

## 5. A Racial Issue

There is a racial issue underlying housework. In Brazil, between 2016 and 2019, domestic child labor was mainly carried out by black children and adolescents, which demonstrates the harmful effects of structural racism.

Domestic child labor was predominantly practiced by black children and adolescents, highlighting the detrimental effects of structural racism in Brazil. Between 2016 and 2019, approximately 70% to 75% of the total individuals engaged in domestic child labor were black children and adolescents. The percentage of black children and adolescents involved in domestic child labor varied across regions, depending on the population distribution of self-identified black individuals in Brazil. In the South region, in 2019, 50.7% of the total children and adolescents in domestic child labor were black, while in the Southeast it was 65.3%, in the Midwest 71.2%, in the Northeast 74.9%, and in the North 89.3% (Ibge, 2020; Fnpeti, 2022). It is important to note that the high representation of black individuals in domestic child labor reflects the impoverished conditions of families, in which black individuals are also predominant (Table 2).

The existence of a difference in proportion between black and whites in domestic service reveals discriminatory practices that permeate Brazilian culture, constructed from stereotypes and negative representations of minority groups, reinforcing the concept that “practices Discriminations and stereotypes are

**Table 2.** Estimation and distribution of the number of children and adolescents aged 5 to 17 years who performed domestic child labor by color in Brazil and Major Regions.

Year	2016		2017		2018		2019	
<b>In absolute numbers</b>								
	Not black	Black	Not black	Black	Not black	Black	Not black	Black
Brazil	28.377	79.162	27.148	67.811	23.989	73.332	24.440	59.184
North	2.573	12.678	3.223	10.733	980	12.867	1.290	10.740
Northeast	6.304	30.844	5.285	24.738	11.510	20.748	6.631	19.763
Southeast	7.622	17.165	7.181	15.785	4.088	21.473	7.893	14.884
South	8.747	8.161	6.518	6.076	6.266	10.881	5.203	5.343
Midwest	3.131	10.313	4.942	10.479	1.146	7.364	3.424	8.454
<b>In percentages</b>								
	Not black	Black	Not black	Black	Not black	Black	Not black	Black
Brazil	26.4%	73.6%	28.6%	71.4%	24.6%	75.4%	29.2%	70.8%
North	16.9%	83.1%	23.1%	76.9%	7.1%	92.9%	10.7%	89.3%
Northeast	17%	83%	17.6%	82.4%	35.7%	64.3%	25.1%	74.9%
Southeast	30.7%	69.3%	31.3%	68.7%	16%	84%	34.7%	65.3%
South	51.7%	48.3%	51.8%	48.2%	36.5%	63.5%	49.3%	57.7%
Midwest	23.3%	76.7%	32%	68%	13.5%	86.5%	28.8%	71.2%

Data sources: IBGE (2020); FNPETI (2022).

mutually reinforcing and lead many blacks and mestizos to regulate their aspirations according to what is culturally imposed as the ‘appropriate place’ for non-whites” (Guimarães, 2006: p. 261). Blacks and browns are exposed to various discriminatory practices in the labor market, as in addition to entering it with less formal education than whites, non-whites are exposed to occupational discrimination, due to which the assessment of non-productive attributes, such as people’s color, results in exclusion or limited access to valued positions in the labor market, says Hasenbalg, in his interview with Guimarães (2006: pp. 261-262).

Added to this is wage discrimination, evidenced in lower rates of return to education and experience obtained by non-whites, which increases even more at higher educational levels. These different patterns of participation of black and brown groups in the labor market translate into a highly unequal valuation of the work of these groups: the average income from work for this group is just under half of the average income from work for whites.

The children and adolescents most affected in their school performance are those from the situation in which they accumulate hours of work on tasks inside and outside their homes, a group in which there are more girls than boys, as demonstrated by the study by Bezerra (2006). If more hours of work contribute to the drop in performance and if black and brown girls are the most disadvan-

taged, as they are forced to divide themselves between housework and work outside the home, the perpetuation of the culture that considers hiring normal of these precocious female workers is an informal institutional mechanism that acts as a barrier to the upward mobility of blacks.

