

Where children work: child servitude in the global economy - Cover Story

Pharis J. Harvey

FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD Santosh spoke in a low, almost inaudible voice. His head hung limp and he showed little expression. But at least he was able to speak--showing a remarkable improvement in the six months since he had been rescued from a carpet factory near Allahabad, India. The story he told needed no dramatic embellishments to convey its horror. One day when he was five, while playing with friends, some men drove into the village and asked the boys if they wanted to see a "video." Having heard of but never having seen such a thing, they all said yes and piled into the back of the vehicle. The men then drove to a city 400 kilometers away, where the boys were locked in a room for many days without food and beaten into submission. Only by working at a carpet loom did they receive food, and then barely enough to survive--bread, water and occasionally vegetables.

Santosh's captivity lasted nine years, during which time he never had contact with his family, never had a day off and was never paid one rupee for harsh, crippling work. Two of his village friends did not survive--one was shot while trying to escape and the other died from some untreated illness. Finally, in the fall of 1993, Santosh was rescued by the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude (SACCS); group led by Kailash Satyarthi, a charismatic former Brahmin. SACCS stormed into the loom-shed where Santosh was working and freed him and all the other children who were being kept in servitude. Unable to speak when rescued, Santosh was taken to an Ashram operated by SACCS where therapists, counselors and a family environment slowly unlocked his shuttered mind and enabled him to identify his family and home village and eventually be reunited with them.

When I met Santosh, he had joined Kailash and his band of child-rescuers on a 5,200-kilometer march from the southern tip of India to New Delhi to muster support in villages, towns and cities for an end to child servitude in India. Though still scarred, he was able to stand on makeshift platforms and tell his story. The marchers urged people to boycott products made by child labor and to work on persuading India's government to put resources into basic village education.

Santosh's experience was extreme but not unusual. In India alone, some 55 million children are at work rather than in school, many in situations of bondage and endangerment that leave them stunted, sickly and illiterate. Their work perpetuates family poverty. In South Asia, around 1 million of these children sit cramped at looms weaving lovely, hand-knotted carpets to sell in the U.S., Germany and other Western countries. Many millions more are born into families bonded by generations-old debt to rural landlords, for whom they work from the time they are old enough to go to the fields. Although outlawed, this pattern of debt bondage, or caste bondage, persists throughout the region because of lax enforcement and a climate of apathy and hopelessness. Others work with toxic glues to assemble shoes, toil in hellish glass factories, weave silk threads, pour molten brass into molds, or clean the poisonous barrels of leather-tanning fluids. Hundreds of thousands labor in brickyards, quarries and mines, bearing burdens far too heavy for their slender bodies, contracting silicosis, tuberculosis and other diseases. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that around 200 million children are engaged in work that is dangerous to their health, morals or development.

A year-long study by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1994 reported that millions of children are involved in producing or processing goods that are imported into the U.S. from Asia, Latin America and Africa. The study provides a chilling account of the extent of child servitude in the global economy.

OPPONENTS OF the Uruguay Round of the Generalized Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which the U.S. ratified in December, point out that the new agreement hampers countries from attempting to ban products made by child labor; in fact, a study by the Congressional Research Service concluded it would be "GATT-illegal" to bar products from the U.S. market simply because they were produced by children.

Defenders of child labor practices--mostly expatriate Indian economists teaching in America--claim that child labor is a necessary if unfortunate aspect of development in poor countries. They say that those who campaign against it are naively applying Western standards to other cultures and if successful will force children out of productive jobs into prostitution and dangerous life on the streets.

What are Christians to make of this debate? The gospel does not allow us to assign higher value to some of God's people than to others.

Addressing the suffering of little children, whether in the workplace or from domestic abuse, hunger or malnutrition, must be our highest priority. Jesus repeatedly reminded his listeners that how they treated children was a mark of their closeness to the kingdom of God.

But assigning a high priority does not in itself suggest what actions or policies will effectively cope with this massive problem. For that, we must first understand the sources of child labor (defined here as mostly illegal, mostly full-time work of children under 14 in situations damaging to their health, education or moral development, whether that labor is for pay or not).

SOME DESCRIBE child labor as the unavoidable byproduct of general poverty. Parents with no security except the hope that children will care for them in old age have large families. The age-old myth that "more hands equals more income" fuels the population growth that perpetuates a child labor supply.

