

Background Information for Teachers and Parents

Slums and Bonded Labour

In the large city of Delhi, the capital of India, live about 10 million people. Some live in grand residences, many live in blocks of flats, and many others live in the spare places they have found when they migrated from the country areas in a desperate search for work to survive.

Many slum communities have formed over the years in all sorts of places. Under bridges, next to high rise buildings, on unused blocks of land, and on the river's edge. The dwellings are made from whatever scrap materials can be found: cardboard, plastic, wood pieces, rope and string. Most families have only enough space for one-roomed dwellings, usually about 2m by 2m, sometimes smaller. The rooms often have no window, and many have only a curtain as a door. They may have electricity (dangerously wired by breaking into street cables) to run a light bulb and maybe a fan. There is no running water. Women and girls collect water from a pump or tap nearby. Government toilet blocks are sometimes available, and each visit costs 1 rupee. In some areas, the toilets are too far away or the family won't pay the money, so the surrounding area is used. This creates a terrible environment which spreads dangerous diseases.

The people who live in these places have often been in this situation for years, some even generations. They do whatever work they can find. Most of them have arrived with only their labouring skills from farm work. They are illiterate and unskilled for most city jobs. One job they can do is rag-picking. This is simply collecting rubbish, sorting it for recycling, and selling it by weight to the recyclers.

Many rag-pickers end up working for someone who will buy the rubbish from them, and who also controls the land on which the slum community lives. This person is both their boss and their landlord. In many cases, the slum is illegal (under bridges and in parks, for example), so the 'landlord/boss' pays bribes to the police to let the community of rag-pickers stay there. In this way, the community is obliged to work for him, as he controls the land they live on. The landlord/boss may also lend money to the slum residents for their needs. He will pay this in advance and record it. Then the rubbish collected may be used to pay off the loan. In some cases, the landlord/boss will also take rent payments. He may provide food at 'budget' prices for the residents, which may be written up in their account as well. As many of these communities are made up of illiterate, unschooled people, they cannot read these records or do the mathematics to know whether they have paid off the loan.

As a result, the landlord/boss has these people in his control; they have become entirely dependent upon him, but also enslaved by him. They are bonded labourers. In order to pay off the money owed to the landlord, many of the families will have their children working as rag-pickers, especially if one parent becomes ill. The rate of pay they receive is tiny, well below the minimum wage set by the government. They don't know their rights, and are often scared of authorities because the police constantly threaten them as their houses are illegal. Some of these people are illegal immigrants from neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal, and so are afraid of being repatriated – sent back into a worse situation from which they have escaped.

People in this situation never have a chance to save money. With the tiny amounts they may have to spare, the banks won't allow them to open bank accounts. In any case, being illiterate means they can't use these institutions with all their forms and written information. Many can't open bank accounts or apply for benefits from the government, as they have no official documents and don't



understand this system. So their only way of getting extra money when the need arises is to borrow it from their landlord/boss.

So they stay on in these enslaved situations as it is the best way they have found to survive. Many have come from similar bonded labour situations in rural areas, but have had to watch their children starve to death when work is low and during droughts. Without some outside intervention, they are caught in a trap from which they cannot escape.

SHARAN Community Development Project in Barakumba District

SHARAN is a TEAR partner which has been working in the Barakumba slum communities amongst bonded labourers for 7 years. When the project started, one staff worker said he was shocked at the living conditions of these communities. When he went to visit them in their homes, he would come back with his body covered in lice. TB was a large problem with the slum dwellers, and was spreading throughout the community as people lived extremely close together, families only separated from each other by thin cardboard walls. Most of the children did not attend school at all, infant and childhood diseases were extremely high, and as a result so were infant and child mortality.

Seven years later, the situation is dramatically improved, as SHARAN staff have worked tirelessly with the community, offering them love, friendship and respect in very practical ways .

Much of the work SHARAN is doing is helping the local communities know about and use the resources and existing programs in their local areas. SHARAN has trained local women from the slum communities to be Community Health Workers in the project. These women, with their intimate knowledge of the community, are well suited to inform and educate their neighbours about important health issues, and the programs run by SHARAN.

SHARAN has provided a health clinic which the slum residents can come to for check-ups and monitoring of infants, children and pregnant women. SHARAN community workers regularly visit the homes of residents, to let them know about health issues, and to remind them to immunise their children at the appropriate time at the free immunisation clinics provided by the government in the area. Information and help with birth control is also provided. Birth control is provided by the government; the Community Health Workers let people know about these free programs. Now many of the couples in the community are aware of and using birth control.

Free TB treatment is also provided by the government. SHARAN helps those affected by the disease to access this treatment, and the Community Health Workers follow up the patients to make sure that they continue with the whole course of the medication – as some patients tend to stop when their symptoms stop. This makes their disease more dangerous, as they have developed resistance to the drugs. SHARAN is close to its aim of 100% eradication of TB in the community.

The SHARAN staff also visit families and inform them of the advantages of sending their children to school. They help parents with the daunting task of enrolling their children in school by familiarising the community with the process of admission into government schools, and helping them acquire birth certificates, affidavits and other related information for admissions. Now, two thirds of children between 5 and 10 years of age are attending school regularly. Each afternoon, SHARAN also holds informal classes for the children to attend to help them out with their homework, and help many catch up on missed school. Most of the parents are illiterate, so these tutorial classes are very valuable to the children, and they come along willingly. Some children who have shown a lot of academic potential are being helped to save for their education in the future.

Women in the community are also helped to organise savings groups. In this way, they can save and borrow money without paying the high interest that money lenders charge. This helps break their



Background Information

bondage, and gives the families a chance to improve their income. Loans are taken for setting up small businesses, such as the purchase of a cycle rickshaw or stock for various market stalls, or to help with the costs of schooling. They can also borrow for family and cultural reasons, such as marriages and expenses incurred during festivals. Women have the opportunity to learn sewing as an alternative employment opportunity. Many young women take these classes every afternoon. They have often missed out on schooling and they are keen to learn. The women are helped to save up for a sewing machine so as to set up their own micro-businesses.

SHARAN has empowered many of the community members to access the government pensions that are available to widows, the old aged and handicapped. Many poor people are unaware that such schemes exist.

Some Facts about Child Labour

India is said to have the largest number of child labourers in the world – over 73 million.

The total population of Australia is 20million, so that is over three times as many children as the whole population of Australia!

Many of these children are working in dangerous occupations, such as making matchsticks and firecrackers. Some children are forced to live at the place of employment away from their families, working in carpet factories or as domestic servants. Many other child labourers work with their families in unhealthy working environments. These include rag-pickers. The children often miss out on school, and are poorly paid and overworked.

There is a law in India that states that children under the age of 14 are not allowed to work in factories or in work that is dangerous. But this law is ignored by many, and police will accept a bribe from the employers or the families so they won't be in trouble. There is no law in India (and many other countries) which bans child labour altogether.

Please contact **TEAR Australia** on **1800 244 986** if you have any questions.