



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES INDIGENOUS VOICES

## Fact Sheet

### Forced Labour and Indigenous Peoples

The International Labour Organization estimates that there are 12.3 million people who are victims of forced labour. Others have placed the estimate as high as 27 million. Forced labour takes place in all regions throughout the world and it is often linked to long-standing patterns of discrimination against indigenous peoples and other groups of people who suffer from discrimination.

Indigenous peoples throughout the world have historically suffered enormously from slavery and forced labour and many still continue to do so today. Due to discrimination, marginalization, poverty and a host of other factors, indigenous peoples are vulnerable to forced labour, debt bondage, trafficking and other slavery like situations.

In Asia, bonded labour has been and remains particularly severe among the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India; and among indigenous peoples in Western Nepal. Indigenous peoples or hill tribes, particularly women and girls, throughout the Mekong region of South-East Asia are also known to be particularly vulnerable to trafficking for sexual exploitation. Throughout Africa, contemporary forced labour and slavery-like practices appear to be a particular problem in those countries, which have a recent history of slavery, and where there are reports of continuing patterns of discrimination against persons of slave descent.

In Latin America, today as centuries ago, the main victims of forced labour are indigenous peoples.<sup>1</sup> Forced labour in Latin America takes place on sugar and Brazil nut plantations, as well as in logging camps in the Amazon. The methods of coercion of the labourers include debt bondage as well as threats and the use of violence.

Indigenous children tend to be more vulnerable than non-indigenous children. They are more likely to live in poverty; they lack access to education and health-care and are more vulnerable to abusive labour practices.


It is estimated that indigenous children in Latin America are twice as likely to work as

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<sup>1</sup> ILO Leaflet on Forced Labour, Human Trafficking and Indigenous and Tribal Peoples



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non-indigenous children. For example, in Guatemala there was a steady decline in the years 1995-2004 in the number of non-indigenous children working in Guatemala, but there was no change in the number of indigenous children in the labour force. Similar trends can be found in other regions, including Kenya and the Philippines. Indigenous child labour has received relatively little attention and this issue remains largely invisible and is not captured by traditional methods of data collection.

The International Labour Organization estimates that 41% of all children in Africa between 5-14 years of age are involved in some economic activity, while in Asia, 60% of children are economically active. Surveys have shown that indigenous children are subjected to many of the worst forms of child labour, such as bonded and domestic labour, participation in armed conflicts and prostitution.


Unfortunately, there is little statistical data and not a great deal of attention given to the trafficking of indigenous peoples, especially women and girls. Their marginalized status, poverty, and exposure to violence make them vulnerable to trafficking. Indigenous women, who face multiple forms of discrimination, are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation as well as other forms of forced labour.


### **The situation of Forced Labour in the Chaco region**

In 2008, in response to a request from the Governments of Bolivia and Paraguay, the Permanent Forum organized a multi-agency visit to the Chaco region to verify complaints regarding forced labour and servitude among the Guaraní people. The mission met with representatives of government and UN agencies as well as various indigenous organizations.

In the large haciendas of the Bolivian and Paraguayan Chaco region, the Guaraní indigenous peoples have been subjected to slavery like conditions since the late nineteenth century. Despite various government efforts, including land reform as well as international condemnation, this practice continues where between 5,100 and 7,200 Guaraní are subjected to servitude in the remote haciendas.

There is a specific term for forced labour in the Chaco region namely *empatronamiento* (which means subjected to the “*patrón*” or employer). Very often, it is servitude or debt bondage (*enganche*), or the captivity of families inside the haciendas. Guaraní men and women grow old on the estates working as labourers in the fields, looking after cattle, or doing other work, including domestic chores, for the owner. Wages are either very low or non-existent, and often there is no money to cover basic needs. Indigenous workers become indebted to the owners, who advance them remuneration in the form of food and clothes at high prices so that the debt is perpetual. The situation is particularly damaging for women in domestic service where they work long hours, in an environment of subjection, maltreatment and verbal and physical abuse. Further, there is often no monetary remuneration and no health-care coverage.





The Permanent Forum's mission found examples of various forms of abuse, including forced labour, child labour, poor working conditions, sexual abuse, the loss of, and consequent lack of access to lands and the non-existence of social services. Further, there were restrictions on the right to freedom of association, discrimination, and judicial bias. Based on these findings, the Permanent Forum made a number of recommendations. One of the main outcomes was that governments of Bolivia and Paraguay continue a dialogue with the Permanent Forum to follow-up on the recommendations.

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**For more information** on the tenth session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, please see [www.un.org/indigenous](http://www.un.org/indigenous).

