



# ETHIOPIA: CHILD DOMESTIC WORK

Annual report 2025-2026



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since its inception in 2021, the Ethiopia Child Domestic Workers (CDWs) Hotspot has transformed from a pilot initiative into a resilient, institutionalised protection mechanism. Grounded in the three pillars of prevention, protection and prosecution, the program has successfully overcome initial scepticism to establish state-adopted frameworks for reducing domestic servitude among girls. By engaging a broad spectrum of stakeholders – from transport hub recruiters to informal community structures – the hotspot has reached thousands of employers and empowered hundreds of recruiters to identify at-risk children.

The 2025 reporting year was defined by the program’s remarkable adaptive management during the U.S. government’s 90-day suspension of foreign aid programs. During this freeze, the Freedom Fund leveraged diversified funding to ensure continuation of “critical nature” services such as safe house operations and emergency medical care. When the suspension was lifted in early March, partners accelerated their activities to conclude Phase Two of programmatic support from the U.S. State Department’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Office and secured extended funding to support Phase Three of the program through October 2027.

The hotspot program’s impact this year was most visible through its commitment to survivor-led advocacy and systemic educational integration. In a landmark achievement for child participation, three CDWs were elected to the Addis Ababa Child Parliament,<sup>1</sup> one of whom was appointed as the head of the Volunteer Standing Committee. These young leaders have become central voices in national dialogues regarding labour and trafficking proclamations. Simultaneously, the program bridged a major gap in the education system by aligning shelter-based schooling with the government’s “Education for Light” initiative. This allows CDWs to transition directly into Grade 3 of mainstream schooling via standardised exams, removing the systemic barriers that previously hindered long-term reintegration.

Over the course of the year, more than 325 children were identified and referred for specialised services through transport hubs and community networks. Outreach to the broader community also saw success, with more than 1,000 employers engaged and nearly half of them officially implementing improved guaranteed rest periods and educational access for their domestic workers.



Innovative approaches continue to drive change, particularly the establishment of safe spaces designated for CDWs – the first of their kind in Ethiopia. These spaces have significantly reduced survivor isolation, prompting partners to expand this model. Further, the program gained substantial visibility in high-level forums, drawing the attention of key stakeholders in the child labour sector to the specific nuances of domestic work.

While the program continues to achieve important milestones, such as supporting 164 prosecutions and 52 convictions for trafficking-related crimes in a single quarter, securing consistent legal outcomes remains a critical challenge. Despite increased advocacy and engagement with the justice system, many cases are still delayed by seasonal court closures, ongoing conflict in regions like Amhara, or the complexity of collecting sufficient evidence for prosecution. Moving into Phase 3, the Ethiopia hotspot is shifting its focus toward institutionalising gains while intensifying the handover of CDW protection mechanisms to local Bureaus of Transport, Justice, and Women and Social Affairs. and ensuring long-term, sustainable impact by directly addressing the root causes and prevalence of exploitative child domestic work. The program will utilise the upcoming prevalence study to provide a scientifically robust endline assessment of domestic servitude rates in Addis Ababa. This research moves beyond general education metrics to measure specific modifiable conditions, such as work hours, rest time, and freedom of movement.

## OPERATING CONTEXT

Domestic work – followed by petty trade and work in the service industry such as bars, restaurants or hotels – is one of the most common forms of paid work among girls and young women in Ethiopia, especially among the sizable number of those who migrate from rural to urban areas.

Historically, this sector has occupied a legal grey area. Under the country's Labour Proclamation (No. 1156/2019), children under age 15 are prohibited from working, and those aged 15 to 17 are classified as "young workers" with restricted hours. However, domestic work has traditionally been governed not by these labour laws but by the 1960 Ethiopia Civil Code, which offers minimal protections and largely leaves working conditions to the "conscience of the employer." This gap is further complicated by the fact that Ethiopia has not yet ratified ILO Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers.

The lack of specific regulation contributes to significant difficulties in prosecution. Prior to targeted training, cases of child labor trafficking were often misclassified as minor offenses rather than serious crimes. Even when legal proceedings are initiated, they are frequently delayed by annual court closures from July to September, which prolongs the stay of children in shelters and hinders family reunification efforts.



A significant development in late 2024 and early 2025 was the rollout of the Consolidated Child Protection Case Management Information System. This state-led centralised data repository, supported by UNICEF, has begun to provide more consistent tracking of child labour cases across regions. This technological shift is a major contextual win, as it provides the infrastructure needed to institutionalise the "identification and referral" protocols developed by the Freedom Fund's Child domestic work program.

