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Hazardous child labor in Nepal: The case of brick kilns



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ABSTRACT

Hazardous child labor in Nepal is a serious concern, particularly in the brick kiln industry. Although a range of interventions have been implemented in Nepal to address hazardous child labor, there is a lack of research to both measure success and shape further development in interventions that integrate sound child protection practices to ensure the wellbeing of all children. This paper provides a review of the literature outlining interventions for children working in brick kilns in Nepal, and presents preliminary case study findings of one current intervention in the Kathmandu Valley. The paper highlights the strength of applying foundational child protection principles and advocates for the development and implementation of future programs underpinned by broad civil society principles within a child rights and protection framework.

1. Introduction

“All children have the right to be protected from economic exploitation and work” (United Nations Human Rights, 1989). Despite such well-intentioned aspirations, child labor remains a pervasive global problem. According to the International Labour Organization ILO (2013, 2015), one child in ten worldwide experiences life threatening work conditions. Hazardous child labor is “work which by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children” (ILO Convention 182). This is one of the worst forms of child labor, which the ILO has mandated to eliminate by 2016 (ILO, 2013). Over the past decade, hazardous child labor has halved, however it continues to be the largest category among the worst forms (ILO, 2013). These declines in prevalence reflect the aggregation of political commitment (ratifying international conventions and national legislation), investment in education and social protection, and promotion of alternative work opportunities (ILO, 2013). Yet much remains to be done if the elimination of worst forms of child labor is to be realized.

This paper presents a systematic review of the literature and case study focusing on hazardous child labor in the brick kilns of Nepal. There has been a range of suggested intervention frameworks to address hazardous labor in Nepal. Yet there is a dearth of research evidence linking current intervention models to principles of best practice in child protection. The application of key child protection principles is critical to the design and delivery of intervention strategies tailored to reduce harm for children working in

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brick kilns in Nepal. The first section of the paper provides a summary of current intervention approaches utilized within Nepal to address hazardous child labor. The second section uses a case study from an NGO in the Kathmandu Valley providing support for children working in brick kilns to highlight the application of best practice in child protection. These combined sources provide a basis to inform the development of future research and intervention designs within the Nepalese context to address hazardous child labor.

1.1. Child labor: The Nepalese context

The greatest absolute representation of child labor is in Asia and the Pacific, with an estimated 130,000 children working in the worst forms of child labor in Nepal alone (ILO, 2004, 2013). The situation of child labor in Nepal has received significant attention in recent decades (United States Department of Labor, 2014), especially under the spotlight of global export industries such as hand-knotted rugs. However, the extremely hazardous employment conditions observed in informal sectors, such as the brick industry, may be more detrimental to child wellbeing and remains largely unregulated (de Groot, 2010). With rapid growth in the industry responding to increasing demand for housing, child labor in the brick industry is of growing concern (ILO, 2014; WE, 2013).

Nepal is an agro-based economy, and one of the poorest countries in the world (Nepal Ministry of Education, 2015). A third of children employed in worst forms in Nepal are illiterate, most have left formal education, come from large and landless families, and have migrated to urban centres for work (ILO, 2009). While the Nepalese Government and the Federation of Nepalese Brick Industries have attempted to regulate the industry, it remains largely unregulated (de Groot, 2010; MinErgy, 2012). Consequently, child labor in this industry often goes undocumented (de Groot, 2010). There are 429 registered brick kilns in Nepal, however the actual number is estimated in the vicinity of 700–750 (Gyawali, Sharma, & Sharma, 2012; MinErgy, 2012). As such, estimates of the number of workers (adult and child) vary greatly, from 50,000 (FAO/RWEDP, 1993) to over 400,000 (General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions, 2007). There is an estimated 30,000 children aged 5–17 years (Gyawali et al., 2012), although some estimate as many as 59,000 (CWIN factsheet 2007 in (de Groot, 2010)) working in the kilns. With over 80% of bricks produced in Nepalese brick fields used by households and petty contractors, brick price is the priority concern, rather than quality or ethical factors (MinErgy, 2012). Further, with the recent earthquake of April 2015, demand for bricks has risen with the demand for materials to rebuild the worst affected areas (Goda et al., 2015).

Labor in the brick kilns is seasonal, operating over winter months (WE, 2013). Families are usually recruited through a contractor in their village, who provides a cash advance for the season, often forcing the family into debt bondage (de Groot, 2010; WE, 2009a). Generally, work in the brick kilns is based on a piece rate payment (i.e. price per brick), and as such, help is enlisted from all family members, including children (de Groot, 2010). About half of the child workers are under 14 years of age, and come from lower castes (General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions, 2007; WE, 2013). About 60% of workers are migrant (General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions, 2007), and 39% of children are in bonded labor (WE, 2013). The primary reason documented for working in the kilns was employment opportunity; however, once employment was initiated, most perceived they were verbally or financially bonded for the season (General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions, 2007). The work is labor intensive (molding stage and carrying bricks form the kiln (de Groot, 2010), requiring high musculoskeletal effort, as well as exposure to hazards resulting in respiratory and dermatological disorders, and psychosocial compromise (ILO, 2014). A third of the children are working more than 12 h daily (WE, 2013). Children working in the brick fields were twice as likely to be sick compared to their peers (ILO, 2014), and regularly suffer from malnutrition (ILO, 2014). Over 60% were found to have severe health consequences (General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions, 2007). In addition to these direct workplace effects, 75% of workers live in shelters provided by the employer, in environments which are inadequate and lack basic sanitation (de Groot, 2010; General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions, 2007; ILO, 2014). Child labor in the brick kilns is at odds with attending education, especially for seasonal migration (Majumder & Mukherjee, 2011). Half of child laborers in brick kilns were reportedly attending school at their place of origin, with almost all of 348 surveyed (88%) discontinuing at the workplace (General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions, 2007). Only 24% had a plan to reenroll after completion of their work (General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions, 2007).

In recent years, documentation describes the situation of child laborers in the brick kilns in Nepal articulating the employment context, group determinants and demographics, and the hazards and negative health outcomes associated with such work (de Groot, 2010; General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions, 2007; ILO, 2014; Joshi & Dahal, 2008; Joshi et al., 2009; WE, 2013). While the problem has been well defined, there is a lack of empirical data to support the most effective interventions to improve wellbeing among these child laborers in Nepal, in particular those interventions that focus on best practice. In this context this research provides a synthesis of current knowledge from the literature combined with an applied case study of an NGO working with children in Nepalese brick kilns. It is hoped this will inform intervention and future research.

2. Method

2.1. Search strategy

A systematic search was conducted to guide the literature review using online databases, including Medline (1946-September 2015), PsycINFO (1840- September 2015), Scopus (1966- September 2015) and ERIC (via ProQuest1966- September 2015). Primary searches included keywords (“brick kiln*” or kiln* or “brick industry” or “bonded labo#r” or “hazardous child labo#r” or “hazardous labo#r” or “child labo#r” or “child work” or “child employment” or “exploitative labo#r”) AND Nepal AND (intervention or “occupational health” or scholarship or “conditional cash transfer” or microfinance or outcome or psychosocial or psycholog* or injur*

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