But child labor is not only a byproduct of poverty; child labor also generates poverty, and until it is ended the number of desperately poor will proliferate, as will the number of children in servitude. Each generation of poverty-stricken, illiterate child laborers becomes the next generation of poverty-stricken and illiterate adults who recapitulate the cycle by producing large numbers of children. The argument that child labor can't be eliminated until poverty is eliminated reverses cause and effect and provides an excuse for tolerating child labor. Ending child labor is a way out of poverty, not a side benefit of poverty-alleviation measures.

A political and social tolerance for child labor is exhibited primarily in attitudes toward minorities, "backward" castes and women. At the policy level, resources are directed away from certain populations and basic broad-based development programs into programs that benefit an already-privileged elite.

It is not accidental that some 80 percent of India's children in servitude are the children of "Dalits," oppressed low-caste or minority tribal people. Prejudicial attitudes affect employers such as carpet loom owners, who consider these children expendable, and administrator who ignore these oppressed castes and tribes, frequently redirecting development assistance away from them. In the Sivakasi area of Tamil Nadu state, where the country's match and fireworks industry thrives on a dry climate and a steady supply of child laborers, local politicians and industry owners deprive poor farmers of irrigation assistance in order to sustain the supply of child laborers. In the northeast near the carpet belt, development assistance is denied low-caste peoples in Bihar, who must then send their children to work at the carpet looms.

This is not a problem peculiar to India. Guatemala's child laborers have been objects of prejudice for 500 years. Brazil's child laborers tend to be descendants of slaves or children of indigenous people with no political clout. In the U.S., children of migrants are exploited for similar reasons.

Caste or ethnic prejudice is exacerbated by attitudes toward girls, who are considered liabilities rather than assets. Where dowry customs prevail, as in much of South Asia, girls and women are often sent into exploitative labor situations. Another reason for large families is the hope of having enough boys to care for parents and to earn dowries for girls. In Nagpur, India, I visited a family of seven Muslim sisters aged six to 16, all of whom roll incense sticks 12 or more hours a day for a collective wage of \$1.61. The 16-year-old completed five years of schooling, but left to work because further education would make her unmarriageable. With slightly more education she would have been able to earn more than her sisters and mother combined.

ANOTHER BYPRODUCT of prejudice is a lack of basic education. When a state requires education for all children, as in Kerala, India, child labor is sharply diminished. In most of India, however, basic education gets short shrift. India has no national education requirement. Many villages lack even rudimentary schools. If school buildings exist, teachers may not. (But in its urban centers, India has some of the finest technological and scientific centers in Asia, and the export of nuclear technology is a key foreign-exchange earner.

Interacting with these causes is official neglect--and worse. "Sheer callousness, almost bordering on sadism, on the part of enforcement officials is the main reason for the exacerbation of the sufferings of child labor," says India's most prestigious social research institute, the Operations Research Group in Baroda. But lack of law enforcement is due to other causes too. In many countries, child labor laws are vague and riddled with loopholes. Labor inspectors are poorly trained, poorly paid and few in number. These conditions lead to rampant corruption--another characteristic of countries with serious child labor problems.

In recent years, macro-economic policies have fostered growth in export-oriented industries, which in turn have increased their supply of child laborers. In India, for example, the numbers of children toiling in the carpet industry rapidly increased after 1975, when Iran

barred child labor from its carpet industry. India's prime minister established policies, including training children as weavers, to take up the market share that Iran was vacating. Child labor in the diamond industry grew when India's diamond cutters developed a market in the West for Siberian diamonds previously considered too small, but now marketed in the U.S. largely through direct television sales.

The integration of the world's poor areas into production for the global markets has rapidly increased the exploitation of children. In Sri Lanka and India children pluck tea; in Guatemala, Mexico and Brazil, coffee; in Egypt, jasmine blossoms; in the Philippines and Central America, bananas. Most of these products are grown exclusively for export. In Colombia, the export cutflower industry employs underaged workers; in Bangladesh, an export-oriented garment industry competes globally by employing children at dirt-cheap wages; Egypt, Turkey, Morocco and Nepal use children to produce carpets. Elsewhere, children work on plantations and in fish-processing plants.

MOST SOLUTIONS will have to be generated nationally and locally. If the will to enforce child labor laws is absent, or if alternatives for children do not exist, international agencies and foreign governments can do nothing directly to remedy the problems. Yet they can act indirectly, by rewarding changes in official behavior or providing sanctions against those profiting from the misery of children. Where the will to change exists, international assistance and support can play a role.

The most important task is to increase the opportunity and the requirement for free public education. Lack of schooling leads to child employment; irrelevant schooling leads to massive dropout rates, then to child employment. International development policy should assist, in upgrading and universalizing basic education as the first line of offense against child servitude.

