



The Small Hands of Slavery

Child labour is a challenging, complex, global issue that raises difficult questions with no straightforward answers.

We need to wrestle with these challenging questions. Not for the sake of mere curiosity...

But for the sake of millions of lives.

Following a recent trip to Southern India, **Bethany Pawson** reports.

U nbearable heat envelops my body as I stand on a dusty, desolate roadside near a village in Southern India. Exhausted in the 38 degree heat, I wipe beads of sweat from my forehead. Weary, uncomfortable and hungry, my mind is occupied with the desire for a refreshing cold shower and a decent lunch to relieve the

pangs of hunger that consume my body. However, these selfish thoughts rapidly drown in a pool of guilt as I snap back into reality and absorb my bleak surroundings. Sitting before me on the filthy ground, in nauseating humidity, is a young boy about the age of eight. For 14 hours a day he turns a wooden wheel about an axle which entwines sabai grass

to make rope. Such monotony, in such heat, for a daily profit of what equates to roughly twenty New Zealand cents. I watch intently, unable to tear my eyes away from the young boy so focused on his labour. There is no means of verbal communication between us. There is no need. His eyes say it all. "Where is my freedom?"

This little boy has barely any time to play, little food to eat and no hope for the future. He endures heat, hunger and constant hardship. His body aches, his mind is dulled and his soul is shrunken. He watches longingly as other little children go to school, earnestly yearning to join them. The door to future work opportunities is being narrowed to a thin crack. Day by day his childhood is being stolen from him, and tragically, he is not alone

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Children in many cultures are taught from an early age that work is a part of living. They learn to work hard, to be efficient, and diligent in their application to tasks. Of course these values and practices have merit but there's a line that should not be crossed. Employing children to work in conditions of extreme hardship is inhumane and exploitative.

Employing them in such conditions in order to pay off or gain payment for debts is callous, cruel and unjust. It is, without a doubt, slavery.

Bonded child labourers endure hazardous work in exploitive conditions to pay off a debt. The dangerous, destructive and detrimental environment affects their health, their education, personal and social development, and their very lives.

Helen Sherpa is a Kiwi woman currently living in Nepal who for the last six years has been working as an Education Specialist for the World Education organisation on a Project called 'Brighter Future'. This project is dedicated to addressing child labour issues. "Many children are torn from home without warning" Sherpa reveals. "They



A young Indian boy lays out matchsticks into frames in preparation for dipping.

are kept imprisoned and working in other people's homes and factories with no contact with friends or family. They are abused and have no idea what the future holds for them. The work they do

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Bound to their employers in exchange for a loan, these small children earn so little they may never escape the firm clutches of repression. They are entrapped for life in a web of poverty, greed and injustice. Bond Masters offer "loans" to destitute parents in an effort to secure the labour of a child. The parents need the money, perhaps to pay for the costs of an illness, or to provide a dowry to a marrying child, or, as is often the case, merely to put food in mouths. The children who are sold to violent bond masters often work 12-14 hours a day over many years in an attempt to pay off

these debts, yet due to the astronomically high rates of interest charged and the abysmally low wages paid, the repayment is often unsuccessful. The cycle of work and abuse continues.

In India, the debt that binds children to their employer tends to be relatively modest, ranging on average from 500 rupees to 7,500 rupees - from 14 to 250 New Zealand dollars. These amounts are large for impoverished families and sometimes represent the difference between life and death. They are tragically pathetic however when compared with the value of a child.

Amalia Fawcett, speaker for the World Vision 40 Hour Famine, travels throughout the country to talk to intermediate and secondary students about the annual 40 hour famine. "Long hours spent hunched over baskets of tobacco causes growth deformities, and the constant inhalation of tobacco dust intensifies the risk of lung diseases. There is a very high rate of tuberculosis in communities dedicated to the manufacture of beedi

cigarettes." says Ms Fawcett. "In carpet weaving the occupational diseases are similar: the children sit in a cramped

space all day long, inhaling wool fibers and dust. As a result, the carpet weavers are prone to emphysema and tuberculosis; they also suffer frequent cuts to their hands and fingers, which may be "cured" by cauterizing them with burning sulphur."

