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Child workers exploited in footwear factories

City News - July 17, 2006

Theresia Sufa, The Jakarta Post, Bogor

Going to school or playing is common for most children but it is a luxury for many youngsters living in the Ciomas district near Bogor.

Many of the children are taken out of school as early as elementary level to help their parents earn additional money.

They spend nearly all day in small factory sweatshops, home footwear industries scattered across the region. Despite this, the children -- aged between nine to 17 years -- often earn only a fraction of what their parent and other adults do.

Ciomas district, just over 40 minutes drive from Bogor, has a high concentration of shoe factories, more so than other large industrial areas like Cibaduyut and Tasikmalaya where the businesses are common.

In Ciomas' 11 villages, there are some 2,000 workshops producing shoes, boots and sandals.

While the industry employs many people in the area it also takes up young laborers to meet production demand.

Despite the meager wages, most of the children said they were ordered by their parents to drop out of school and go to work instead.

Mohamad Hendar, 11, left school in third grade. His parents had divorced and his mother told him that she could no longer afford his tuition fees.

His mother and sister Nia also work in one of the small factories.

"He was once offered a chance by his *kakak-kakak* (big brothers) from Saung Sararea to continue his study, at least until he finished elementary school. But he didn't want to. He said he was too tired to go to school," Nia said.

Saung Sararea is the name of a group co-founded by the International Labor Organization and local nonprofit group Elsppat to help child workers.

Hendar's job at the workshop is to glue the footwear parts -- for which he can earn a paltry Rp 15,000 (US\$1.63) a week.

"I am happy whenever I give the money to my mother, that's enough for me," he said.

His job may not require much physical activity but Hendar said he often felt dizzy because of the glue smell.

Being exposed chemicals like glue is just one of the hazards child workers face on a daily basis.

When *The Jakarta Post* visited the footwear workshops, it found many of them were located inside the houses of factory owners. Hot air from a drying oven, smoke from cigarettes, dust, and the noise from machines are the daily companions of the child workers.

ILO project coordinator Mediana Dessy said the conditions for the child workers in Ciomas were deplorable. She said parents were often



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unwilling to admit the dangers because they were caught in a poverty trap.

"The ILO will support initiatives from the government and non-government groups to work together with us to eradicate child labor in this area," she said.

Dessy said ILO began to closely monitor the conditions of child workers in the area in June 2005.

"Our target is by 2016, there will be no more underage labor employed in those workshops and in the meantime, we are using the persuasive approach to get these children back into schools," she said.

"It's hard to ask them to return to school. They know they can earn money, so what's the point of going back to school. This is already a culture here," Dessy said.

ILO and its local counterpart, Elsppat, also tried to educate adults about the hazards in their workplaces.

"Many of them still cannot accept this."

Istiati B. Sapto, a doctor with the Bogor Health Agency, who initiated a program to treat the children, said the glue was having a terrible affect on the children's health.

"Many children are exposed to glue and sniff it for around eight to nine hours a day for up to two years at a time," she said.

Other children complained of skin rashes, dizziness and a loss of appetite. "It takes some time to get them willing to be checked. They don't care about their own health," she said.

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