



On the Record: Global Movement for Children

Issue 7: Child Labour

From the AP Editorial Desk

UNICEF works with NGO activists to end child labour

Liberating children from formal employment has proved easier than reaching street and slum children in India's vast and unorganized informal labor sector.

In the early eighties, several NGOs, including the Global March Against Child Labour and the London-based Anti Slavery International, exposed the practice of employing children as young as six to weave carpets for export.

This led to one of the most successful initiatives in the world to stop child labor. Known as 'Rugmark' it consists of inspecting carpet factories and certifying that the carpets were not made with child labour. A consumer education program was also launched in North America and Europe, and importers were pressed to join the scheme.

After carpets, the next industries to be targeted were the sports, glass, matchstick and firecrackers industries.



One of the most successful campaigns launched by the Global March Against Child Labour has been to prevent the use of children in the manufacture of firecrackers, which are popular during religious celebrations such as the Hindu festival of lights (Diwali). The campaign was initiated in 1995. It was quickly taken up by more than ten thousand schools and eventually resulted in a widespread public boycott of firecrackers during this

festive holiday.

Another campaign by the Global March aims to target the forthcoming World Cup soccer tournament, which is due to be held this summer in Korea. The Global March wants FIFA, the world soccer governing body, to ensure that soccer balls and other sports equipment are not made with child labor.

This activism has certainly resulted in sharp decreases in child labor in these industries. But the



news isn't overwhelmingly positive, according to Johan Fagerskjold of UNICEF's state office in Uttar Pradesh. U.P., as the state is called, is home to the country's "carpet belt," a section of the country known for producing carpets for export. 1.74 million children do not go to school in U.P. and of those enrolled in school, only 48 percent of the boys and 35 percent of the girls complete their education. Fagerskjold says that the problem of child labor in factories persists despite the activism of

NGOs and even the Rugmark label, which, he says, is almost impossible to authenticate.

As a result, UNICEF is working with a local organization to gain the trust of communities, and provide alternative forms of employment for families. Mothers are told that if they work, they can send their children to school who can, in turn, earn a higher salary in the future. "The idea that education is a better value than child labor percolates down through the villages and eventually to the whole community," says Fajerskjold.

The NGO helps local people, especially women, to initiate microcredit projects by establishing a savings group that acts as a loan agency for the village. This eliminates the role and profits of a middleman and eases the burden on local people who might otherwise feel pressured to make their children work just to pay off the interest from the loans they have taken out to keep their shops and businesses running.

"The solution to child labor in the carpet belt," says Fagerskjold, "has to be community-based. Meanwhile, corporate giants like IKEA are supporting our programs to end child labor. There's a real interest from abroad."

A big part of the challenge from child labour comes from the fact that much of it takes place at

home. Activists are only just starting to penetrate home-based industries such as bidi (cigarette) making, zardosi (weaving gold and silk beads onto saris).

In Uttar Pradesh, UNICEF partnered with an NGO called Laxmi to provide non-formal education to children who work in the zardosi industry. Some employers are paying children who are as young as four. Their work day can start at 8 a.m. and end at 9 p.m.

Laxmi representatives lobby zardosi employers to send the children to school for at least a few hours a day. They also organize non-formal education for girls who work at home doing embroidery. The NGO has even enlisted some community members to contribute five rupees for the establishment of a local school so that people will feel they have a stake in its success.

"This is an issue of child rights for us," says Jerroo Master, Communications Officer of UNICEF's U.P. office, "We are working on closing off the tap for employers who use children. We are focused on preventing child labor."