

## INFO SHEET – BONDED LABOUR

### **What is Bonded Labour?**

Bonded labour, also known as debt bondage, is one of the most widely used methods of enslaving people.

In 1999, the United Nations Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery estimated that at least 20 million people throughout the world are in bonded labour: entire families are bonded as labour in South Asia; in Brazil young men are forced to work on distant estates; and women from eastern Europe are forced into sexual slavery.

Most people become bonded when their labour is demanded as a means of repayment for a loan. Usually they are forced by necessity or are tricked into taking a loan in order to pay for such basic necessities as food, medicine, and for social obligations -- the cost of a wedding or a funeral. A loan for as little as £30 can take a lifetime to repay. Bonded labourers are typically forced to work long hours, up to seven days a week, 365 days a year for little or no wages, regardless of their age or health.

Entire families can be affected by this brutal system, with the debt being handed down for generations. Once the loan is taken, bonded labourers are deprived of their rights to negotiate terms and conditions of work. High interest rates with little or no wages, increase the debt keeping them enslaved. Most have no proof of their agreement, and if a contract exists, few can read it. Working under harsh conditions, they are often the victims of physical and mental abuse.

### **Bonded labour in Nepal**

Bonded labour in Nepal primarily affects two groups: the Tharu in the Far Western Region, and dalit (untouchable) agricultural labourers throughout the country.

During the 1960s many Tharu were displaced from their land because it had not been legally registered. With little access to education and with low wages, many were forced to take loans to survive and became bonded labourers, in many cases working on land that had once been theirs. Studies estimated between 70,000 and 100,000 Tharu were being exploited as bonded labourers in Western Nepal under an agricultural labour system known as Kamaiya.

In the 1990s, after democracy was established, a group of Nepalese human rights and labour rights groups came together to demand an end to bonded labour. In May 2000, a decade of pressure from local and international organisations culminated in a series of demonstrations in Nepal's far western Kailali district. Many of the protesting kamaiya bonded labourers and their supporters marched to the capital, Kathmandu, in July. The demonstrations and years of pressure from Anti-Slavery International, BASE (Backward Society Education) and other organisations led the Government on 17 July 2000 to declare that bonded labour was illegal. Despite this positive move, it made no legal or social provision for its implementation.

As a result, landlords expelled tens of thousands of freed bonded labourers from their land and homes. Displaced, they were forced to live by roadsides, in forests and in makeshift emergency camps leaving them vulnerable to hunger and disease. In desperation, hundreds of freed bonded labourers seized government-owned land and built huts as government promises of land redistribution in 2000 failed to materialise. Over the following year, there were numerous instances of huts being burned down by local government officials forcing the former bonded labourers to live in the open.

On 21 February 2002, the Government of Nepal finally passed a law prohibiting bonded labour among kamaiya and declared all loans taken as null and void. The law requires landlords to return any property taken as collateral and states the Government is responsible for managing housing, employment and income-generating activities.

The situation has improved for many kamaiya. BASE estimates 40 per cent have been released and allocated land, most are in easily accessible areas. But thousands remain unregistered, without land and support and face malnutrition while the rehabilitation process is hindered by the conflict between government and Maoist forces.