

Child Labor in Nepal

The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness of child labor in Nepal. Educational programs are seen as a feasible solution to the poverty that creates the horrific conditions of child labor.

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Education Combating Unjust Labor

by Santosh Varghese

Aarti is a seven year old girl who has been working in a brick factory in the Kathmandu Valley ever since the death of her mother. While most children around the world begin school, learn the alphabet, color, and play with other children their age, Aarti wakes at sunrise for a 10 hour work day – to make bricks, with her small, fragile hands. Aarti moves quickly, sprinkling a little sand into the brick mold before filling the mold with a scoop full of mud. She uses a wire to remove the excess mud and then taps the mold against the earth so the brick can form. Finally, she flips the mold over, laying the brick on the ground for it to dry in the hot sun. Aarti does this about 1,500 times a day. In addition to her long work schedule, Aarti works in an area saturated with black smoke, dust, and germs. Aarti and the other children she works with run the risk of chronic respiratory and stomach problems, along with frequent cuts, bruises, and other injuries to various parts of their bodies.¹

Exploitive child labor is a serious problem in Nepal. Recent reports have shown that 2.6 million (2,596,000) children between the ages of 5 and 14 are working in Nepal. Of this, nearly 5% (127,000 children) are involved in what the International Labor Organization defines as ‘the Worst Forms of Child Labor’.²

This resource paper focuses specifically on child labor in the Nepali society. Beginning with an examination of Nepal, the report will explore the roots of the crisis as well as the various manifestations of child labor in Nepal. It will then offer an effective buffer to such exploitation: education.

Nepal: A Brief Overview

A landlocked country located between China and India, Nepal has a population of 27,070,666.³ The region has a variety of ethnic groups, including Brahman, Chetri, Newar, Gurung, Magar, Tamang,

Rai, Limbu, Sherpa, and Tharu. As the only official Hindu state in the world, Nepal consists of 86.2% Hindu, 7.8% Buddhist, 3.8% Islamic. The population has a literacy rate of 45.2%, with 62.7% of the male population and only 27.6% of the female population over 15 able to read and write.⁴

Considered to be one of the world's most poor and underdeveloped countries, Nepal has a gross national product of \$220 per capita and has 45% of the population living below the international poverty line of roughly \$1 per day.⁵ Agriculture is the most prevalent industry in the county, constituting 40% of the gross domestic product and 80% of the work force.⁶

Child Labor

The International Labor Organization (ILO)⁷ estimates that there are 246 million child laborers

worldwide.⁸ In an interview, Kailash Satyarthi, a leader in the fight to end child labor in South Asia, said that:

“Children work in export industries, where profit margins are highest: in agriculture, construction materials, stone quarries, and in cottage industries such as carpet weaving and the glass industry...there has been tremendous growth in child servitude in the export-oriented industries of India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka.”⁹

Looking at Nepal specifically, we see that children are involved in numerous trades. In a report by the Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Centre, fifteen areas where children work are identified. The following chart lists and briefly describes these sectors.

Factory/Industry	Working in extremely poor conditions, children (usually migrants) work 15 hours/day often injuring themselves in the filthy, hazardous factories. Other factories/industries include: carpet factories (India), garments/textiles, handicrafts, printing press, welding, confectionery, bread making, making matches, pottery and brick kilns.
Mines and Quarry	In addition to mining magnetite, children also labor in coal mines and quarries.
Plantation	A large portion of the population is involved in agriculture. Children assist in planting substances such as sugar cane, tea, tobacco, millet, maize and rice.
Domestic Service	Possibly one of the more dangerous forms of works because domestic servants are more prone to abuse, children often conduct household activities such as fetching water, cooking, cleaning, and caring for others.
Shop Keeper/Service	Children may work in small shops selling sweets, tea, liquor, and other goods.
Transportation	Children work in public transportation as conductors, ticket collectors, and rickshaw drivers.
Porters	According to IPEC, (The International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor,) there are two types of porters – long distance porters, and short distance porters. Long distance porters carry goods in rural areas, whereas short-distance porters generally work in urban settings. There are street porters, tourist/trekking porters, and domestic porters.
Construction Work	Children work in the hazardous areas of building roads, houses, bridges, and sewage systems.
Street Work	More likely to contract HIV/AIDS and partake in criminal acts, working as newspaper vendors, rag pickers, beggars, street singers, and shoe shiners/makers.
Commercial Sexual Exploitation	With the high chance of getting STDs, children involved in CSE act as prostitutes, pimps, work in massage parlors, and dance bars. In this sector we see a high volume of children being trafficked to India to work in the sex industry.
Bonded Labor	Constrained by the chains of their own or their family's debts, bonded child laborers tend to work in carpet factories, as domestic servants, in restaurants, etc. Although the Kamaiya system (the bonded labor system) was abolished in July 2000, the problem and its aftermath still continue.
Migrant Child Labor	Those children who migrate from rural to urban settings in hopes to find employment.
Refugee Children	Many Tibetan and Bhutanese refugee children work in the factory setting.
Circuses/Music Industry	A growing trend, children often work in circuses both in Nepal and other South Asian countries, particularly India. In addition, they work in magic shows and music programs.
Publicity and Advertising	Children work in TV advertisements, radio programs, newspapers, and magazines.

