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# Children Working in Transport Sector

Child Labour Status Report 2009

Child labor in the transportation sector has emerged as a major social challenge due to the increasing process of urbanization. Children working in transportation sector are found in all types of vehicles-trucks, buses, mini-buses, microbuses, jeeps and tempos throughout the country, particularly in major urban centers such as; Kathmandu Valley, Dharan-Biratnagar, Birgunj, Nepalgunj, Butwal and Pokhara.

As these vehicles wind their way through chaotic traffic and polluted streets young boys can be seen hanging dangerously off the backs of tempos or from the doors of buses. Periodic crack downs by the traffic

police and the objections of passengers do little to stop the practice.

These young boys have often run away from home to escape problems at school, domestic violence or problems at home. They are sure that by working on the tempos and buses as conductors that one day they will be in a position to secure a job as a driver. Many are determined to stay on the tempos and see efforts to remove them as people trying to prevent them having a career in the transport industry.



According to a study conducted by CWIN in 2002, the influx of children in this sector may be due to both push and pull factors. The 'pull' refers to the increasing urbanization and consumerism that has attracted a large number of children to urban areas, the 'push' refer to poverty, family problems, lack of access to schooling, social exclusion and lack of work opportunities in rural areas. These children work long days sharing their lives with the drivers and by night often sleeping at the depots where the vehicles are stored. Huge amounts of money pass through their hands each day but at the end most have little to show for their months working on the buses and tempos. The dangers from the traffic, their exposure to pollution and their poor living arrangements put them at risk for health problems and sexual and physical abuse. To remove these children, special arrangements are needed for residential accommodation as few are willing to return to school. Most are not yet of legal working age of 14 and so can not be enrolled into most vocational training programs.



Child transport workers are highly visible and many NGOs and stakeholders requested World Education expand efforts to reach this group. Starting in 2006, Brighter Futures NGO partners CWIN, Sahara, BASE, Chartare Youth Club, Pokhara Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Suryadaya Youth Club and other NGOs took on the challenge of trying to find ways to address this difficult target group and to reach them with education options that could remove them from this work. Although only small numbers were supported this effort has taught us valuable lessons as to what is needed to work with this group.

## Children Transport Workers

Children under 18 years of age assisting in the operation of the public or private transportation services for cash or in-kind or as apprentices are considered as child labor in the transportation sector. Children work in different vehicles to upload and download goods, to collect fares from passengers, and to give signals about the traffic situation while on the road. These children, while at work, are not only deprived of their basic rights, they are also exposed to highly hazardous situation. They are prone to accidents, and are exposed to a highly polluted environment. This situation can not only hamper their healthy growth, but also result in many chronic health problems.

CWIN conducted a study in 2005 and estimated that 2,193 child transport workers in the Kathmandu Valley with 28% under the legal working age of 14. Four out of five were migrants with the greatest numbers coming from Kavre and Sindhupalanchok. By ethnicity and caste they

were Chhetri 31%, Brahman 17%, Tamang/Lama 13% and Newar 11%. One in five transportation workers did not have one parent, either a biological father or biological mother. Of the children, 73% were literate. Half the children had directly entered this work while half had transferred from other work often as porters, hotel workers, casual laborers or domestic workers. Most cited poverty as their major reason for being involved.





Children were found to be working a median of 12 hours per day with an average monthly salary of Rs.930. Despite appearances, many of these children maintain a family connection and 68% reported contributing financially for their family's food, sibling's education, clothes, agricultural inputs and to pay family debts. Many of the children reported physical and mental abuse and ill-treatment. One-third were required to do extra work for drivers/owners families. In addition to the risk of accidents on the road and health risks from exposure to pollution these children face other risks. Their lifestyle and living arrangements expose them to sexual and physical abuse and encourage high risk behaviors. Over half the children sleep in the vehicle in which they work. Half smoke, while one in four consumes alcohol and a small number use harder drugs.

### Brighter Futures and Transport Workers

Brighter Futures' partners identified 393 child transport workers for participation in the program. Of these participants 95% were boys and 5% were girls involved in loading and unloading and cleaning vehicles. By age, 3% were under 10 years of age, 42% children were between 10-14 years of age and the remaining 55% are in the 15-18 age range. The incidence of very young boys was most common in micro vans and tempos compared to other types of vehicles. Children in the 15-18 age range were mostly working in bigger vehicles such as buses and trucks.

