

Before Their Time

Child Labor Around the World

BY DAVID L. PARKER

When I began photographing child labor in 1992, I had no idea how many children worked, what their working conditions were like, or how difficult it would be to document the issue. Although many factories and workplaces were open and easy to photograph, others were closed and unwelcoming. To gain entry into some factories, I presented myself as a buyer of shirts, carpets, or other products for an international corporation with only a post office box for an address.

I was surprised at what lay just beyond the surface of everyday activity. In 1993, during my first trip to Nepal, I visited dozens of carpet factories where children were hand-knotting carpets in cramped, musty rooms. After leaving Nepal, I went to Bangladesh and photographed children working waist deep in leather-tanning chemicals and scavenging plastic and cardboard amid the rotting waste in garbage dumps.

The photographs in this article, and in my book, *Before Their Time: The World of Child Labor*, portray the range of work and working conditions of children around the world. In a larger sense, these photographs document an ongoing failure to meet children's basic needs—a goal that is out of reach of their families. I have no doubt that poverty forces most working children and their families to become victims of economic exploitation. Some of these situations, such as sex trafficking, make regular

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news headlines. But problems such as lack of schools and lack of jobs in which parents can earn enough money to feed a small family go largely unnoticed.

To protect children from what are often deplorable working conditions, national and international communities have implemented laws and treaties to regulate child labor. Since the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948,¹ dozens of international treaties concerning children's rights have been written.

Nonetheless, child labor remains an enormous problem, and millions of children lack access to basic education. Officially, more than 320 million children under age 16 work worldwide and 25 percent of children do not complete a primary school education.

For many families, child labor is part of an intergenerational cycle of poverty, social exclusion, and lack of education. Poor families frequently lack the resources to ensure that their children go to school and stay healthy. An increased risk of illness contributes to the cycle of poverty. Young women who work and go to school or who work instead of attending school tend to have less-healthy children. A woman who has been to school for even a few years is more likely to marry later, obtain prenatal care, have a smaller family, and have healthier, better-educated children.²

I have sometimes found it difficult to determine when work is harmful because of the complexity or ambiguity of some job circumstances. For example, in 1993 and 1995, I photographed circus performers in Nepal and India. Although the children are often laughing and having fun, most are bonded laborers, a type of modern-day slave. Circus owners trick families into selling their children and then force them to work many years with-

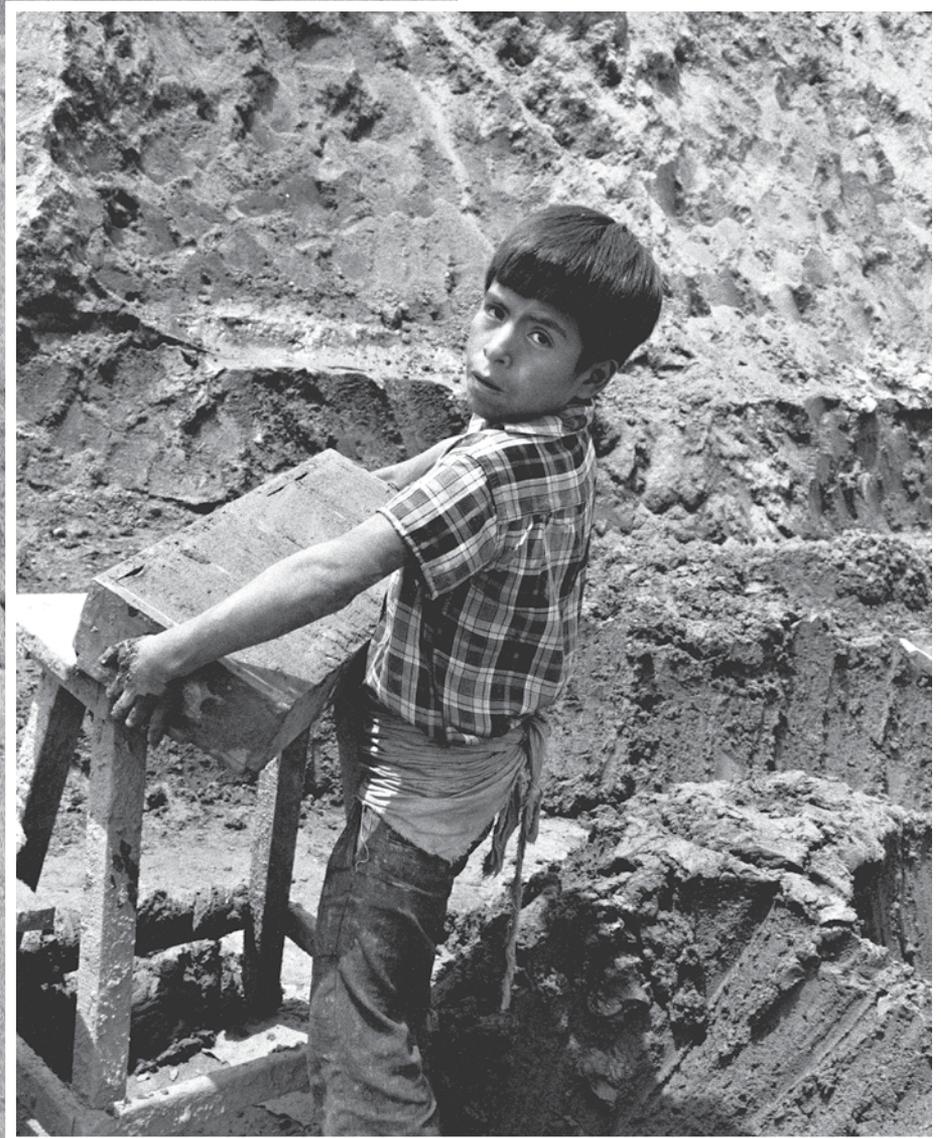
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Left, hauling bricks for firing, Nepal, 1995.
Below, forming bricks, Peru, 1998.