The Freedom Fund's Child domestic work program has made progress in defining and measuring exploitative Child domestic work. A key breakthrough is the Lagos Guidelines, which, alongside the data collection tool, has provided a framework for defining and tracking exploitative practices. Between 2024 and 2025, partners adopted the Busara tool to collect consistent data on CDW treatment, revealing sustained improvements in welfare.

Additionally, the Ethiopian government's Education for Light Initiative now allows children in informal learning pathways (like shelter-based Alternative Basic Education) to take standardised exams. Successful candidates can join Grade 3 directly upon reintegration, bypassing the previous rigidity that relegated older children to Grade 1.

Large-scale urban redevelopment in the capital throughout 2025 has occasionally led to the displacement of informal settlements. For CDWs, this often means increased isolation, as the traditional community networks and *Iddirs* (traditional, community-based self-help groups) they rely on for support are sometimes fragmented by these physical shifts in the city's landscape.



# PROGRAM OUTCOMES

The Ethiopia Child domestic work hotspot program overall goal is to substantially and measurably reduce the prevalence of domestic servitude amongst girls in Ethiopia by strengthening community and government protection mechanisms, promoting survivor-centred reintegration, and improving the labour conditions and rights of children in domestic work. Overall, the hotspot has seven partners that have been working on this issue for more than seven years.

In terms of partners' key areas of engagement, two of them run shelters to protect children from re-traumatisation and abuse and provide legal support before reunification with their families. Another partner provides a safe space for children.<sup>2</sup> The other four partners engage key stakeholders and the wider community – including employers, recruiters and transporters – to protect children's rights and to engage government in high-level discussions to impact existing policies and trends that compromise the safety and protection of children.

During 2025, several high-level achievements were registered toward the following organisational strategic goals:

## **Direct impact in communities affected by modern slavery**

The hotspot continues to move “beyond basic shelter provision to an integrated, holistic, rights-based model” that combines protection, education and access to justice. A catalyst of this impact is the stabilisation of families, with partners noting that the strategic integration of seed money for income-generating activities (IGAs) with family reunification has decreased economic pressures and reduced the risk of re-entering into Child domestic work that is exploitative. One partner reported that children reunited with IGA support are “most likely to stay with their family.”

In Addis Ababa, the practice of ensuring a formal contractual agreement between a child domestic worker and an employer is growing into a

documented norm. This shift transforms an invisible, high-risk labour sector into a monitored one. Freedom Fund partners have successfully trained and engaged local brokers who now act as frontline enforcers of these agreements. These brokers are required to share their contracts with the regional-level Bureau of Women and Social Affairs (BoWSA), ensuring that the child's right to education and safety is legally visible. To date, this initiative has brought more than 170 previously “hidden” CDWs under the umbrella of official government oversight.

The most sustainable element of the hotspot program is the evolution of traditional community structures into human rights watch groups. In 2025, these grassroots groups conducted door-to-door monitoring and risk assessments, reaching more than 200 households and identifying at-risk children working within them. As one partner brief noted, “this model has been so effective that it has been officially adopted by *woreda*-level<sup>3</sup> protection systems,” ensuring that the mechanism survives beyond the Freedom Fund's direct intervention. This year demonstrated that when protection is “owned” by the community, it persists even when external funding fluctuates. Traditional, community-based self-help groups (*Iddirs*) have begun incorporating CDW protection into their formal bylaws. Members who violate these rights now face internal penalties or get dismissed from membership.

During the reporting period, an MoU dictating clear responsibilities for each party was signed between *woreda*-level BoWSA and the Transport Office, the Labor and Skills Office, the Child Rights Committee (CRC), and recruiters to ensure the sustainability of the practices beyond the project period. While these bodies have worked together for years, the MoU formalised and structured their collaboration. Transport workers have been empowered through the Child domestic work program with skills that enable them to identify and refer trafficked and at-risk children. Despite the six-week pause in funding from the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons with the U.S. Department of State, transport hubs continued rescuing and referring children to the authorities while the Ministry of Transport and Logistics conducted follow-up activities across all transport hubs in Addis Ababa.

### **Foster systems change to shift power**

In 2025, there was significant progress in institutionalising protection standards by moving from ad hoc NGO interventions to state-led and community-owned mandates. This shift is characterised by the formal integration of child protection and labour rights into the core functions of the Ethiopian government and traditional leadership structures.