On a recent trip to India, I was able to see for myself the horrific conditions that many of these children worked in. My father, brother, sister and I watched them making ropes, cigarettes and matches. Before I walked into their world and experienced their trauma, these children lay outside the circle of my awareness and concern. Children who should have been laughing, skipping, playing, and basking in the free-

dom of their youth were instead enduring difficult, repetitive, manual labour. The contrast with my own upbringing was stark. Despite my feeble complaints, I have never experienced genuine hunger or hardship. I've had pleasant houses to live in, clean water to drink, labelled clothes to wear, plenty of time for fun and socialisation, and wonderful schools to educate me. I have the freedom to voice opinions, make choices, and select a career from a wide range of options.

Many, young and old, in our Western societies become absorbed in our own comfortable worlds, oblivious to the horrifically unjust existence that millions of vulnerable children are forced to live. We continue with our tenderly bubble-wrapped lives and are blind to the misery and difficulty of child labour-

“They are abused and have no idea what the future holds for them - the work they do denies them an education and a childhood. ”

ers in other parts of the world. While we complain daily about difficult colleagues, stressful workloads and cheap instant coffee in our workplaces, children are dying on the altars of our consumer needs and lifestyles. As members of the global village we can not simply continue on in our ignorance. We need to be informed and we need to act.

After meeting and interacting with Indian children who were previously or are currently ensnared by the claws of bondage, I began to question their lack of anger and grief. ‘Why aren’t these kids enraged about their dire circumstances or upset by their oppression?’ I asked myself, ‘Why aren’t they pleading for help and literally dying to escape the pain and monotony of their captivity?’ The answer? This is what their experience and upbringing have taught them is acceptable. This is their existence, this is what they are used to, and this is all they

know. They are tragically shackled by the chains of ignorance and injustice.

Whether at home, or in school, streets or workplaces, a child is always a child and deserves an upbringing free from harmful manual labour and abuse. No one - no adult, no adolescent and absolutely no child - should be subjected to the privations and slavery of bonded labour.

“Childhood should not be a time to have to experience such exploitation and misery,” says Helen Sherper. “Everyone has the right to positive, equal liberties that uplift them as worthy individuals. We should all experience the real value of life, and not have to endure an existence of such pain and suffering.”

This is why abolishing the bonded child labour trade is not an option, it is a necessity.

Attempts are being made by various bodies and individuals to abolish bonded child labour. The Indian government has passed many laws designed to ultimately eliminate child labour, however these laws are often disregarded. For reasons of apathy, social group bias, and corruption, many government officials deny that these labourers exist at all. According to a vast and deeply entrenched set of myths, bonded labour and child labour in India are inevitable. They are caused by poverty. They represent the natural order of things, and it is not possible to change them by force; they must evolve slowly toward eradication. “People in countries where bondage exists, see child labour but accept it,” says Education specialist Helen Sherper. “They know families are poor and so they feel there is no choice but for children to work no matter how bad the conditions.” Fortunately these destructive underlying attitudes and rationales are

THEN...



Seated cross legged in a modest hut, I hear the story of a child whose life bore no fun, no freedom, no hope. Sudarmathi's family worked hard to make ends meet, she tells me. A few years ago, when her father, Ravi, first fell sick, it seemed the barriers that restricted the life of the family would never be broken down. He needed treatment at the hospital. They borrowed 1,500 rupees to pay for this. It was agreed Sudarmathi would work making beedis (cigarettes) until the debt, plus interest, was paid. She was 9 years old.

Quietly reflecting on her past, Sudarmathi describes what it was like to be a bonded labourer - "Repeating the same task for long hours, my fingers throbbed, my legs got cramp and my back began to ache. If the daily target of 2,000 beedis was not reached, or I didn't do it right, the mudlalis (boss) would yell at me, or ruthlessly beat me with his stick. Starting at 7am and finishing at 8pm for 6 days a week, Sudarmathi earned 60 rupees a week (about \$2).

NOW...

Fortunately the family's circumstances came to the attention of *Born to be Free* project workers. They arranged to pay the debt and for Sudarmathi to begin transit learning at the local government girls' school. She diligently worked to catch up on missed education and now at 14 years old, Sudarmathi has a dream. A dream that has full potential to become reality. She wants to become a doctor, and with the provided education, her honest application to learning, and her current academic position of second in a class of 40 girls, Sudarmathi has just as much

chance of reaching this goal as a n y w e s t - e r n e r .



being challenged and overcome by people and organisations with a commitment to justice and compassion.