The higher incidence of black girls in domestic child labor demonstrates the existence of “a series of informal institutional mechanisms, which create barriers for blacks and privilege for whites”. To these collective mechanisms, there is added “a network of individual mechanisms, including indifference, aggression and various other informal practices, originating from a culture that naturalizes racial hierarchy” (Telles, 2003: p. 235).

The issue that emerged from domestic work, substantially altering relations between the sexes, before, during and after slavery, is the parity between men and women: “The work that slaves perform for themselves and not to praise their owner was carried out in terms of equality” (Davis, 2013: p. 20). Faced with the inequality of the condition of captivity, “They transformed this negative equality emanating from the equal oppression they suffered as slaves into a positive equality: egalitarianism characterized their social relations” (Davis, 2013: p. 20).

Non-white women adjusted more easily to free work than non-white men, as reported by Florestan Fernandes (2013: p. 82). On the one hand, in the slave regime, domestic services, mainly in urban areas, did not involve the same degradation of their agent as the hard “about in the fields”. They provoked greater permanent contact with whites and facilitated old-style paternalistic relations.

It was because of their insertion in urban domestic services that the non-white woman acts as a privileged labor agent. The black man left slavery in a situation of social disorganization, which led him to expose the woman to become the ‘means of subsistence’ of the whole family, then unstable and not integrated. This is because the transition between slave and free labor occurred in an uncompensated way, in a movement that meant the elimination of those most apt for urban life (Fernandes, 2013: p. 83).

The freed man did not find the tolerant treatment of the slave era from whites, as he was now seen and treated as a freed man. I had to take the job that came my way, without making any demands: porter, house cleaning, leaflet delivery, helper for masons, carpenters, painters. Those jobs that had better prospects for profits, even more modest ones, were reserved for Italian immigrants (Fernandes, 2013: p. 91).

The existence of a greater proportion of black children and adolescents in domestic service demonstrates an equation that is not just a simple vestige of slavery destined to disappear over time, since more than a century has passed since the abolition of slavery and girls and women black women persist in domestic work in significant numbers.

In the domestic activity of girls and adolescents, sexual exploitation is not uncommon, a silent aggression, difficult to be investigated, supervised or punished. The aggressor, in most cases, is the employer, because “many of these

girls are brought from the countryside to the big cities due to hunger and the misery of their families. Upon arrival, many work even for a plate of food. In many cases, these girls suffer sexual abuse and end up prostituting themselves as a means of survival” (Grunspun, 2000: p. 44).

Ângela Davis (2013: p. 69) draws attention to the frequent sexual abuse of black domestic workers in the United States, for whom sexual abuse perpetuated by the “man of the house” is one of the occupational hazards: “time after time, they were victims of extortion at work, forced to choose between sexual submission and absolute poverty for themselves and their families”.

Regarding the merely symbolic character of the principle of equality, in peripheral countries such as Brazil, equality is the symbolic horizon, which establishes the possible social links, because without the feelings created by the primary reality of equality, without the opinions and practices it creates agitated or suggested, there is no possibility of constituting a community (Moreira, 2010: p. 127).

In this wake of concepts, it is in childhood and, especially, in the family and at school, that the unconscious strategies of the past perpetuate and legitimize the naturalized history that classifies individuals and attributes different values to human beings.

The primary process of ‘naturalized’ introjection of this criterion that legitimizes inequalities takes place at school and in the family, not only in relation to what is explicitly taught, but above all from the implicit practices that these institutions demand (Souza, 2003: p. 49).

Although apparently without any practical use, for an effective fight against early work it is essential to bring to light the origins of the implicit ideologies of inequalities, recognizing the existence of social signs that allow social stratification between citizens and sub-citizens; between children and adolescents with a protected and recognized childhood and children and adolescents who must seek their own support, victims of exclusionary mentalities.

Such behavior results from the universalization of male supremacy, which ignores the prerogatives that oppose this hegemony. There is a social order, in a “sexual” order directed by their parents, teachers and peers, which girls incorporate, in the form of perception schemes inaccessible to consciousness and to the principles of the dominant vision that naturalizes the social order (Bourdieu, 2002: pp. 52-53).

