

The ability to live free from any form of discrimination is a fundamental human right. Discrimination in the workplace is part of daily life for an immeasurable number of people more or less everywhere. Women, minors, migrants and those who suffer from a handicap are often subject to the most humiliating forms of discrimination.

DO HUMAN RIGHTS HAVE FRONTIERS?

edited by Alessandra Cipolla

## NEW PYRAMIDS, NEW SLAVES

Dubai's futuristic skyline and its 6-star resorts, probably the biggest building boom of our time – an emblem of the headlong growth of the Arab Emirates – are the façade that hides the decidedly less attractive experiences of a small army of migrants employed in the construction industry. A recent report by Human Rights Watch documented a state of affairs that includes wage exploitation, debt and working conditions so dangerous that in several cases they have proved fatal. Starvation wages are often held back for months by unscrupulous contractors who also hold the workers' passports. After getting into debt with the agencies who recruit them (and who, on top of an initial payment, take part of their wages for the next two years or so) and paying for the journey from their home countries, these workers have no way out. **Foreigners make up 95% of the workforce in the Emirates where, in 2005, the number of immigrant workers amounted to 2,738,000. At least 20% of them, mostly illiterate, come from destitute rural communities in South Asia. Laws that ought to be enforced** – there are only 140 inspectors to do it – are widely ignored. Instead of implementing the awaited inspection standards promised by the government, the Ministry of Labour has formulated a law forbidding immigrants who go on strike from taking up any form of employment in the country for at least a year. Working conditions are often dangerous. Official sources quote 34 workers killed in 2004 and 39 in 2005, but data from independent sources suggest much higher figures. The Human Rights Watch report stresses that the laws exist in theory and should apply to native and migrant workers alike, but no-one sees to it that they are enforced.

## WOMEN AND WORK: A BATTLE STILL TO BE FOUGHT

There have never been so many women on the employment market, yet they are still subject to discrimination in terms of different rules, of job security, of salary and education when compared to men. According to *Tendances mondiales de l'emploi des femmes. Résumé 2007* [World trends in female employment. 2007 Summary], the report issued recently by the Bureau International du Travail [International Labour Office], 1.2 billion of the world's total 2.9 billion workforce is women;

but women also constitute 60% of workers classed as "poor". The conclusions reached by the report are not particularly encouraging. The assumption that the process of socio-economic development would tend to bring about a continued improvement in women entering the job market is not true, especially in certain regions. Moreover, a greater share of the market doesn't always mean improved quality, and women have not yet achieved true socio-economic independence, especially in the world's poor regions. In fact, they have greater difficulty in finding dignified, productive jobs, are less likely to find regular, well-paid employment and, where they do find it, they are almost always paid less than their male colleagues. This is the case even in fields that have for centuries been considered "women's work" such as teaching and childcare. The fact must also be considered that, especially in poor economies, unpaid work for the family falls mainly to women and, even if the percentage of women in paid employment has risen from 42.9% to 47.9% over the last ten years, in the poorest countries the situation is still very difficult. If, compared with ten years ago, girls now have a greater chance of learning to read and write, there is still a gap between the level of education for males and females and it remains unlikely, especially in certain areas of the world, that women will have the opportunity to develop their skills in the same way as men. In China, for example, it seems that more than 115 million children of primary school age do not attend school; for every 100 boys, 115 girls are in the same situation. The annual UNICEF report states that "Ensuring that women and men have equal opportunities to generate income is an important step towards realizing women's rights, which would also result in the greater likelihood of children's rights being fulfilled. **Achieving the third of the Millennium Development Goals (Investing in gender equality and empowering women) will contribute to all the other goals:** from reducing poverty and starvation to protecting children's lives, promoting the health of mothers, education for all, the fight against HIV/AIDS, against malaria and against childhood diseases; it will also help to guarantee sustainable development".

## WHEN THE EXPLOITED ARE UNDER 14

The International Labour Organization estimates that there are 218 million child workers between the ages of



5 and 17. **126 million are thought to be employed in working conditions that are particularly bad for children; 1 child worker in 8 of the global population is between 5 and 17 years old, while 111 million under-15s work in extremely risky conditions and should “stop work immediately”.** In addition, there are **8.4 million children who are victims of slavery, of human trafficking**, of working to pay off debt or of other forms of forced labour, of being pressed into armed conflicts, into prostitution, pornography and other illegal activities. These are still worrying figures, but they do reflect a reduction and one which, if the trend remains unaltered, leads us to think that the worst forms of child labour could be eliminated within ten years. Child labour is a product of poverty and also helps to produce it. Most working children have no chance of going to school and often become unskilled adults, trapped in poorly paid jobs who, in turn, want their own children to contribute to the family income. But where do they work? The majority of youngsters, around 70%, are employed in agriculture, while domestic work in other people's houses is considered to be far and away the type of activity in which most girls are employed. The rest of the child workers are employed in factories, making things such as matches, fireworks and glass, on the streets as beggars, in brickworks, mines or the construction industry, in producing cocoa or in tourist establishments. And in the sex industry or as soldiers. Children in different countries have created their own organisations and movements to force leaders to listen to their concerns and to take action to improve an appalling situation. Among their number are Ninos y Adolescentes Trabajadores (NATS) in Latin America, the African Movement for Working Children and Youths, and Bhima Sangha in South Asia. Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the

Child (1989) states: “Member States recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development”. For its part, Convention 182 of the International Labour Organization (1999) has elimination of the worst forms of child labour as its main objective. It stresses the need for immediate action to deal with the worst forms of child exploitation and insists that the measures adopted by the authorities should be implemented immediately after ratification. The chief provisions of the convention define which situations are to be classed as the worst forms of child labour, and specify the measures that governments must take to prohibit and eliminate them.

According to a recent report by the International Labour Organization, Latin America and the Caribbean are the parts of the world where the decrease in child labour has been most rapid. Despite some improvements, Asia and the Pacific remain the areas with the largest number of child workers aged between 5 and 14 (122 million). Nevertheless, Asia is an example of how political commitment to reducing poverty and encouraging education has brought success. Since last October a law decreed by the Indian Government has prohibited the use of children under 14 years of age in jobs considered dangerous, including domestic work and employment in hotels and restaurants. On the other hand, it is in Sub-Saharan Africa – where epidemics and immense economic poverty have combined with a massive increase in population to make the fight against child labour even more difficult – that the highest percentage (26%) of child workers is recorded.