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Child Labor in the Carpet Industry

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Carpet manufacturers and the carpet export industry in Pakistan, as well as carpet importers and retailers in the USA and other Western countries, have announced that child labor no longer exists in the carpet-weaving industry. They have attacked UNICEF, the Society and other charities as "do-gooders", the phrase used by the Chief Executive Officer of the largest carpet importer in the United Kingdom.

The ordinary American consumer, with family commitments and a mortgage, does not have the time and money to travel to Pakistan to verify these claims.

Who do you believe?

UNICEF and the other charities like this Society have no financial interest in making such claims. The carpet industry does.

Since these claims have been made by the industry, the Society has funded a Mission to Pakistan which shows the extensive use of children in the industry. Many of them, as you can see, are very young.

The photographs on this page are from a recent undercover investigation in Pakistan by the Society, which revealed that young children still work in horrific conditions making carpets which we buy and put in our homes. The photographs are black and white because the sweatshop is very dark and the use of a flashlight on the camera would have alerted the master to that photographs were being taken secretly.

The handmade woolen carpet industry is extremely labor intensive and one of the largest export earners for India, Pakistan, Nepal and Morocco. During the past 20 years, it has been one of the fastest growing industries and most of this growth has been achieved through the use of child labor.

"children work long hours for very little pay. Indeed, in many cases [...], they may receive no pay whatsoever"

The total number of children involved in the industry in South Asia is very difficult to assess, but in India the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude estimates that between 200,000 and 300,000 children are involved, most of them in the carpet belt of Uttar Pradesh in central India.

Similar numbers may be working in Pakistan and up to 150,000 in Nepal.

For years the industry claimed in its propaganda that the nimble fingers of children are essential to form the intricate designs used in the carpets.

This claim has long been discredited and the most expensive carpets are generally made by adults, with children producing the low and middle grade carpets.

There are two main advantages of child labor to the carpet makers:

- their very low wages and their docile acceptance of terrible working conditions;
- their good eyesight, which allows them to perform intricate work in very poor light.

As a result, many of the children, who may begin working as young as 6 or 7 years old, are severely ill by the time they are adults.

Their eyesight is damaged and lung diseases are common as a result of the dust and fluff from the wool used in the carpets.

To make matters worse, many of the children employed in the industry have been separated from their families.

The carpet industry is very complex, but is generally controlled by the export companies. These exporters arrange, either directly or through contractors, for a carpet to be produced on a particular loom. The looms are normally owned by small entrepreneurs and range from single looms in private houses to small factories with 30 or more looms. The exporter supplies the wool and design and after a price and quality is agreed, the loom owner is responsible for producing the carpet to specification. Agents for the loom masters and owners find their workforce from a variety of sources.

The children may be their own children and other children from within the village. These remain in their own family.

The child labor may also be obtained from other areas (normally poorer regions) by purchasing or coercing children from Bihar in north-east India to Uttar Pradesh; or from small villages in Nepal to Kathmandu; or from outlying villages to small towns in Pakistan; and even children trafficked from other countries, such as children imported from west Nepal to Uttar Pradesh. Removed from their families, these are, without doubt, the worst sufferers.

All the children work long hours for very little pay. Indeed, in many cases, particularly when they live at the looms, their wages are reduced to pay for food and lodging, or they may receive no pay whatsoever, for example, where the loom owner applies their wages to cover the advances given to their parents and the agents who brought them in the first place. This is a form of debt bondage (which is defined as a slavery-like institution by Article 1(a) of Article 7(a) of the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery 1956) and is quite common in the industry throughout South Asia.

A great many of them are children who have been kidnapped by slavers from their parents and sold to the loom master.

They are locked behind bars and beaten. They are poorly fed and receive no wages.

In the past ten years, there has been a gathering movement in India, Pakistan and Nepal to end the exploitation of so many children in the industry. This activity has been supported by the Anti-Slavery Society. As a result, the UN Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery and the International Labor Organization have called on the Union Government (ie, the federal government) in India and the federal government in Pakistan to enforce their own laws and to stop the use of child labor.

The material in this report is based on a Mission to South Asia by the Society's Secretary-General.

THE SOCIETY IN ACTION

As mentioned earlier, the Society recently conducted an undercover investigation in Pakistan, some of the photos from which appear on this page.



RugMark

The Society is promoting 'Rugmark' carpets — hand-woven carpets, which carry a guarantee against the use of child labor — in preference to carpets made by children (some as young as four years of age).

'Rugmark'. In August 1994, the Rugmark Foundation was registered in India by a consortium comprising the following business associations and human rights organizations: the Carpet Manufacturers' Association Without Child Labor, the Indo-German Export Promotion Council, UNICEF India and our partners in the international anti-slavery movement, the South Asian Coalition on Children in Servitude. Exporters wishing to use the Rugmark have to register their looms with the Foundation and they will be checked by inspectors.

The 'Rugmark' label on hand-knotted carpets from India indicates that they have not been produced by child labor. The conditions for use of the Rugmark are that the exporters undertake:

- not use child labor in any area of production; and
- to pay all workers at least the minimum wage as set by Indian law.

It also requires regular school attendance by children working at home on family looms. The exporter will then be given the right to put a label on their carpets, which will carry a code enabling purchasers to check each carpet with the Foundation. Spot checks will be carried out on all looms registered with the Foundation to ensure they continue to operate without illegal child labor.

To date, 100 manufacturers in India and a few suppliers in Nepal have applied for registration.

Unfortunately, some of the largest carpet exporters in India remain uncommitted, as they are waiting to see how the inspection scheme operates and the demand (if any) for Rugmark carpets from consumers.

To date, the campaign to free these children has not made much headway in Nepal and Pakistan. The South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude, a coalition of more than fifty groups from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, has been campaigning for increased consumer awareness in the USA, Canada, the UK, Europe, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand and better regulation of the industry in their own countries.

'Woolmark'. In addition to the Rugmark, there is the 'Woolmark' label of the International Wool Secretariat. The label is granted to manufacturers who agree to meet certain criteria set out by the International Wool Secretariat. Since October 1993, all Woolmark licensees producing hand-knotted carpets in India, Pakistan, Nepal, China and Morocco have to sign a declaration.

However, unlike the Rugmark, the International Wool Secretariat in London has

informed us that there is no monitoring mechanism to ensure that products carrying the Woolmark are free from child labor.

EFFECTING CHANGE

The Anti-Slavery Society believes that the positive moves made by some manufacturers in India must be reinforced by purchasers in the USA, Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand like you. If exporters who have stopped using child labor are perceived as having a marketing advantage over those who use child labor, then these other exporters will certainly follow — initially in India, and then in other countries.

Change will not come overnight. But the first target of the campaign, fully supported by the Anti-Slavery Society, is to put a stop to the exploitation of migrant child labor in the carpet industry and other dangerous industries. The international concern raised for these children gives the best chance of success.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you are buying, or thinking of buying, a hand-knotted carpet ask the retailer for a guarantee that the carpet was not produced by exploited child labor. Ask them how they check on their suppliers.

Ask your retailer whether they can supply carpets from the India bearing the Rugmark. Support carpet retailers who sell “Rugmark” carpets.

Source: <http://www.anti-slaverysociety.addr.com/carpets.htm>





Children working in a carpet factory

Photo taken by Mathias Heng during undercover Mission funded by the Society.
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