"At last I am growing taller": Voices of the Rugmark Children: children and teens rescued from a life of child labor by an outstanding human-rights organization share their experiences.

The following excerpts are from We Need to Go to School: Voices of the Rugmark Children, compiled by Tanya Roberts-Davis of the Rugmark human-rights organization. Tanya, 19, currently attends Trent University in Ontario, Canada. The first excerpt, written by Tanya, explains Rugmark's mission and tactics. The three remaining excerpts were written by Nepalese child carpet workers who got a chance for a better life.

CHILDHOOD MATTERS

Imagine waking up at five o'clock every morning to start work in a dimly lit carpet factory. Sitting on a hard wooden bench in front of a loom, your job is to quickly tie wool in tiny knots that you then tighten using a heavy toothed hammer. The only windows in the building are small and placed near the ceiling. There are bars across them. At times, you can hear the laughter of school children outside.

You continue to weave until nine o'clock at night. You have only two short meal breaks. A cup of tea and sometimes a small bowl of rice with lentil soup will be given to you as your payment for the day. There is time for just one trip to the toilet. The air is thick with dust from the wool, which gets into your lungs, making your chest ache when you breathe.

This life is real for more than one million children in countries such as Nepal, India, and Pakistan. Every day we walk on carpets that could have been made by children who are forced to work in order to help support their families and to survive. Children are employed in these factories because adults demand a better salary, while young workers can be paid little or nothing at all.... Growing up illiterate and unhealthy, these children ... exist in a vicious cycle of poverty....

Exploitative child labor is a complex problem, but part of the solution is to provide all children with the opportunity to go to school, where they can learn to read, become informed about their rights and find the means to escape the stranglehold of poverty.

Through an organization called Rugmark, some child carpet weavers are being given the chance to change their lives. Rugmark labels carpets from Nepal, India and Pakistan to certify that they have been made by adults who are paid a decent wage.... Factory owners are allowed to put the Rugmark label on their carpets when they agree to follow strict labor standards. Each factory is then inspected on a regular and surprise basis.... Any child found working in a factory is invited to attend a center for education and rehabilitation set up by Rugmark and maintained by a local community group. Students can stay at this school until they are eighteen and have been trained for a job [or] return to their families and attend a local school, with the education fees paid by Rugmark.
AKKA

My name is Akka. I am eleven years old. My hut is in a village that is six hours from Kathmandu by bus. I don't have parents. I used to live with my older brother and his wife. They both worked, so it was my duty to look after the children. I looked after the home and took care of the animals, fetched water and cut grass to feed the animals.

I came to Kathmandu with my aunt and started working in a carpet factory. I worked there for five months from six o'clock in the morning until nine at night. When a Rugmark representative came, I asked him if I could leave the factory. He took me to the transit home and then I was transferred to this rehabilitation center. Now I am in class three.

Small (a poem by Akka)

Don't undermine the small.
Small are the ones who will be big one day.
We all know drops of water make an ocean.

Look at the soil containing various particles.
This makes the mountain.
But when we look at the huge mountains
Who can say
They are made up of such small particles.

By joining the small sticks
The nest of a bird is made.
Each movement of a single day makes history.

Join the tiny bricks.
You can erect a temple.
But even if there is a small hole
You never can expect the teapot to be full.

People who hate small things
Always remain small.
But people who protect small things
Always remain big.

SAPANA

My name is Sapana and I am thirteen years old. I am from a village, but when I was very small, my family moved to Kathmandu. As a result, I know very little about my village.

At the age of nine, I started working in a carpet factory. I worked there for three years. Along with working in the factory, I also had to look after my younger sister and cook for my family.

I used to see lots of boys and girls going to school in the mornings and I always dreamed of attending school. My parents knew about my ambition. They kept promising they would send me to a school, but they never did. Thinking that one day I would go to school, I worked without saying a word. In this way, my life was passing.
One day, while I was sadly weaving a carpet, Rugmark inspectors arrived and asked me if I wanted to study. I quickly answered, "Yes!" They wrote my name on a paper along with the names of some of my friends and then promised they would come back the next day. The next day, we went with them to the transit home. We stayed there for two months and then we moved to a Rugmark rehabilitation center. I stayed there for eleven months and then moved to another center. After nine months of studying there, I came to this center. At last I am now growing taller!

PARWATI

My name is Parwati. In the village where I lived until I was nine years old, I got up at five o'clock. After washing my face, I would go and get the grass for the cattle. Then I had dhero [dough made from corn flour] and went into the jungle to cut branches for firewood. After returning from there, I didn't have a single minute to rest. I washed the pots, plates and cups as well as the clothes.

While my father worked in Kathmandu, my mother worked in other people's fields from early in the morning. My brothers and sisters were very small so I had to clean the house, make the beds and cook tiffin [afternoon meal] for my siblings. I never had any of this food because there was not enough. During the day, ... I would bring unrefined wool from a storage outlet and spin and braid the wool so that it could be sent to a carpet factory. In the evening, I cooked rice and curry for my family. My mother returned home late in the evening. Once she was home, I served food to my family. After my mother, who was very weak, and my siblings had gone to sleep, I washed the dishes and then I worked on the wool. I was able to go to sleep at 11:30. At this time, I was only five or six years old.

When I was nine, I was taken to a carpet factory by one of my neighbors who had promised to educate me. I don't know where my neighbor went, but I never saw him after I started working. I woke up at five and worked until nine at night. I only had time for two meals during the day. I never received any wages. Instead, I was allowed to eat and sleep there. I slept on the floor in the carpet factory. The toilet was a hole and had walls made of sacks, but the master had a real toilet.

When I was weaving the carpets, there was a lot of dust. Due to this dust, I had the first stages of tuberculosis. Since I was sick, I stopped working on the carpets. But instead of resting, I cooked for the master and his family and washed their clothes and all the cooking utensils. If the food didn't taste perfect, I would be scolded and beaten. I worked at this factory for two years.

When I grow up, I want to become a doctor so I can make sure children who are poor like myself are healthy without charging them a fee.

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