

THE PHILIPPINES

The constitution of the Philippines forbids the employment of children below the age of 15 except under the responsibility of parents or guardians, and then only if the work does not interfere with schooling. It allows employment of children aged from 15 to 18 under conditions established by the government. Nobody under the age of 18 is allowed to take part in hazardous work but serious violations of child-labour laws occur in the piecework or contracting out of embroidery and other work related to textiles.

The field study

In the Philippines the field study looked at a German textiles multinational with 48 branches around the world, including one in the Philippines, which produces women's clothing such as bras, girdles, panties and bikinis. 98% of its output is marketed in Europe; the remainder is sold in the Philippines. This company produces clothes in the Philippines because of the low wages which it has to pay, and like many other businesses in the Philippines it benefits from using child labour. It does not do so directly, but contracts work to local firms and asks no questions; these firms employ child labour themselves or sub-contract the work again.

Some children start working at the age of four.

When local operators receive an order from a multinational for a certain quantity of underwear, either they produce it in their own factory or they farm it out to sub-contractors in community-level «factories» that are nothing more than small huts. Most of the community-level workers are children. The child-workers, mostly girls, are chosen for their extreme poverty, their docility and their dexterity with their fingers. The sub-contractor pays the children considerably less than the contractor pays him for each item.

There is always a delay in paying for the work which is contracted out, which means that the child-workers have to wait for their meagre pay-packets. Contractors also compete fiercely to win the limited number of contracts that are on offer. They offer the very lowest possible price, and this ensures that the child-workers' wages stay low. The beneficiary of this process is the German multinational.

The underwear that reaches its main factory is in an advanced state of manufacture, thanks to the young, delicate and

obedient hands which have done jobs such as sewing, embroidering, making button-holes and attaching separate pieces of the product.

Working class

The parents of the child-workers are from the low-paid working class: mechanics, drivers, farm-workers, electricians and vendors. Their mothers may be garment-workers working in the same hut. Families can have as many as 23 members, and they live in dilapidated two-room houses often with dirt floors and with ceilings so low that adults have to stoop. These homes are sometimes close to the factory but many can be found on river banks and on the edge of swamps. There is no adequate ventilation. Prize possessions are a television set, a sewing machine and a fan. Sadly, frequently these «prizes» have broken down and the family cannot afford to have them repaired.

Latrines are often primitive, and stink; gastro-intestinal ailments are rampant. Children often have to make do with one or two meals a day, which inhibits their mental and physical development.

The field study found that from four to six years of age child-workers have their earnings appropriated by their mothers. From seven to 12, children alternate school with garments production, and many of the children in this age group said they sent their wages on school needs.

From 12 to 15 some children try to get a secondary education but those who cannot afford to do so go to work.

Girls are under more pressure to give up school than boys. This is because, in addition to their jobs, they are expected to carry out household chores such as

cleaning, washing, ironing and babysitting. Many younger girls placed a high premium on education, as they said that their textile jobs were a stepping stone to better education. Some girls said they were working so that they could send their younger brothers and sisters to school - in a spirit of self-sacrifice they had given up their own ambitions.

Their ideal, often expressed, was to become a nurse or doctor working overseas-a dream not for them but for their younger brothers and sisters.

Four-year-old workers

Wages are paid by piece-rate. Children aged between four and six, who do simple jobs, earn roughly five pesos a day, while an 11-year-old may earn up to 10 pesos a day. In factories, children work for eight to 11 hours a day, Monday to Friday.

In the peak pre-Christmas season they work on Saturdays and Sundays as well, and for a rush job they can work for as many as 24 hours before taking a break. In the many months they are encouraged to come late and leave earlier which is in the interests of the sub-contractor who pays by piece-rate. Take-home pay from factories varies between 15 and 150 pesos a week.

If the work is not considered up to standard, the children have to re-do the rejects a very unfair system which upsets the children, as they have to pay for the cost of the thread and are not paid for the extra work involved. They complain of back strain and hand cramps after long hours of stitching, and of allergies to factory dust and eye strain. Accidents are frequent - there have been several cases in which children's fingers have been cut off.

Children are under such pressure to meet quotas that they repress the desire to use the toilet. Sometimes they are sent on unpaid errands while at work; they are shouted at, cursed and otherwise humiliated by their bosses.

Adult workers are given the best work positions and access to fans.

The position of children who carry out the same work at home is marginally better than those who work in factories.

They are given more time to rest and are not exposed to such a strict, menacing boss, as they are in the charge of parents or

relations.

The multinational makes the money

These child-worker produce the women's underwear that the German multinational sells on the world market, particularly in Europe. A piece for which a child in tattered clothes is paid 80 centavos can be sold by the company for the equivalent of 150 pesos, a difference of more than 1,000% even considering the cost of the raw materials.

The field study found that in factories run by the contractors the workforce ranged from 30 to 100 people, and at home work-sites from five to 30 people. In both, the age of the workers ranges from ten to 45. Almost all the workers are girls or women. At home work-sites the ratio of adults to children can be two to one.

No Job security

In the factories the conditions of work are what is known as "casual", while for those at home work-sites, there is no job security at all. In the factories, the working day is from 7 am to 7 pm with an hour off for lunch. At home work-sites there are no schedules, and payment is by piece-work. For example, a seamstress in a community work-site gets five centavos to attach lace to a bra. She usually sews 500 pieces of lace a day and earns 25 pesos. At the factories a folder/packer can earn 30 pesos a week for packing 1,200 half-slips or bras.

In the factories workers are given snacks during overnight work and a free excursion to a resort every year. In the community work-places, on the other hand, there are no benefits except access to a television and cold water.

One factory visited during the field study was a crowded, two-storey building crammed with machines, bundles of cloth, thread, plastic bags and cartons. It was well-lit and the toilet was adequate. But the place was poorly ventilate, and the smell of the textile was nauseating. Chemicals irritated the eyes and the sound of the machines was deafening.

More relaxed at home

The house visited in the field study was one of the better ones. Some other work-

places are dilapidated and poorly lit and ventilated. This is particularly the case in the poorest communities, and it is here that the children are under particular pressure to accept employment at extremely low wage rates.

In the home work-sites, houses turned into factories provided a more relaxed atmosphere. Children watched television, drank cold water or relaxed in the living room during breaks.

Their main concern was when the subcontractor, who owns the house, demanded more work - especially during the peak pre-Christmas season.

These children do not realise that they are being exploited. They have no idea of the multinational's profits. On the contrary, they regard themselves as lucky to have the job so that they can afford to go to school as well.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the field survey did not come across any case of children organising themselves to protest against their low wages or appalling working conditions.

Children keep quiet, as they dare not risk losing their jobs, and they usually voice satisfaction.