



Trash or treasure? - the way the world treats its children

"Mankind owes to the child the best it has to give..."

The child shall be protected against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation."

Declaration of the Rights of the Child, 1959

"If a child is a national asset, it is the duty of the state to look after the child with a view to ensuring full development of its potential."

Indian Supreme Court, 1986

"The rights of the child are amongst the most essential principles etched into the statutes of humanity. They are also the most frequently disregarded."

James P Grant, UNICEF

They are young. They are trusting. They begin life with hope. Millions of children are nurtured and protected by families who want the very best for them.

Yet children are also vulnerable to abuse and neglect, and powerless when adults use them in ways that damage their physical, emotional or mental health. Too many of the world's children are subject to exploitation in the form of dangerous or exhausting work, cruel treatment, exposure to criminal activity or deprivation of other rights.

How are children exploited?

Working with the trash



Zabbar is a ragpicker in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He makes his living by picking up waste papers, plastics, rags, bottles, and scrap metal from the streets and garbage heaps and selling them for cash.

Ragpicking is unhygienic and dangerous work. Children develop skin diseases like scabies. When they cut themselves, the wounds can easily become infected. Carrying heavy loads causes

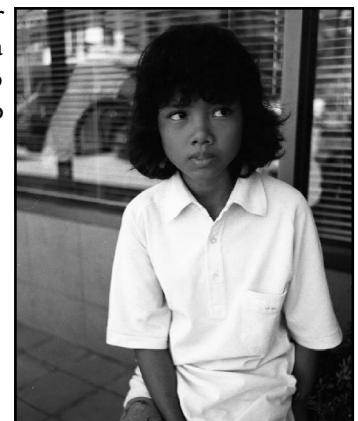
permanent damage to growing bodies. And there is the temptation to eat discarded food, leading to food poisoning and diarrhoea. Scrap merchants make a handy profit from the children's work, but offer them no protection from illness or harm.

Deceived by a "friend"

"Soam" (not her real name), 16, comes from a small Cambodian village. A girlfriend told Soam she could arrange a job working in a city restaurant.

"She brought me to a house in Tuol Kork and introduced me to a man. She left me with him. Before I knew it I was taken by a woman and given new clothes. I was told I had to do exactly as they said. It did not take very long to know I had been tricked."

Soam spent the next 10 days at this brothel. The "friend" was paid A\$200, for delivering her to the owner. Each girl in these brothels sees from four to six customers per day, earning from 8,000 to 20,000 Riels (A\$4 to \$12), but Soam never received any pay. Then she was sold to another brothel, and another. She was at a fourth brothel by the time she was traced by her worried mother and a policeman friend, who persuaded the owner to release the girl.



Young girls like Srey arriving alone in Phnom Penh risk ending up as prostitutes.

Missing out on childhood

- * The ILO estimates that the number of 5-14 year old labourers has reached 250 million.
- * One out of four children in developing countries is working: half of these children are in Asia.¹
- * Nine out of ten children working in domestic service are girls.²
- * 30 % of children in developing countries who enrol in primary school do not complete it.³
- * At least one million girls worldwide are lured or forced into commercial sex activities each year.⁴
- * Some 70,000 children are estimated to be working up to 20 hours a week in backyard sweatshops in Australia, sewing clothes to help their families make ends meet.⁵

Forced to fight

Twelve-year-old David remembers the year he was compelled to fight with the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda, after being abducted from his home.

"My main duties were to carry looted foodstuffs like groundnuts and millet. I was also taught how to use a gun. If a child's load was too heavy or he was too clumsy and fell with it he would be beaten and sometimes killed. The rebel commander warned us that if we ever [left] the rebels, the spirits of people we killed would follow and attack us."

The begging business

Seven-year-old Lan lived with her family on the streets of Danang, Vietnam, begging at the market or in tourist areas. After a severe illness, she was left with a weak right leg, and for a year she had to be carried. As they had no identity papers, Lan's family did not qualify for public medical care. Her stepfather made her a wooden crutch, so she could move around again. The first day she limped off to beg, she came home with 20,000 Dong [A\$3]. Next day she made 15,000 Dong. From then on, she continued to earn more than the rest of the family.

Caring visitors to Danang met Lan and arranged with her parents for Lan to be fitted at a rehabilitation centre with a brace to support and straighten her leg. Sadly, her new mobility meant she earned less when begging. Her mother decided the family's livelihood was more urgent than the chance to restore Lan's health, so the brace was rarely worn.

Outside the law

When he was ten, Aruinbold was chased out of home by his stepfather. He tried to stay with an aunt, but with six children she had little left for him, so he moved on. Now he lives near a city bus stop in Ulan Bataar, Mongolia. At night he sleeps in a cardboard box.