From the perspective of the theory of integral protection, as provided for in Article 227 of the Federal Constitution, the rights of children should be recognized as a priority due to their biological, social, physical, psychological, and moral development, regardless of their social condition. This means guaranteeing every child and adolescent the recognition of their childhood. Poor children should not be seen as “irregular,” abnormal individuals, or a social danger (Azevedo & Pazó, 2017). The responsibility for protecting our children and adolescents lies jointly and solidarily with the family, the state, and society.

In this regard, it is pertinent to reflect on Carlos Henrique Bezerra Leite’s



words, who states: “If the state, society, and family do not fulfill their constitutional duties to enforce Article 227 of the Constitution, we will have, in the near future, a nation of delinquents, drug addicts, outcasts, alienated, unproductive, and at high risk to national development” (Leite, 2023: p. 555). Everyone must engage in the endeavor to promote emancipatory and inclusive education for children, adolescents, and young people.

In this dimension, which presupposes an effective consensus regarding the importance given to principles by the new paradigm of constitutionalism, it is important to emphasize that although they may have low normative density and strong subjective connotation, the guiding principles, once enshrined as in the case of the principle of the integral protection of children and adolescents, acquire the same legal force as constitutional rules, possessing immediate applicability and therefore being immediately enforceable (Delgado, Alvarenga, & Guimarães, 2019: p. 37)

It is necessary to be always attentive to the excluding dispositions considered universal in relation to the process of inferiorization of women, as well as to the oppressions that afflict women in different ways, under the biases of class and economic power, schooling, ethnicity, professionalization, etc.

## 6. Conclusion

Reflection on coping with the existence of children and adolescents in situations of domestic work must be developed from the communitarian nature of the Brazilian Magna Carta, when dealing with the formulation of public policies aimed at children and adolescents. Article 204 of the Federal Constitution established two lines of action for social policies: political-administrative decentralization and popular participation through representative organizations.

Networking presupposes coordinated action between the various entities that make up the System for Guaranteeing the Rights of Children and Adolescents. In Brazil, the idea that the simple change of laws is capable of transforming habits and social relations is quite common. Facing the serious and complex problem of domestic child labor must go further, as its confrontation necessarily involves understanding and diagnosing the different manifestations of injustice, both those rooted in the economic-political structure of society, as well as cultural or symbolic, present in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication, whose examples include cultural domination, social concealment, that is, social invisibility as a result of cultural communicative and interpretive practices.

In this research, we explore the interconnection between child labor, gender and race, revealing the complexity and implications of this relationship. Throughout the study, we evidenced how child labor disproportionately affects girls and boys from different racial backgrounds, highlighting the structural inequalities and power dynamics that perpetuate this reality.

It became clear that child labor is not just an economic issue, but is also deeply rooted in gender and race issues. Girls are often assigned to domestic tasks,

while boys are more likely to do work that is considered more “outside”. In addition, black children and adolescents are especially affected, reflecting persistent racial inequalities in society.

This interconnection between child domestic work, gender and race requires a multifaceted approach to tackling the problem. It is critical that public policies consider this intersectionality and develop comprehensive measures to eliminate child labor, ensure the protection of the rights of all children and promote equal opportunities, regardless of their gender or race.

Education plays a key role in this process, with the implementation of policies that encourage school attendance and provide an inclusive and egalitarian educational environment. In addition, creating cash transfer programs conditional on school attendance can be an effective strategy to fight poverty and reduce the need for child labor.

However, we recognize that just addressing economic causes is not enough. It is essential to combat the social and cultural structures that perpetuate gender and racial inequalities. This includes promoting awareness, sensitization and changing attitudes towards household chores and gender expectations.

This study underscores the importance of understanding and addressing the interconnection between child domestic labour, gender and race to promote a more just and inclusive society. A concerted effort by public policy, institutions, civil society organizations and society as a whole is needed to eradicate child labour, protect children’s rights and ensure an equitable future for all children, regardless of their gender identity or racial origin.

The recognition of all childhoods, regardless of gender, skin color or social class, must be the starting point for building a society that values fraternity at its core. It is in this environment that the feeling of collective belonging arises, allowing the development of individual autonomy.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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