Throughout much of the world, bricks are made by hand. In Asia, Latin America, and Africa, children and adults dig clay for bricks using shovels, picks, and awls. After mixing the clay and water to the proper consistency, workers form bricks using small wooden molds. When the bricks are dry, barefoot workers load them on their backs or on top of their heads and carry them across fields of stones and broken bricks. Each brick weighs four to nine pounds. A small child may haul 1,000 to 2,000 bricks each day.





Left, migrant worker picking cotton, Turkey, 1997.

Above, looking for conch shells in a mangrove swamp, Nicaragua, 2004.

In many countries, large migrant communities follow the agricultural seasons from one region to another. In the U.S., migrants may start the year in Texas and gradually work their way to the sugar beet fields in Minnesota's Red River Valley.¹ In Turkey, entire communities move from the eastern part of the country to central Anatolia to pick cotton, dig potatoes, or harvest vegetables. Common to all migrant communities are low wages, unhealthy sanitary facilities, and meager opportunities for education.



Above, stone quarry worker, Nicaragua, 2004.

Stone quarrying is the most common type of mining work children do. Workers crush stones to form aggregate used in construction. Families sit on the roadside and break apart stones delivered by truck. Young children use small hammers; the hammers get larger as the children grow. Flying chips of stone can lodge in workers' eyes.

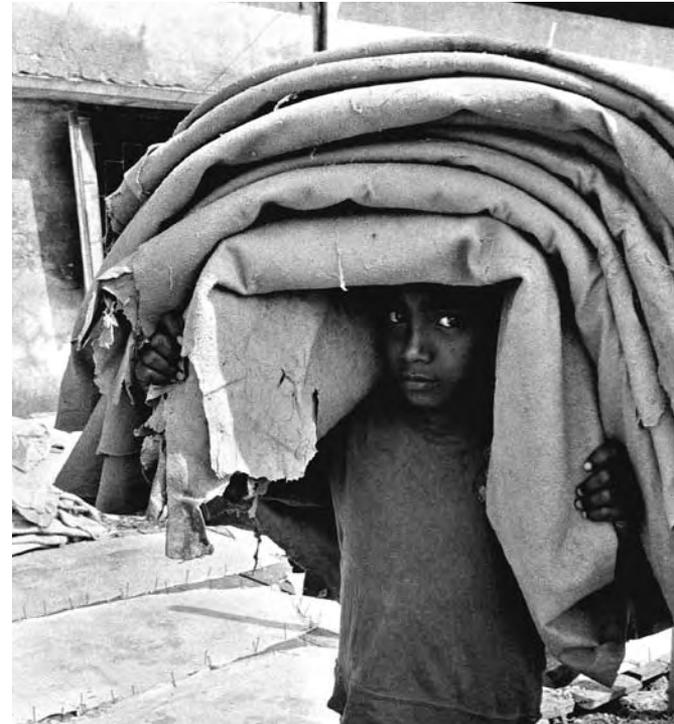


Above, carpet weaver, Nepal, 1993.