The ethnicity and caste of these transportation workers were Janajati 38%, Brahman/Chettri 26%, Dalit 16%, Newar 9%, Muslim 6%, Terai castes 2% and small numbers of others. This breakdown was similar to those found in CWIN's study but the focus on younger workers may have resulted in a higher proportion of Janajati and Dalit children who often enter child labor at younger ages. The majority of children working in transportation came from the surrounding districts to the urban areas. Many children came from dysfunctional or single parent headed families.



## Working conditions

Children of the transport sector usually work more than 12 hours a day. Working hours are one of the indicators in identifying whether or not a particular form of child labor is one of the worst forms of child labor. By this criterion, child transportation workers are categorized as falling under the worst forms of child labor in Nepal. Children are both physically and mentally abused and harassed while they are at work. Many of the young boys report have been sexually abused. They are quite often abused by drivers/owners. Traffic police often beat child “Khalasi” (helpers or conductors) because they do not understand the traffic signals and rules when they first enter into this work.

## Origin Districts

In all, 393 child transport workers participated in educational activities under the Brighter Futures program. Out of them 238 beneficiaries were working in the Kathmandu Valley. The majority of the child transportation workers came from the surrounding districts close to their working area. The children found working in the Kathmandu Valley, mostly came from Makawanpur, Dhading, Nuwakot, Kavre, Sindhupalchok, Dolkha, Ramechhap and some were from Sindhuli. Similarly, in the eastern, central and far-western cluster, the majority of the children originated from the same district with a few children having migrated from nearby hill districts such as Salyan in the west, Makawanpur in the Central Cluster, Panchthar and Ilam in the Eastern Cluster.



## Reasons Children Work in the Transportation Sector

Children say they migrated to urban areas for work and a better life. Social and security concerns are also reasons for migration of children. Many boys said armed conflict in rural areas was one of the main reasons why they left their home and joined the workforce. The children, and staff working with them, said that the armed conflict in the rural areas was one of the main reasons why the boys left home mostly with their parents' consent.

There is a constant flow of children mainly boys into this sector. The "pull" factors that attract these children to the city and work on public transport, are the prospect of earning good money, because they want to be drivers, because working on public transport the employers take care of food and shelter (even if that means sleeping inside the vehicle) while many say the chance to travel about free of cost and see the city are attractions. Many are also drawn by promises of work or exploring with friends.

The "push" factors are often as important as the pull factors. Failure at school or dropping out of school for a variety of reasons; dysfunctional family situations with step parents, alcoholism or domestic violence; a mentally ill parent; family poverty; social exclusion of minorities or Dalit groups; fights with parents, friends or teachers; and the armed conflict or a combination of factors result in children leaving home.

The dreams of a life of glamour in the city quickly meet up with the reality and difficulty of being young and alone and surviving on the street as a young migrant. Some drift in to recycling, begging and living off charity. Others take the first opportunity they get to enter a shelter. The more independent and ambitious often turn to work on public transport. Drivers often take pity on them and their demands to be allowed to work. The boys often say that they see this as a "safe" option until they are older and can "be a driver" or find some other better work. Too often the children end up in a much worse situation than they faced in their village but are reluctant to sort out their problems with their families or admit that it has been more difficult than they imagined and go home.





## No Place To Go

The general public when confronted by children living and working alone on the streets often ask “Why don’t they go and live in a children’s home ?” In 2008, Brighter Futures partners in the Kathmandu Valley surveyed the children’s homes and shelters. Nearly all were full and had just a few spaces free. In many districts such as Makawanpur despite there being many orphans and abandoned children there is no system to house or support them. Many do not want to be confined in an institution and would be better off with foster care in their own community or being supported to stay with extended family. Boys in difficult circumstances are more likely to end up on the street and to work on public transportation while get taken in as domestic helpers. Until the welfare system is capable of caring for these children they will continue to see child labor as their only option for survival.

## A Joint Effort To Prevent Child Workers on Public Transport

To address the issue of minors, below legal working age, working on public transport, Child Workers in Nepal-CWIN conducted a campaign to remove child Tempo-Khalasi. As part of this effort, it carried out a study on children working in the transportation sector in urban areas in 2005. A Joint Task Force for the elimination of child labor in Tempos and Microbuses was also formed aimed at combating child labor in tempos and microbuses. The members of Joint Task Force on the Elimination of Child Labor in Tempos and Microbuses are, CWIN, the Social Welfare Council, Clean Transportation Professionals Association, Kalanki -Manakamana Transportation, Nepal Trade Union Congress, Ministry of Labor and Transport, Ministry of Women , Children and Social Welfare and Kathmandu Valley Traffic Police Office. This Joint Task Force is not as active as it needs to be with occasional efforts related more to the personal commitment of the individuals rather than organizational commitment.



