

CHILD LABOUR: STOLEN CHILDHOOD

Viewers of SBS and ABC television were recently reminded of the horrors of young children, some as young as 6, being forced into slavery to weave carpets. As a rich country that exports wool and provides a market for these luxury carpets, we should be aware of the misery and suffering that goes into their making.

The following part of an article by Penny Mote was published in the Sydney Morning Herald more than 3 years ago.

Unfortunately it could have been written yesterday.

"Very young children are working long hours - some as many as 20 hours a day - in the loom sheds of India's carpet-weaving belt in the State of Uttar Pradesh, despite constitutional provisions banning child employment under the age of 14.

In a cruel distortion of the Gandhian vision of a small-scale, cottage-based industry to encourage rural self-sufficiency in India, an estimated 15 per cent of carpet children have been sold or kidnapped into slave labour, hand-knotting carpets which will be sold overseas as a luxury item to earn foreign exchange for the country.

Deprived of education, recreation and adequate diet, and working in badly lit, poorly ventilated sheds around remote villages, many of the children suffer from tuberculosis and skin diseases without receiving medical treatment.

They are often beaten and tortured into submission if they cry, refuse to work or try to run away.

Legislation to contain and eventually abolish child labour has not been adequately implemented in the carpet industry, a spokesperson admits. Recent legislation - the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986, and National Child Labour Policy, 1987 - has led to programs which aim to wean children away from employment back to education by a variety of incentives including

vocational training and a stipend of 100 rupees a month.

These have yet to reach the two main carpet belts of Utar Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir. It is claimed that contractors evade the law by classing children as "chelas" (apprentices learning a trade from senior craftsmen).

Relief for the child labour force will come as a result of pressure by foreign buyers on Indian manufacturers and the Government to insist that each carpet carries a label saying no children have been employed in its weaving.

In the meantime thousands of children are being robbed of their right to a childhood. An aid worker says *"We all know that children shouldn't be working. Once they start to work it is the end of their childhood and you can't always give that back."*

Joan Ausburn

SENATE PROPOSES CHILD LABOUR LEGISLATION

On September 22, the following motion, moved by Senator Sid Spindler, was passed with the support of all parties:

"that the Senate:

a) reaffirms Australia's opposition to the economic exploitation of children, as expressed in Article 22 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Australia in December 1990,

b) calls on the Australian Government to play an active role in developing within the international community effective measures to eliminate the exploitation of children and to examine the feasibility of legislation to prohibit the importation of goods produced by child labour and to report to the Senate in the sitting week of 7 November 1994.

Hansard pp1245-1256

Please send your comments to DCI-Australia for inclusion in our submission on the form that such legislation should take.