In India, Pakistan, Turkey, and other countries, children knot wool or silk carpets. Children who spend day after day doing this type of detailed handwork are likely to develop arthritis at an early age. Virtually all children who knot carpets get skin rashes and frequently cut their hands with razors or knives.

Right, sex workers in front of a brothel, Thailand, 1993.

Globally, an estimated 1.8 million children are engaged in prostitution and pornography.² A taxi ride in Bangkok or a late-evening stroll through the central part of the city, known as Patpong, reveals the easy sale of young boys and girls. Young women sit in front of brothels drinking alcohol and waiting for the next customer.

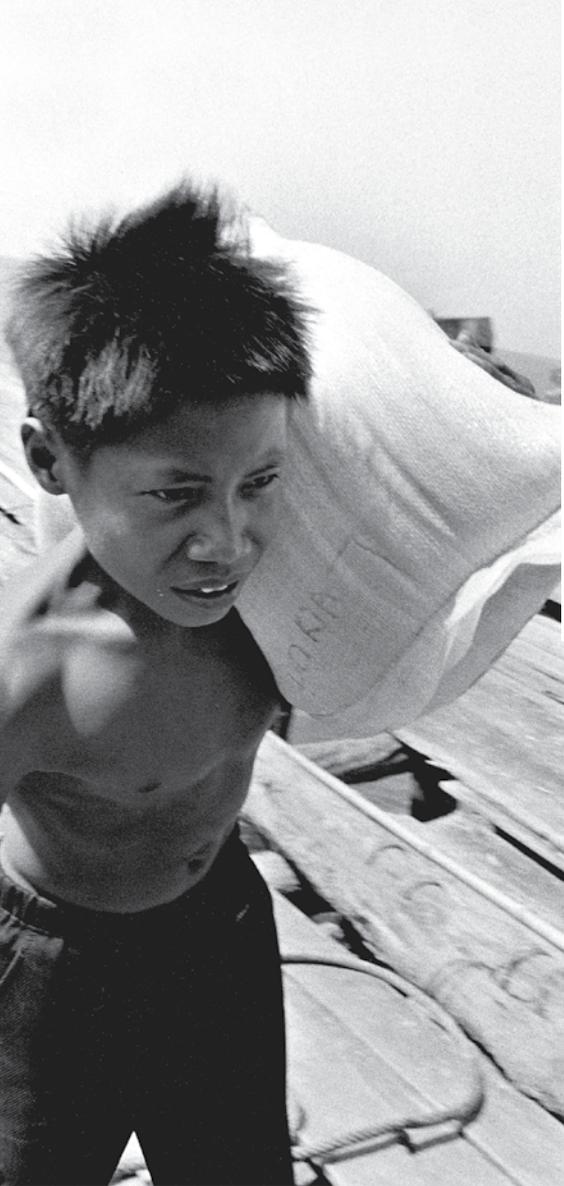


Above, leather tannery, Bangladesh, 1993.

Children tan leather in cottage industries around the world. Leather tanning is one of the dirtiest jobs imaginable, carried out in a tumbling barrel or large vats using chromic acid, oxalic acid, formaldehyde, and alkalis such as trisodium phosphate and borax. In addition to exposing workers to toxic chemicals, the process releases carbon monoxide, hydrogen sulfide, and other noxious gases.

Left, garbage pickers in a market, Mexico, 1996.

I have never seen a published report on the number of children or adults who work as garbage pickers around the world. Although it is impossible to obtain good estimates, based on even casual observation the number is likely high. People sort through rotting garbage in search of paper, wood, plastic, or other items to sell. As they search, the workers battle flies, vermin, and mangy, sometimes rabid, dogs.



Left, fishing platform worker carrying rice, Indonesia, 1995. Above, fishing platform worker, Indonesia, 1995.

Children in coastal areas fish or help farm coastal waters. In Indonesia, up to 2,000 fishing platforms, called *jermals*, rise from stilts in the ocean around Java and Sumatra. Labor contractors lure young workers from inland villages with promises of good wages. Because the platforms lie far out at sea the children cannot escape. Platform workers subsist on rice; fresh fruit and vegetables are a rare luxury and potable water is brought in just once a week. The bosses often subject the children to physical and sexual abuse.