World Vision India is one such organisation. Over the last 12 years they have developed a holistic, highly effective approach. In one project called Born to Be Free they have managed to help free and educate over 600 former bonded and child labourers. Initially, World Vision granted families money to pay to employers, so the children could be set free. Over time, in co-operation with village leaders, other NGOs, educational institutions and local government, they have developed a longer term holistic approach designed to empower the child, family and wider community. Now instead of giving grants they help provide pools of money that are controlled by self help groups of villagers. Families with children trapped in bonded or child labour are able to free their children by accessing low interest loans with easy terms of repayment. The money then goes back into the pool and continues to be accessed by others in the village to free children and assist with other areas of need such as poverty relief, education and economic advancement.

A number of other initiatives in the area of education, health, micro credit and vocational training have also been introduced to ensure the complex needs of the children and their families are adequately addressed. The aim in all of this endeavour is to provide a hand up not a hand out. The strategies are designed to empower the local people and give them greater control of their own destinies.

Dr Jayakumar Christian is the national director for World Vision India. "We believe that a child enrolled in school is a child withdrawn from labour." He says "We want to eliminate the practice of child labour in 5835 target communities by year 2012."

During our time in Southern India we witnessed not only the horrors of child labour but, the glowing freedom of

playing our part FOR FREEDOM...

Little stones can spread big ripples and the actions of each and every one of us can impact upon the lives of children thousands of kilometres away. As individuals we can become a component in the abolition revolution. No matter what our culture, language, race or religion we can play our a part in eradicating this evil from the planet. Complete liberty may appear to be an unreachable goal but if individuals combine their efforts, more and more children will recover their rights, their freedom and their childhood.

As consumers, we can take immediate action. We can read information provided by reputable NGOs and other groups identifying companies who exploit children in their manufacturing processes. We can cease to purchase the products of offending companies. We can talk with friends, and family members about the issue and encourage them to be part of the answer. We can write to offending companies and pressure them to improve their trading practices. We can also inform and pressure others who have influence and power. Politicians, Government groups, and media sources all heavily influence society. Reverse the roles. Urge these powerful groups to become poverty focused. Encourage them to highlight the issue and where appropriate fund projects which aim to eradicate the exploitation of children.

We can also give money to worthy projects. For \$15 per month I can become a donor to World Vision NZ's 'Children in Crisis' initiative and help them fund the work in India and other places around the world.

We can also engage in other creative initiatives to arouse awareness and raise funds. After visiting World Vision's 'Born to be Free' project in Southern India in April 2007 and seeing the appalling conditions in which many children worked, Sean Pawson, a Kiwi consultant who serves in the area of child and family care, decided to do something more.. "My heart was really touched by the children that I met. I felt a strong desire to do more to help. I have decided to gather a team of family members and friends together and ride a tandem mountain bike from one end of New Zealand's South Island to the other. We will be riding through the mountains along a route that has never been ridden before. We're calling the journey "cycling with the poor". We are partnering with World Vision on this journey and will use every opportunity we have to highlight the plight of bonded children and encourage people to become financial sponsors of World Vision's children in crisis programmes."

those now set free. We saw the joy in their smiles and heard the pride in their voices as they trialled their English learned recently at school. We joined them in their play and listened as they and their parents spoke, sometimes tearfully, of new-found hope.

Numerous other organisations are also exercising initiatives to assist children and abolish child labour. UNICEF, the Christina Noble Foundation, the Child Labour coalition and various other groups are acting to rescue and restore children and families in bonded labour. These efforts are uplifting and life changing, but more needs to be done.

Child labour is a stark human rights issue. When freedom is stolen from children by the ravages of poverty and injustice, their entire physical and emotional being is severely jeopardized. Strategies to combat the issue require more than moral expressions from socially conscious organisations. We as global citizens are collectively responsible. Childhood. Hope. Future. These are the *rights* of every individual. It's not a suggestion but a necessity that we advance the dignity of our youth worldwide by providing ways for the struggle-bound to view life from eyes gleaming with newfound freedom. *Every* child is born to be free.