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The perilous problem of child labor occurs throughout a number of South Asian nations. According to the World Bank,¹¹ India has over 10 million working children, Bangladesh over 6 million, and Pakistan over 3 million. Nepal is notable because the 2 million Nepalese workers make up over one quarter of all Nepalese children. Thus, although some countries have a greater absolute number of child workers, the proportion of child workers is significantly greater in Nepal than in other countries.

Causes of Child Labor in Nepal

What causes this incredibly high rate of children in labor? There are numerous theories that account for the high rate of child labor in Nepal. First, one must consider the nation's financial situation. Labeled as one of the poorest and most undeveloped nations in the world, Nepal's poor economic status contributes to the high rate of child labor and poverty. When families are faced with monetary hardships, they are often forced to send their children to work, sometimes in extremely hazardous conditions, merely to attain basic subsistence.

Nepal's rigid social structure also contributes to child labor. Inequalities between groups in society often augment poverty, which in turn forces parents to send their children to become part of the workforce. Social inequalities causing child labor can most vividly be seen with *bonded* child labor. With such disparity of wealth in Nepal, poor families are often in great debt, and in turn, must become bonded laborers. Often, their debts are passed on to their children, who then become bonded laborers themselves.¹² Discrimination against minority groups also contributes to Nepalese children entering the workforce. A prime example of this can be seen in the number of Tibetan and Bhutanese refugee children involved in labor.¹³

Land ownership and rural migration have further contributed to child labor in Nepal.¹⁴ With over 80% of the population living in rural areas, much of the child labor occurs away from centers of power and law enforcement. Moreover, 6% of the population owns 46% of the land.¹⁵ With the power and money in the hands of a privileged few, the bulk

of the Nepali population remains in poverty. With such immense rural poverty, families are often caught in the common cycle of rural-to-urban migration in hopes to find employment. Factory owners and other employers in urban areas receive a steady flow of rural labor. Children constitute a huge part of this workforce.¹⁶

Elimination of Child Labor

There have been numerous efforts to aid in the elimination of child labor in Nepal. However, such efforts must be practical and culturally specific. For example, Rugmark is a leading agency fighting for the end of child labor in the carpet making industries of South Asia. It monitors carpet factories, making sure there is no child labor in the creation of rugs. Rugmark achieves its objectives by recruiting carpet producers and importers to produce their goods without child labor. In turn, their goods receive a Rugmark label, explicitly indicating that the product is child labor free. Producers and importers must adhere to Rugmark's stringent guidelines and allow for random inspections of facilities.

In reality, this program is not always practical, given the rampant corruption of power in South Asian societies. Businessmen, workers, police officers, and other high-ranking governmental officials are often inclined to accept or pay a bribe in order to have things said or done in their way.

One example of the shortfalls of the Rugmark program can be seen in the story of Minsari Rai. Minsari was a girl child worker at the Sangrila Carpet Factory. She often worked very hard 18-hour days in poor conditions. Ultimately, she died of a serious illness directly due to the negligence of the factory's owners. Deceivingly, Sangrila Carpet Factory was functioning under Rugmark, but obviously did not adhere to the spirit of the program.¹⁷

Despite its imperfections, Rugmark has contributed greatly in the effort to eliminate worldwide child labor. In addition to monitoring affiliated factories, Rugmark has also provided education for many former child workers. Rugmark correctly recognizes that education is essential for the elimination of child labor.

Nepal has less than 2 million working children, but deserves special attention because the child workforce accounts for over one quarter of all Nepalese children.