Above, injured fireworks worker, Guatemala, 1999.

In India, Guatemala, and other places, children make fireworks and matches. Children take part in all steps of the manufacturing process, including mixing gunpowder or potassium nitrate and cutting firecracker tubes with machetes. In Guatemala, small factories are attached to homes. These families face the risk of an explosion that can destroy their home and injure family members.

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out pay. Neither the poor working conditions nor the slavery-like situation is obvious to a casual observer.

Other forms of work harm children in obvious and painful ways. In 2000, I photographed children at a rehabilitation center for young combatants in Sierra Leone. The children told stories of being drugged and forced to kill their parents or mutilate their neighbors. They also reported being shot during combat or beaten if they tried to escape from military service.

Some domestic workers are held in virtual slavery behind locked doors. Although I have photographs of children doing domestic chores—preparing food, caring for sisters and brothers, and washing clothes—only once did I gain access to a private home where children were employed. The employer did not allow me to take photographs.

Overall, working conditions for most

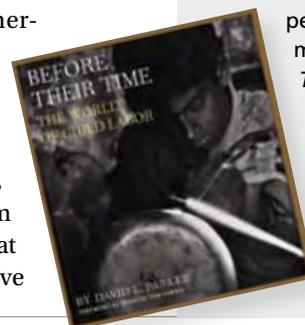
children are pathetic. Many work sites lack sanitary facilities and clean drinking water. Child workers are exposed to excessive noise, clouds of dust, and other safety hazards. They eat food they find on the street or in the garbage dump, drink water and bathe in the same pond where they wash their tools and mix mud for making bricks, and live on the street or in cardboard huts.

Because children are still developing, harmful substances have a greater impact on them than on older workers. Pound for pound, children breathe more air, eat more food, and drink more water than adults. Toxic chemicals such as mercury or lead can cause brain damage and permanent disabilities.

Children work long hours with little time for rest, play, or school. Even jobs that seem relatively safe place children at risk. Street vendors may leave

for work at four or five in the morning and not return home until late at night. They go long stretches without eating. They may be robbed or abused. Street children often work for unscrupulous adults who refuse to pay them, cheat them of their earnings, or sexually exploit them.

Children who work face a wide array of dangers: from rats, wild dogs, and rotting waste in garbage dumps or choking dust in stone quarries to injuries from high-speed machinery or the harsh chemicals used to



This article was excerpted with permission from David Parker's most recent book, *Before Their Time: The World of Child Labor*, Quantuck Lane Press, 2007. To learn more about child labor, visit his Web site at childlaborphotographs.com or e-mail him at parke065@umn.edu.

tan leather. Some children develop diseases typically associated with adults, such as arthritis or skin diseases. Most children do not wear protective equipment. Even when such equipment is provided, it does not serve children well since it is designed for adults.

New data indicate that the number of working children has declined over the past few years. Some nations have made strides to protect child workers from dangerous conditions, yet many others still fail to keep children safe, healthy, and educated. It will take the commitment of all nations to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. This commitment must provide for the basic needs of children, families, and their communities. These needs include food, schools, books, and health-care. The failure to control the AIDS pandemic continues to result in the displacement of millions of children. Many end up living and working on the street.

Perhaps the most common question I am asked is, "What can I do?" Many organizations, such as the Global March to End Child Labor, the National Consumers' League, and Anti-Slavery International, help child laborers. For example, Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights operates a small school in Sankhu village, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, Nepal.³ The school serves poor children, who receive free schooling and a daily meal. Anyone can support these efforts by donating time and money. □

Endnotes

¹ A copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights may be found at www.un.org/Overview/rights.html.

² A discussion of the impact of child labor on the development of girls may be found in D. L. Parker and S. Bachman, 2002, "Economic exploitation and the health of children: Towards a public health model." *Health and Human Rights: An International Journal*, 5: 93-119.

³ Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights may be found online at www.mnadvocates.org.

Caption Endnotes

¹ Human Rights Watch provides an excellent discussion of migrant workers in the United States in its publication *Fingers to the Bone: United States Failure to Protect Migrant Farmworkers*. Human Rights Watch: New York, 2000.

² International Labour Organization, International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, "Every Child Counts: New Global Estimates on Child Labour," ILO: Geneva, 2002. This document offers a wide range of statistical data on working children.

