

Working to learn

By Peter Dalglish

KATMANDU, Nepal — You can find courage in the most unlikely places. Less than a kilometer from the entrance to Thamel, Katmandu's unofficial backpacker and hippie headquarters, a dozen ragtag children from the poorest elements of Nepali society are pouring over their mathematics and language books in a borrowed classroom.

Their hands, reddened and calloused from countless hours devoted to scrubbing floors and washing other people's dirty laundry, provide hard evidence of their employment as servants to the city's burgeoning middle class. But whatever these disheveled girls and boys lack in decorum is more than made up for by the zeal they demonstrate in attacking their lessons.

The education project is the brainchild of Manoj Gautam, the 21-year-old founder of Roots & Shoots Nepal, the local affiliate of the renowned biologist Jane Goodall's international youth movement.

Alarmed by the growing phenomenon of children as young as nine years age being hired by strangers as domestic servants, Gautam and fellow university students convinced the British Council in Katmandu to open its doors to children whose work prevented them from enrolling in government primary schools.

With no funds to pay for full-time educators, the university students have taken up the responsibility of teaching bruised and battered kids who regularly arrive for their lessons fatigued and hungry. All the children have had to negotiate with their "owners" for permission to attend the classes.

For most of the child domestic workers studying at the British Council, this is the first time that they have received any formal instruction. The impact of the twice-weekly classes on each of them is profound.

"Basic education frees child servants from the drudgery and misery of their workplace," Gautam says. "They are not accustomed to being treated with respect, or even being addressed by their proper names."

Throughout South Asia, the poor quality of education and harassment in the classroom contribute to the vulnerability of hundreds of thousands of children to exploitative forms of child labor. Most children who fail to complete primary education join the workforce as a means of supporting their families.

Girls and boys in Nepal between the ages of 10 and 16 are traditionally employed in the agricultural sector, in brick and carpet factories, as drivers' assistants, breaking stones, on farms, in coal mines and as porters along trails in remote locations.

June 12 has been designated by the United Nations as "World Day Against Child Labor," and this year attention is being focused on the challenge of providing free and compulsory education.

The International Labor Organization has underlined the importance of ensuring access to primary schooling as the most effective means of preventing children from being condemned to dead-end and often dangerous jobs that few adults would be willing to perform.

There can be no doubt that the cause is just.

Having just emerged from 11 years of armed conflict that transformed schools across the nation into recruiting stations for Maoist rebels - who on April 10 won 220 of the 601 seats making up the Constituent Assembly - Nepal now faces massive challenges in reforming its antiquated and under-funded education system.

School fee and school uniform requirements prevent many children from enrolling. Classrooms are Spartan, devoid of teaching aids, including simple charts and maps. The lack of separate toilets and a scarcity of trained female teachers mean that many mothers are reluctant to send their young daughters to school.

Schools in Nepal promote rote learning and memorization rather than creativity and critical thinking skills. Children vote with their feet: Bored with their classes, 35 percent of all children in Nepal who enroll in primary school drop out before completing grade eight.

As a result of the recent national elections, working children in Nepal can now count on at least one member of the Constituent Assembly who is committed to championing their cause.

Shanti Adhikari, elected as a candidate for the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist, over the years has earned the reputation of being a powerful advocate for child domestic workers across South Asia.

Back at the British Council, inspired by the story of a black American raised by a single mother who dreamed at an early age of becoming president of the United States, Manoj Gautam has taught his young charges their first words of a foreign language: "Yes we can!"

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