One of the most profound shifts in power occurred through the formal political inclusion of CDWs in the Addis Ababa Child Parliament. For the first time, CDWs moved from being “subjects of protection” to “agents of policy.” Facilitated by a partner-led safe space, CDWs participated in the child parliamentarian election forum. The result was a historic breakthrough: one CDW was elected head of the Humanitarian Standing Committee, while two others were elected as members of the Parliament. This ensures that the specific vulnerabilities of CDWs are no longer just “advocacy points” for NGOs but are now part of the formal legislative agenda of the city’s youth leadership.

Another structural change in 2025 was the Ministry of Labor and Skills’ (MoLS) commitment to forward to the Ethiopian Parliament the International Labour Organization’s Convention No. 189, which affirms the fundamental rights of domestic workers and sets minimum labour standards for them. This move, alongside the ongoing work to finalise updated labour regulations under Ethiopia’s Proclamation No. 1156/2019, represents a fundamental shift toward formalising labour protections for a previously “invisible” workforce. These were not an isolated government action, but the culmination of intensive, collaborative efforts by program partners.

To bridge the gap between policy and practice, Freedom Fund partners have successfully engaged the justice system through “mock court sessions” and technical accompaniment to enable the children to become familiar with the legal process they will take part in. These sessions function as simulated legal proceedings where Child domestic work survivors can practice giving testimony and interact with the judicial environment in a controlled setting, which has been instrumental in reducing survivor anxiety and streamlining actual legal processes. As a result, witness protection for survivors of domestic servitude is transitioning from ad hoc negotiations into formal

written protocols with the Federal Police Witness Protection Department, ensuring secure transport and court escorts become a reliable, standard procedure.

Partners have successfully embedded Alternative Basic Education (ABE) within the official practices of the local education office. This includes the institutionalisation of volunteer management and flexible registration procedures, ensuring that the education of CDWs is no longer dependent on project funding but is a recognised function of the state school system.

### **Invest in the strengthening of civil society organisations and movement**

The Freedom Fund’s Community of Practice (CoP) serves as a vital engine for collective learning, enabling partners to harmonise skills, share adaptive strategies and address systemic challenges. In 2025, this demonstrated significant maturity as it navigated the operational uncertainties created by the U.S. government’s suspension of funding early in the year.



A major development this year was the structural redesign of the CoP. To increase efficiency and cross-pollination of ideas, the program merged all CDW-specific CoP meetings into a single, unified forum. This evolution allowed for more robust peer-to-peer exchange, specifically regarding the Safe Space model. With newer partners like Emmanuel Development Association and Hope for Children preparing to launch their own safe spaces in 2026, the CoP facilitated a “lessons learned” exchange to standardise these environments across the hotspot. This collective expertise ensures that, as the program scales, the quality of survivor-centred care remains consistent.

The CoP also served as the primary vehicle for preparing partners for the launch of the TIP Office funded program in October 2025. These sessions shifted focus toward the “sustainability and handover” phase, engaging external experts to help partners refine their Individual Implementation Plans. By aligning these plans with the core functions of the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoWSA) and the Ministry of Labor and Skills (MoLS), the CoP has transformed from a project-management group into a strategic advisory body.

### **Efforts to amplify the hotspot’s work**

In 2025, all seven Child domestic work program partners and the hotspot team took part in the Girls’ Summit organised by the Africa Union. During the forum the hotspot presented an exhibition and spoke at a breakout session sharing project experiences. A key insight was realising that even among seasoned child labour experts, CDWs are often a “blind spot” because the work happens behind closed doors. By using photovoice platform – where survivors themselves captured their daily realities – the hotspot moved the conversation from abstract statistics to undeniable human faces. The driving vision behind this approach is that impacted communities cannot wait for the issue to be “discovered” and that the use of creative, survivor-led media can force the “invisible” into the public eye.

The team also took part in the forum organised in Addis Ababa under the Bogotá Call to Action to end violence against children in Africa. Additionally, the 1st East African Regional Convening on the State of Child Domestic Work was held in Kenya, Nairobi and was attended by Freedom Fund partners the Professional Alliance for Development Ethiopia and Caritas Catholic Ethiopia. The partners returned with the understanding that a survivor who is mentally

empowered is far more likely to successfully navigate the legal system and resist re-exploitation. They were also able to notice how regional peers integrated trauma-informed care and storytelling not just as “extras” but rather as core components of intervention design.

Free the Slaves and the Freedom Fund organised an online forum on research and practice to address exploitative Child domestic work, where the Ethiopia team presented the outcomes of its evaluation on shifting household attitudes and norms towards CDWs and highlighted the hotspot’s efforts towards reducing the prevalence of child domestic servitude.