At first he was harassed by the police. Then he started to buy polish, brushes and a foot stool. With five customers per day, he made enough money from polishing shoes to feed himself.

But one night somebody stole his kit. After trying begging, he took to low-level criminal activity. Each night, Aruinbold and his friends go out to squirt water on the prostitutes looking for customers, and aim to extract at least tugrik 100 (about 30 cents) from the girls. Aruinbold also buys alcohol or cigarettes for drunks and then shortchanges them. Occasionally he picks pockets at the market.



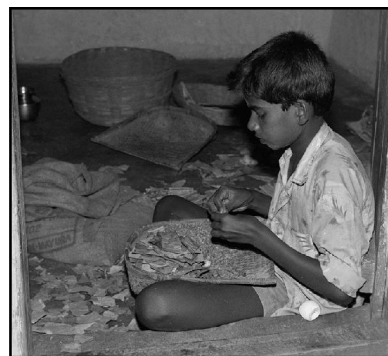
Trapped by debt

It seems particularly unfair that children are bonded to work to repay loans which may never be fully cleared.

Twelve-year-old Murugan lives in south India. His father works at rolling beedis (local cigarettes). His mother works as an agricultural labourer, or helps her husband rolling beedis. Desperately short of money, they had to borrow 3,000 rupees (A\$125) from the mudalali (money-lender), who also runs the beedi shop. To pay off the loan and interest at 30% *per month*, they had to bond Murugan to work for him.

Murugan's working day begins at 7am and drags on till 7pm. Six days a week, his job is to close the ends of 2000 beedis with a sharp penknife-like instrument. The work requires concentration and quick, intricate finger movements, which eventually make Murugan's fingers numb. He sits cross-legged, his head bent over his work, inhaling tobacco dust. To keep the children from talking while they work, the mudalali makes them hold an empty match box between their chin and neck. Murugan goes to bed with an aching body and sore neck and knees.

Footnote: Murugan was released from his bondage in 1998, when World Vision settled his parents' debt. There was a special celebration of his new freedom!



Behind the scenes:

Djllika is an 11-year-old maid-servant who has come to work for her uncle in Bamako, Mali. She is not paid for her work. Instead, her uncle will pay her dowry when she marries, at age 15 or 16. Each day, Djllika gets up by 6 am to collect water and prepare the family's breakfast. Then she goes to the market to buy the day's food. When she returns, she cooks lunch, then prepares dinner. After dinner, she is finished for the day.

Yet Djllika is much better off than many other maids. Most don't get to work with relatives. Some are orphans. Others have escaped forced marriages, or fled to the city to hide a pregnancy. Separated from their families, these young girls are at risk. Unscrupulous employers don't hesitate to mistreat their servants, or dismiss them without pay.

Because girls are sometimes seen as a financial burden on the family, they may also be forced into early marriage and child-bearing. Teenage mothers face higher risks during pregnancy.

Why are children exploited?

◆ Children are vulnerable and relatively powerless. Sometimes they are unaware that they are being abused; in other cases, they are too afraid to protest, or they are not heard.

◆ The pressures of poverty give parents few choices. Unable to earn enough to provide for the family, some parents accept any opportunity for their children to earn money. Some parents take refuge in substance abuse or violence. Children may be the victims.

◆ In all societies there are those who are willing to abuse others for their own profit or benefit. Children of disadvantaged groups (e.g. recent migrants, families without identity papers, minority language communities) are especially at risk.

◆ Even where there are laws to protect children, they are not always enforced. Recent newspaper reports in Australia have cited cases of children working long hours or with dangerous equipment, without the necessary permit. Evidence of child abuse sometimes emerges many years after the offences were committed.

◆ The international economic system is fiercely competitive. Cheap child labour may seem to offer an advantage to producers and employers, and to countries struggling to repay enormous debts.

Working towards a world where children are no longer exploited.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that children are to be protected from

- ❖ violence
- ❖ economic exploitation
- ❖ drug abuse
- ❖ sexual exploitation
- ❖ sale, trafficking and abduction and all other forms of exploitation

❖ torture, capital punishment and illegal detention and that children also have the right to treatment so that they can recover from abuse and exploitation.

Almost all countries have ratified the Convention, committing themselves to take action to protect children's rights and to report on progress.

Child exploitation is not easy to overcome. To ban children from all kinds of work, for example, can plunge their families into even more desperate poverty. Many children are exploited by adults who have been abused or mistreated themselves. Addressing child exploitation involves not just rescuing children, but also tackling the underlying causes of poverty and injustice.

