

# NEPAL

*The legally defined minimum age for the employment of minors in Nepal is 16 in industry and 14 in agriculture. The constitution stipulates that children shall not be employed in factories, mines or similar hazardous work. But there is no child protection act, the labour department administers the minimum-wage law only in larger enterprises of the formal sector, and child workers are found in all sectors of the rural and urban economies.*

## The field study

Nepal is known for the beauty and craftsmanship of its carpets. It is less well known that these carpets are partly made by children who work from 6 am to 10 pm, seven days a week, in atrocious working conditions for a pittance.

The field study of Nepal's carpet factories found that roughly 20% of the workforce were children below 14 years. Other estimates have been about 50%, ie. 200,000 children, many of whom have been sold into slavery at the factories by their parents.

As with child textile-workers and street-vendors in other parts of the developing world, which are described in other sections of this report, the company which completes the carpet and exports it does not soil its hands with child labour.

It conveniently sub-contracts work to the locals, some of whom sub-contract it further.

At this low level, anything goes.

Ruthless exploitation is the name of the game.

Child-labour laws are flouted.

In Nepal, there are three levels of work in the carpet industry: the manufacturer/exporter, who is at the top, and who contracts work out to a master-weaver or loom-holder.

The sub-contractor who employs weavers to make the carpets. Finally, the weavers, and it is among them that children are found.

The weavers say that children are employed because small hands tie intricate knots more easily. Maybe. But the principal reason for employing children is that they are easy to exploit.

**Less than a dollar a day**

After three to six months of unpaid "training", during which the children live 15 to a room and are fed rice and lentils, they go on the payroll and are paid for piece-work.

They usually receive less than \$1 a day, but in some factories, they only receive \$10-\$15 a month.

In one study more than 75% of the child carpet-workers had migrated to towns such as Kathmandu and Lalitpur from homes in the countryside. Some 80% of these are from Mongol ethnic minorities, mostly from the Taming community, a friendly people who are mostly illiterate.

Some of the children have run away from home because family life was difficult. Others are brought to the factory by their parents because they could not afford to support them or pay for their education. Some are brought to the factory by friends or relations who are already working there. Others are recruited in distant villages by middlemen who collect a percentage of the child's tiny wage.

One young Mongol boy, Shyam, said he earned 500-600 rupees a month for working a 16-hour day - and out of that he had to pay 300 rupees a month in rent.

He had come to the factory because at home "however hard my father and my brothers worked there was never enough to eat".

**"I would cry for my mother"**

At work the children sit on hard benches in unventilated rooms, breathing in the woollen fluff that fills the air.

The hammer they use in the weaving process often skins their knuckles, making them bleed.

Girl workers are often sexually harassed.

Sometimes the child-workers stay in a hunched position for hours.

Some factories are so badly lit that the children's vision becomes impaired.

Work on tight looms causes their knuckles to swell, causing early arthritis.

At one factory a child-worker said her hands were frequently injured by a cutter. "I would cry for my mother but then the master would beat me," she said.

The boss provided his own unusually crude brand of medical treatment for deep cuts. He would fill the girl's cut with matchstick-powder and set light to it with another match. «My skin and blood would burn together,» she said.

The sub-contractors give no days off or holidays and provide no conventional medical care or education for the children. There is no job security.

The workers are not allowed to have visitors who, in any case, are not welcome. Security at the main gates is tight.

The employers do not want outside world to know what they are up to.

Some of the most unscrupulous of the factory-owners encourage young Tamang girls to go to Bombay where they are promised work in Indian films - and end

up in prostitution. The girls naively jump at the idea of stardom.

### **No prospects**

If they lose their job, the child-worker's chance of finding another are slim.

This is because they have missed out on their education and are mostly untrained and illiterate.

Their lost opportunity to live a decent life has been described as a devastation of human resources".

There is no excuse for the businessmen's behaviour, which is mainly motivated by greed. The carpet industry is booming in Nepal. In 1991-92, carpets accounted for 57% of all exports.

A study of earnings indicates that if only adults were employed in the factories, these would still be profitable. Total costs would increase only by 8%.

According to a study by UNICEF, the most effective and best solution to the child-labour problem is to provide children with free and easily accessible primary education. When given the choice, the poorest parents send their children to school and not to work.