### **Strategic areas of further improvement**

While “education is a key factor in reducing poverty,” data gathered through Freedom Fund’s programmatic monitoring indicate that for CDWs, the gap between “access” and “attainment” in education remains a primary driver of entry and/or re-entry into Child domestic work. A strategic improvement for 2026 is to move beyond general enrolment and focus on educational portability and vocational alignment. Improvement is needed in linking income generating activities directly to school retention and institutionalising “education funds” within family businesses to ensure that economic shocks do not lead to the withdrawal of children from school.

Prosecution has remained a challenging area for the hotspot since the launch of the Child domestic work program in Ethiopia. Despite identifying hundreds of cases of domestic servitude, the transition from “rescue” to “conviction” is often stalled by a lack of supporting documents and the high “attrition rate” of witnesses due to fear and economic pressure. To improve conviction rates, the program is shifting from ad hoc legal aid to technical accompaniment of the justice system. A key insight from the partner reports was that while mock court sessions significantly reduced survivor anxiety, only 39.1% of survivors initially felt ready to participate in full legal proceedings. A strategic priority is the finalisation of written witness protection protocols with the Federal Police, with the goal of moving away from “negotiated” protection and toward a standard procedure that includes secure transport and court escorts. Reducing the “burden of bravery” on the child survivor through formal state-led protection will enable the system to address the primary reason traffickers currently evade justice.



## CASE STUDY

### From hardship to leadership: The story of Akrim Jenber

Akrim Tewdros is a 16-year-old student in Grade 11 whose life reflects both hardship and resilience. She comes from the Gurage Zone in the Central Ethiopia Region, where her early life was disrupted by her parents' separation. Due to her mother's severe financial difficulties, Akrim was unable to continue living with her and supporting herself at home became increasingly challenging. In response to these circumstances, her family decided that she would move to Addis Ababa to help support her mother. With the assistance of her nephew, Akrim relocated to the city and began working as a CDW.

Like many CDWs, Akrim faced an uncertain future, carrying the weight of her responsibilities with little support. Her path, however, took a hopeful

turn when she joined Mission for Community Development Program's (MCDP) Safe Space. Through the project, Akrim accessed comprehensive services that equipped her with knowledge, skills and emotional resilience. She participated in trainings on life skills, child rights and advocacy, gender norms, and sexual and reproductive health. Further, she benefited from both individual and group counselling sessions, which provided her with psychosocial support, and recreational services that offered a much-needed respite and a sense of community.

This nurturing environment was catalytic for Akrim. The knowledge she gained empowered her to find her voice, transforming her from a recipient of services into a powerful advocate for herself and others. She soon began actively advocating for the rights of CDWs at workshops.

A pivotal moment arrived when CDWs from the MCDP Safe Spaces were invited to participate in the Addis Ababa Child Parliament election forum. At this event, Akrim and her peers delivered moving and powerful presentations, articulating their rights and shedding light on the unique challenges faced by CDWs. Their compelling advocacy made a significant impact as they learned to reason deeply with the audience and officials. In a historic outcome, three CDWs from the MCDP program were elected to the Child Parliament, shattering barriers and ensuring their voices would be heard at the highest levels.

Akrim herself was not only elected but was also chosen by her peers to serve as one of the eight committee leaders within the Parliament. She now leads the Volunteer Committee, a role with defined annual responsibilities focused on supporting vulnerable groups in her community, including children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. In this role, Akrim is no longer just a survivor; she is a leader and a changemaker.

Inspired by her own journey, Akrim now looks to the future with a clear vision. She aspires to become a lawyer and ultimately establish her own non-governmental organisation dedicated solely to supporting and promoting the rights of CDWs across Ethiopia.

Her story, which began with profound loss, is now a powerful narrative of resilience, empowerment and unwavering hope.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Addis Ababa Child Parliament is a youth-led platform designed to amplify children's voices in policy-making, addressing critical issues like education, child labour and protection. It connects with federal and regional child parliaments, enabling young representatives to advocate for child rights in Ethiopia.
- 2 Safe spaces are community-based environments designed to provide continuous support and empowerment for CDWs, distinct from temporary shelters. These spaces serve as vital hubs where CDWs can access services during their rest days or following reintegration into the community.
- 3 A woreda is the third-level administrative district in Ethiopia, sitting below zones and regional states.

# VISION

Our vision is a world  
free of slavery.

# MISSION

We invest in frontline organisations  
and movements to drive a measurable  
reduction of modern slavery in high-  
prevalence countries and industries.

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