
India: Children Still Work, Despite Ban

A year after India banned children under 14 from working as domestic servants or in food stalls, millions continue to be employed according to a report by Save the Children. The report states that many of the child workers are denied food, and are beaten up, burnt or sexually abused.

According to official estimates, India has more than 12 million child workers. Of these, about 200,000 are estimated to be working as domestic servants and in teashops, restaurants, spas, hotels, resorts and other recreational centres - the areas from where they were banned last year.

No difference

But unofficial figures, quoted by groups working with children, say the country has up to 20 million children working at homes and in food stalls. And the ban does not seem to have made any difference.

“I recently met a 12-year-old girl, Sonali, in the eastern state of West Bengal. She had been working for the last two years as a domestic servant in the city of Calcutta,” Anuradha Maharishi of Save the Children told the BBC.

Sonali’s job was to cook for a five-member household and clean a three-storey house. One day there was a delay in serving dinner and her employer poured burning hot food on her hands.

She managed to escape with help from a neighbour and Save the Children have now restored her to her family.

“Although she is 12, she looks like she could be eight or 10. Her eyes brimmed with tears as she showed me her burnt hands. She didn’t cry, she’s a very brave girl,” says Ms Maharishi.

Save the Children says that in Delhi alone, close to a million children are still employed at homes or in food stalls. Another 40,000 work in the southern city of Hyderabad and 50,000 more work in Calcutta.

Lax laws

Since last year when the government announced the ban, officials say only 2,229 violations have been reported. Save the Children - which works in the states of West Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra - says that most of these child workers are routinely subjected to abuse and are in unsafe working conditions.

The study says in Delhi 99 per cent of child domestic workers are girls and in a large number of cases they are open to sexual abuse.

“Most of these young girls who come from poor families are forced to work up to 15 hours a day with no breaks and little or no pay,” Ms Maharishi says. She says protecting children working as domestic servants is difficult because it is carried out within the confines of private homes and information about their condition does not filter out easily.

Announcing the ban last year, the government had warned “firm action against those violating the law”. Punishments range from a jail term of three months to two years and/or a fine of 10,000 to 20,000 rupees (\$225 to \$450).

But child rights activists question the effectiveness of the ban in India. India bans the use of young workers in hazardous industries, but thousands of children continue to work in firecracker and matchstick factories or are involved in carpet-weaving, embroidery or stitching footballs.

Many parents say crippling poverty forces them to send their children, sometimes as young as five or six, to work in other people’s homes or in factories.

CHILD SOLDIERS: Call for more States to sign pact

France and UNICEF have urged more countries to sign an international set of principles outlawing the use of child soldiers and helping restore them to civilian life. Governments of 59 countries originally signed the "Paris Commitments" in February, pledging to do more to prevent children from being recruited as soldiers. Another seven committed themselves at Monday's meeting on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly.

French Secretary of State for Human Rights, Rama Yade, called Monday's meeting to rally support for the principles, drawn up with the United Nations children's agency UNICEF, which estimates that more than 250,000 children were recruited or used by armed forces in 2006.

"Every country says that they support the commitments and the principles of Paris," Yade told reporters after the meeting. "The problem is some accept to sign and the others don't."

She cited the United States as an example of a country that backs the core principles but has not signed because it opposes a clause dealing with the International Criminal Court.

"There are not two camps, on the one side against, on the other side for. It's more complicated," Yade said.

February's meeting in Paris agreed a set of principles, meant as practical guidelines for governments and aid groups working in the field, and commitments, which governments were asked to sign.

The documents include some 20 specific measures to protect children from being employed by armed forces or groups.

Many of the measures refer to ways of reintegrating child soldiers into society, saying such minors should be viewed "primarily as victims" and helped to overcome their traumas. The document calls for particular focus on the needs of young girls, who are often forced into sexual slavery.

The seven countries that agreed to the Paris Commitments on Monday were Argentina, Croatia, Guatemala, Laos, Mauritania, Morocco and Ukraine.

[Source: Reuters: www.alertnet.org]

Further information

The [Optional Protocol](#) on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict
Visit:

India: Child Bondage Continues in Indian Cotton Supply Chain

More than 416,000 children under the age of 18, and 225,000 younger than 14, are involved in (often bonded) child labour in India's cottonseed fields. Most of them are girls. They work in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Compared to the 2003-2004 harvest season the total number of working children has risen. It only decreased in Andhra Pradesh because of local and international pressure.

These are some important results from the study 'Child bondage continues in Indian cotton supply chain', published on behalf of the India Committee of the Netherlands ICN), the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF, USA), OECD Watch, German Agro-Action and OneWorld Net NRW (Germany).

The report is based on field research and has been written by well-known expert Dr. Davuluri Venkateswarlu, director of Glocal Research, who authored several other reports on this issue since 2001.

ICN's director Gerard Oonk says: "The report makes it chillingly clear that our cotton products are tainted with massive bonded child labour. The companies involved, both Indian and multinational, governments and international organisations should make every effort to get the children out of this pernicious work and into school. Together with organisations in India and other countries we will certainly urge them to do so."

Horrendous working and living conditions

Children are made to work 8 to 12 hours a day and usually earn between Rs.20 and Rs.30 a day (hardly half a euro). They are routinely exposed to poisonous pesticides and often trafficked as migrants from other districts and even states.