Nepalese children need international legal protection and other protective measures to ensure their safety. In addition to a minimum age requirement for labor, there should be a reasonably set minimum wage for child workers. To decrease the number of children trafficked out of the country, there should also be a minimum age law restricting the travel of minors without parent approval. Lastly, there needs to be a concerted global effort to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. Children can contribute to the family income in more pro-social ways that do not put their health and well-being at risk.¹⁸

Education: A Combative Force

In 2003, the literacy rate of the Nepalese population above 15 years of age was 45.2%.¹⁹ One of the most effective ways to combat child labor is to change misunderstanding from within. This can only be done through education. Education acts not only as means to develop the minds of children, but also as a foundation for social change.

Foremost, there should be free access to primary and secondary school education for all children. The education of a child should not be hindered by a family's income. Moreover, schools should be tailored to accommodate the needs of all the children. Various types of schooling, such as formal, informal, non-formal, vocational, semi-vocational or pre-vocational education could be introduced into Nepali society.²⁰ With the variety in schooling, children in both rural and urban settings could find the type of school most appropriate for them based on their learning style and experiences. Enforceable legislation could promote free education, and responsibility could be placed on the governments to provide schools and parents to ensure attendance.²¹

Offering incentives, such as financial assistance to families, is an effective way to ensure children are sent to school rather than to factories. Since children often work to supplement the family's income, monetary incentives from the government substitute for the child's income contribution so that the child can go to school. In other words, government subsidies can compensate families who educate their children. Such a policy should be viewed as an investment in the future of Nepal and the liberation of the Nepalese people from poverty.

The Sankhu School in Nepal has successfully provided such incentives to Nepali

families. In addition to providing free education to Nepalese children, the school provides one free meal per day to each child. It is estimated that over 50% of the population of the Sankhu village is unemployed. Coupled with the high cost of tuition, Sankhu villagers often feel obliged to send their children to the capital city, Kathmandu, to find work. The Sankhu School provides free education for children, and also nutrition and immunizations.²²

Child workers are not the only ones who need to be educated. Parents must also be aware of the dangers of child labor, the devastating effects working may have on their child and on the larger society, and most importantly, their feasible options (i.e., education, government programs, etc.).

In order for real change, there needs to be societal mobilization. The elimination of child labor cannot solely rely on legislation and enforcement; the Nepalese society must attain a common understanding of the negative effects child labor has on their children, their families, their economy, and their county.

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Endnotes

¹ David I. Parker with Lee Engfer and Robert Conrow. Stolen Dreams: Portraits of Working Children. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1998. pgs. 20-24

² "The State of the Rights of the Child in Nepal, 2003" pg. 10 (Article accessible on <http://www.cwin-nepal.org/resources/reports/index.htm>)

³ Estimate as of July, 2004. <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/np.html>

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/nepal.html>

⁶ <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/np.html>

⁷ Founded in 1919, the ILO is a UN agency which advocates social justice and international human and labor laws. The making of Conventions and Recommendations, the ILO creates international labor standards of basic labor rights. These rights include: freedom of association, the right to organize, collective bargaining, abolition of forced labor, equality of opportunity and treatment, and other standards regulating conditions across the entire spectrum of work related issues. (additional information can be found at www.ilo.org)

⁸ http://www.endchildexploitation.org.uk/issue_child_labour.asp

⁹ <http://multinationalmonitor.org/hyper/mm1094.html#labor>

¹⁰ http://www.cwin-nepal.org/press_room/factsheet/child_labour_in_nepal.htm

¹¹ January 2000; Chart from, <http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/sar/sa.nsf/0/6114c3934c4776238525696000487390?OpenDocument>

¹² Denis Wright, "Child Labor in Nepal." <http://www.une.edu.au/~arts/SouthAsiaNet/childlabour/child%20labour%20Nepal.pdf>

¹³ http://www.cwin-nepal.org/press_room/factsheet/child_labour_in_nepal.htm

¹⁴ Denis Wright, "Child Labor in Nepal." <http://www.une.edu.au/~arts/SouthAsiaNet/childlabour/child%20labour%20Nepal.pdf>

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ "The State of the Rights of the Child in Nepal – 2001" CWIN. <http://www.cwin-nepal.org/resources/reports/roc2001.pdf>

¹⁸ http://www.cwin-nepal.org/resources/issues/child_labour.htm

¹⁹ <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/np.html>

²⁰ http://www.cwin-nepal.org/resources/issues/cwin_strategy_clabour.htm

²¹ *Ibid*

²² http://www.mnadvocates.org/The_Sankhu_School__Nepal.html