## Providing Education for Child Transport Workers

NGO partners of Brighter Futures Program had little experience working with children from this sector. Rehabilitation centers and shelters are already full and it was hoped that these children would be willing to make use of Open Learning Centers. Most have some schooling but almost a third of these children are illiterate or barely literate. The nature of the work—constantly on the move from dawn till after dark—made this a difficult fit. While these children were interested, they were unwilling to risk losing their jobs for the opportunity to attend nonformal education programs. Some wanted to return to school and live with their family while most wanted to participate in vocational training. Many were too young for most vocational training. Two strategies were therefore used. For those able and willing to return to school in-kind scholarships were provided. For older children of legal working age—vocational training or apprenticeships were provided.

## School Scholarships

Many of the boys identified were school dropouts. In all 120 beneficiaries received in-kind scholarship to attend formal school. These scholarships covered the costs of fees, uniforms, stationary and textbooks. Many of these children had returned to their family and school after a brief period of transition and stay in a children's shelter.

## Vocational Training

In all 103 older children working on public transport received vocational training from the program. Many of these boys are fascinated by vehicles and remain determined to develop careers linked to transport. Some have gone on to become mechanics while many have fulfilled their dream to

get proper training and become drivers. With proper training and a drivers license these boys get much better salaries and have many opportunities for work in both Nepal and abroad. Some have trained as cooks and commercial artists.







## Treated With Respect

"My name is Suman. I came to Kanchanpur from Salyan District. In the beginning I started working as a Khalasi (transport worker) and at that time people used to mock me calling me "Khalasi". When people used to call me a "khalasi", it felt very bad. Later on, the staff from BASE contacted me and gave me the opportunity to participate in an Automobile Training. After finishing the three month training, I became a mechanic. Now I earn Rs.3000 a month. From that I have to pay my own food and accommodation but this is enough for me and I can support my family too. Now I am very happy because people are respectful of me and call me the "mechanic".

Former Khalasi- now 17 years old – Khanchanpur District



*"Since my childhood I dreamt of driving a bus but due to our family's economic situation I had to satisfy myself with working as a helper. But thanks to Sahara Nepal for selecting me to participate in the driving training, I am a proper conductor now, and I am earning Rs. 5000 per month but my aim is to be a driver. With conductor's job I will gain more experience which will help me become a good driver. I am happy and the credit goes to World Education for developing such a good program for the children like me who are working in child labor. I have not yet heard about any other programs that help children like me to make our future bright."*

**Raju Rajbanshi, Jhapa**

## Dreams Come True

For youth like Nima Lama and Jeet Bahadur Moktan opportunities in rural Nepal were slim pickings. When they got the chance, both boys dropped out of school and migrated to the capital Kathmandu in search of work. Says Nima, “All our friends in the village were in similar situations – we couldn’t really see a future.”



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But life in the big city has been a hustle ever since. Nima finished grade 9 and joined his father in Kathmandu at age 14. A family friend who drives a tempo gave him work as an assistant, or *khalasi*, collecting fares and managing travelers – a dangerous occupation in Kathmandu traffic that frequently involves hanging on to the vehicle when seats fill up. He also began working as a kitchen helper on organized treks, seasonal and very irregular work. Nima struggles to make ends meet. Jeet Bahadur came to Kathmandu on his own after finishing eighth grade. He lived with a friend who worked as a *khalasi* and who taught him the

ropes. Jeet didn’t have full-time work: “When a friend jumps off for a lunch break, we jump on to cover him. We earn about 100-200 rupees a day.”

Brighter Futures partner, Child Workers in Nepal (CWIN) identified Nima and Jeet Bahadur as youth in need of vocational training. Based on their age and interest, arranged for the boys to get driver training and driver’s licenses.

The training is completed, and the boys are still hustling, but with a valid license in hand, they are building their credibility and skills. This first year, according to transportation committee rules, they will only be permitted to park and drive vehicles when there’s limited traffic. They ask taxi drivers they know for the nightshift to build confidence. Jeet Bahadur concludes, “We are working hard, but we now have a license. In Nepal, you need to be connected and opportunities are few. But the more skills you have, opportunities increase. To that, Nima adds, “We see a future now: we hope to drive for a project or a good office one day!”