Strengthening families

Ten-year-old Vong Chanry, her two brothers and sisters often used to go to bed with empty stomachs. Their father's

small plot of land did not produce enough food, so he tried to find work such as tapping palm-sugar or fishing. Then he would spend almost half his earnings on alcohol to dull his fatigue and stress. Chanry had to leave school so she could help her mother.

With the support of World Vision Child Sponsorship, Chanry was able to go back to school. Her mother learned about basic health care. The family was able to build a new well, and received a loan to purchase pigs. The community rice bank means that families can "borrow" rice which they repay after the harvest. As Chanry's parents saw their situation improve, they became less dependent on alcohol and family life became less tense.



Chanry and her family

Enabling children to learn skills and access services

Education is vital in overcoming child exploitation. Children who can read and write are less likely to be cheated. Children's health can also be monitored at school. In the long-term, education opens up choices for employment away from hazardous and low-paid jobs. However schooling must be carefully planned: for example, evening classes may suit children who need to work during the day. Discussion programs can help children to be aware of their rights and responsibilities.

Allowing children a voice

Increasingly, children are seeking opportunities to express their opinions on issues that affect their welfare. In Brazil, the National Movement for Street Children has spoken out against killings of street children by police and vigilante groups, and called on the government to protect children at risk. All around the world, young people took part in a Global March against Child Labour between January and May 1998.



Ecuadorian children marching in support of children's rights

Setting children free

WorldVision has released over 2,000 children from bonded labour in south India, and helped them to learn new skills. Now there are young tailors and carpenters who earn more in one day than they used to in a week as beedi workers. World Vision's advocacy has resulted in the local government's arrest of seven money-lenders, and the warning that anyone who hires a child will be prosecuted.

Campaigning for laws against child exploitation

Concerned people are urging governments to pass and implement well-planned laws to protect children and support families in caring for children.

Since foreign tourists are one group involved in exploiting children as prostitutes, several countries including Australia have passed laws making it an offence for their citizens to commit sexual crimes against a child anywhere in the world.

The International Labour Organization is drafting a convention to ban exploitative forms of child labour. It is hoped this will be agreed at the ILO's assembly in 1999.

Non-government organizations are urging governments to support an optional protocol (addition) to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, increasing the minimum age of soldiers from 15 years to 18.

Legislation alone will not eliminate child exploitation, but it can provide standards indicating behaviour that is widely regarded as unacceptable.

The world's children deserve to be treasured, because they carry within them the dreams and hopes that are needed as we embark on a new millennium.

Notes on sources

This topic sheet draws on reports by Nikesh Chandra Das, Mikel Flamm, Sanjay Sojwal, and other WorldVision staff in Uganda, India, Vietnam and Mali.

¹ *State of the World's Children 1997*, UNICEF p 25, based on International Labour Organization surveys

² *State of the World's Children 1997*, UNICEF, p 30

³ *State of the World's Children 1997*, UNICEF, p 29

⁴ *State of the World's Children 1997*, UNICEF, p 36

⁵ Textile Clothing and Footwear Union, cited in *The Age* 27 Oct 1998

Compiled by Deborah Patterson
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Action you can take

► **Copy** the children's stories to use for discussion in your class, youth group or church. Role play interviews with one or more of the children.

What do you think could help to improve their lives?

► **Review** the way children are treated in your society (in schools, in families, in advertising, in public places). How are they protected? In what ways are children vulnerable to economic, sexual or other kinds of exploitation?

► **Find out** about services like "safe houses" and telephone crisis lines, designed for children who fear abuse or mistreatment. Make sure that children you know are aware of people and places they can go to for help.

► **Reflect on** this verse from the Bible. (Ideally, read the whole chapter in a modern translation)

Is not this the fast I [God] choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Isaiah 58:6

What do you think Isaiah was trying to tell people?

What motivates **you** to act in response to injustice such as the exploitation of children?

► **Support** the worldwide campaign to ban exploitative forms of child labour. Contact WorldVision's Action Network.

► **Join** Partners for Action, a WorldVision program which supports projects addressing child exploitation.

► **Take part in** the World Vision 40 Hour Famine, and raise funds to give new opportunities to child labourers.

► **Sponsor** a child, so that a whole community will be able to provide more effectively for its children.

World Vision resources on related issues include

Children of War (1998) - 4 page topic sheet about the effects of war on children, and efforts to address the damage

Life of Chains (1998) - 18 min video from World Vision New Zealand, examining the exploitation of working children, with comments by young New Zealanders

Make it Right! (1998) - set of 5 coloured posters and notes about working for children's rights

The Other Side of the street (1991) - 45 minute video (in 4 segments) about the needs and rights of children in Brazil

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