Second, development assistance should target the regions and populations that provide inordinate numbers of child labor. In India this means re-examining development projects such as the huge dam on the Narmada River, which will displace tens of thousands of primarily tribal people, or providing basic irrigation to sections of Tamil Nadu or Bihar states that supply migrant child labor to various industries. Recent U.S. legislation requires the U.S. to support World Bank policies that encourage countries to respect the internationally recognized rights of workers. A good first step would be to re-examine current development projects, screening out those that exacerbate child labor and redirecting other projects toward alleviation of conditions that lead to child labor.

IN SEPTEMBER 1994 the Conference on Population and, Development concluded that giving high priority to development programs and policy changes that enhance the status and economic power of women and girls will go far toward ending the particular exploitation of female children in the workplace. U.S. development programs should focus on efforts that increase the purchasing power and social status of women. It is also important for development programs and civil-justice instruments to be better targeted toward vulnerable ethnic and social groups that provide an undue proportion of child laborers.

In the context of such changes, stronger laws and more honest enforcement of child labor laws become both possible and necessary. In most countries with child labor problems, laws exist but are ignored. It is impossible to expect strong enforcement of laws on child labor, compulsory education and health and safety in the workplace until alternative means of survival for the desperately poor exist.

We can protect freedom of association and collective bargaining rights for adult workers. It is universally true that adult workers who have the right to negotiate and bargain for a living wage do not have to send their children into the workplace. Where strong unions exist, they resist the hiring of children at wages that undermine their own. U.S. efforts to secure the compliance of its trading partners with internationally recognized worker rights is an important element in the drive to end child labor.

In the face of overwhelming poverty and growing populations, how can governments be induced to give priorities to these measures? They must have a political will powerful enough to overcome cultural resistance, prejudice, entrenched economic interests and the enticement of an export market for goods produced cheaply but with child labor.

The most powerful instrument for forging this political will is the Child Labor Deterrence Act, introduced into the U. S. Congress in 1992. This bill bars the U. S. from importing products made or processed by children. It also directs specific aid (through the ILO and UNICEF) toward programs to eliminate child labor in developing countries;

There is hardly a government with serious child labor problems that is unaware of this bill, sponsored in the Senate by Tom Haridn (D., Iowa) and in the House of Representatives by George E. Brown (D., Calif.). During the past three years the Indian government has opened up a dialogue with carpet manufacturers that has been missing for decades. In Bangladesh the reaction has been mostly negative. Its government has enlisted nongovernmental organizations to attack the bill as "protectionist" and "imperialistic" instead of

coping with changes the bill would require in its garment industry. In Nepal the Harkin-Brown bill has stimulated a willingness to develop a child-free carpet industry and to find alternatives for children who are weaving carpets. In the Philippines the threat of this bill induced the Ramos government to reverse recent legislation that lowered the age for working children.

The European Union is also considering restrictions on trade in child-produced goods. Together with the Harkin-Brown bill, these laws would directly impact only a small portion of child labor in most countries (in India less than 5 percent). These bills, however, have the power to generate political will in countries where it has been lacking, and to counter the growing economic and political strength of exporters who block reform efforts. As countries compete with each other for foreign investment and export markets, such legislation could take child labor exploitation out of the equation by removing child labor as a competitive advantage.

THE INTRODUCTION of the Harkin-Brown bill has already encouraged nongovernmental efforts to achieve child-labor-free production standards in India, where carpet manufacturers formalized the Rugmark Foundation licensing system for carpets made without child labor. Since September more than 100 carpet-makers have licensed the trademark and agreed to random inspections. In mid-January the first "Rugmark" labeled carpet was presented to Senator Harkin in recognition of his efforts to combat child labor. Consumer groups, churches, trade unions and other organizations are spreading the word in shopping malls and in correspondence with the home furnishing industry. If the "Rugmark" initiative succeeds in pressuring South Asian carpet-makers and U.S. importers to end the employment of children in this sector, it will provide strong incentives to other industries and countries to take similar steps. Christians do not stand alone in their opposition to child labor; in India the lead is being taken by reform groups of Hindu and Muslim faiths. But the impact of

Christian faith on this problem is profound. Kerala, where Christianity is strongest, has had the most success in coping with child servitude. This is due in part to the strong egalitarian values of a communist government, but also to the Christian concepts that value women, oppose caste discrimination and emphasize education.

These values must inform and energize church efforts to end child labor. At a time when U.S. political forces seem determined to revert to a Dickensian past of orphanages and poorhouses, we must draw on all the resources of our faith to counter these trends.

COPYRIGHT 1995 The Christian Century Foundation

COPYRIGHT 2004 Gale Group