## Most successful approaches

- **Socialization training:** Before starting the vocational training, socialization activities were provided to child transportation workers. During the course of the socialization, the children developed life skills and social skills. These activities helped prepare children used to being very independent to be patient and to be able to concentrate on their technical training.
- **Hostel Accommodation:** As most of the children working in transportation do not have a proper place to live, accommodation becomes a major issue for those wanting to attend full-time vocational training. Providing hostel accommodation during the training period enabled these older children to focus on their studies and later on when they get employment, prepared them for independent living when renting their own flat.
- **Involvement of Unions and Employers** – Many of the young boys working in transport dream of jobs as drivers. Most are too young for this but do well in jobs working with vehicles as mechanics or other related work. Involving the auto-mechanics union and employers helped get these youth good training and alternative work options. Many still want to be drivers when they are older. In the long term they will continue to use the skills they are gaining and have relatively well paid work alternatives.





## *One Day I will Own My Own Garage*

"When I look at my past two years, it seems like a dream of a boy who had dropped out of school to help his parents to feed a family of five. As a jeep Khalasi (helper to the driver), I came from Salyan to Mahendranagar, and struggled hard for survival. During those days of struggle, I was selected for a four months training course in Auto Mechanics. I still remember the day and date that turned my life from cleaner to a mechanic. It was July 13, 2007. One day, I am going to own a garage of my own and I will employ 4 to 6 persons in my garage." Binod recalls his past days when he had to struggle to remember names of the tools, and the insults when failed to do so. He says proudly, "I now am a trained auto mechanic. I have a certificate of my training. Now, I earn Rs. 4000 per month including free food (two meals, breakfast) and lodging, and soap for cleaning."

The owner of the workshop where Binod works has nothing but praise for Binod, "This boy is my one of the most trusted mechanics and very good in his work. I am wholly dependent on him. I know he will never fail me." His fellow workers are also confident that Binod will have a good future in the industry and say "This boy is sincere. He never uses alcohol or drugs and we can see a good future for him."



## Challenges

- Orphaned and Abandoned:** Many boys working the transport sectors have lost one or both parents. Others have been abandoned with the breakdown of their parent's marriages. Many orphanages and children's homes are full. Those with space prefer to take young children and boys ten and older are hard to place. Nepal lack's financial assistance for foster parents or more distant relatives that would be willing to care for these older children within the community.
- Driver's Licenses and Legal Identity:** The majority of the boys assisting as conductors on buses and tempos dream of being a driver. Most though are too young to get a license. They can not legally sit for their test until they are 18. For this reason many try to pretend they are older than they are on entering the program hoping they will be given driving training and then get their license. A Nepali Citizenship Paper or *nagrita* can be obtained once a youth reaches 16 and is needed to get a license. Many child laborers lack family documentation or have been orphaned and have enormous trouble getting this documentation making driving a difficult work choice.
- High Costs:** Boys living and working on public transport need holistic rehabilitation, including food and shelter until they can return home or independently support themselves in non-exploitative work. The costs of residential centers, re-integration in to home communities, and vocational training in urban areas are all expensive.



## Specific trends in different geographic areas

The majority of the children are working in the Kathmandu Valley with just small numbers scattered in other districts. The numbers involved fluctuate depending on the efforts being made by the Ministry of Labor and Transport Management and the Traffic Police. After a crackdown very few children are found then as the months pass the numbers gradually rise again until there is another crackdown. This fluctuating level of effort makes it difficult to control child labor in this sector. Outside the valley far more of the children are of legal working age but are at risk due to the occupational safety and health concerns. In other regions of the country in the east Jhapa and Sunsari were the main origin districts, in the Central Terai, Chitawan, Dhanusha, Makawanpur and Parsa, in the Mid-West Terai from Jajarkot and Dang, and in the western hills and terai the children came from Nawalparasi, Gulmi Lamjung and Tanahau.



**World Education Brighter Futures partner NGOs providing services for children working in domestic sector.**

- **Child Workers in Nepal (CWIN)**
- **Sahara Nepal**
- **Gramin Bikas Manch (GBM)**
- **Backward Society Education (BASE)**
- **Chartari Youth Club (CYC)**
- **Pokhara Chambers of Commerce and Industry**
- **Suryadaya Youth Club (SYC)**

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