

# FARMERS AND OTHER VICTIMS OF TOBACCO

## CHILD LABOUR IN TOBACCO GROWING VIOLATES CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), tobacco growing as a general practice is hazardous to children: "The hazards are obscured or take a long time to be felt. For example, many young farm workers don't know that when they harvest wet tobacco leaves, they will be absorbing nicotine through their skin."

Children face many dangers in tobacco growing. They can be poisoned by pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and of course by ingesting the nicotine from tobacco leaves through their skin (Green Tobacco Sickness).

Children risk bodily injuries by carrying heavy loads and experience fatigue from working for long hours. Children can get malnourished because they lack nutritious food and their families are caught in a cycle of poverty. In bidi and cigarette production, dust exposure leads to pulmonary diseases among child workers.

In addition, children working in

the tobacco sector lose their future, because they either cannot attend



Little boys engaged in rolling bidis in Andhra

school or they are not able to focus fully on their education due to the double burden of work and school.

These conditions violate protection and development rights provided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Including:

**Article 19 - protection from all forms of violence**

**Article 32 - protection from dangerous work and exploitation**

**Article 24 - the right to health and sufficient nutritious food**

**Article 28 - the right to education**

**Article 31 - the right to leisure, play and culture**

In September 2016, the international bureau of the US Department of Labor listed 16 countries employing child labour in tobacco growing: Argentina, Brazil, Cambodia, Indonesia, Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Lebanon, Malawi, Mexico, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Philippines, Tanzania, Uganda, Vietnam, and Zambia. In Bangladesh and India children work to produce hand-rolled cigarettes, known as bidis.

Recently, a US watchdog group, Human Rights Watch, documented how in the USA, children are also working in tobacco fields. [<https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/09/teens-tobacco-fields/child-labor-united-states-tobacco-farming>]

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## BIDI ROLLING: TRAPPED A IN CYCLE OF SILENCE

Indian bidis (rolled tendu leaves) have found their way in to fashionable Paris and small boutique stores in London. However they don't reflect the harsh exploitative conditions under which tiny fingers roll each of these bidis in impoverished Indian homes for pittance.

In India, bidis are the poor man's smoke. A pack of 25 bidis cost only US\$ 0.15. Mainly women and girls are employed in this industry.

Conservative numbers estimate about 5.5 million



Small bidi bundals, sold between INR 3.5 to 10 (USD 0.6 - 0.15)

bidi rollers. However, Non-governmental organisations and labor unions estimate the number is closer to 10 million. Published literature estimate women make up 90 percent of the total bidi employment and a quarter are children, mostly girls, who often miss school and roll bidis instead.

Established in the 1900s, the bidi industry flourished till 1980, when the government implemented regulations to stop the

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# ALTERNATIVE CROPS PROVIDE A BETTER FUTURE FOR TANZANIAN TOBACCO FARMERS

Tanzania is a major tobacco producer in Africa with more than 120,000 tonnes harvested in 2012, of which around 85 percent was exported. While tobacco is an important source of government revenue, tobacco growing also damages the environment and harms the well-being of communities where it is produced.

For example, the Tabora Region, a major tobacco producer in Tanzania, lost about 140,000m<sup>3</sup> of forest worth more than US\$10 million between

2010 and 2011 alone. Furthermore, tobacco farming draws on child-labour, causes illness among farmers who report smoking raw tobacco and uses toxic pesticides that pollute the

soil, air and water, and irreversibly damage the environment.

Tobacco growing also perpetuates poverty whereby tobacco companies exploit farmers by giving them highly priced subsidies, with the view of recovering the loans after sales. However, during the purchase, tobacco companies downgrade the tobacco leaves and lower prices, making it difficult for farmers to repay the debt, subjecting them to lifetime bondage.

To address these serious harms, the Tanzania Tobacco Control Forum (TTCF) has been working with tobacco farmers in Namtumbo District in southern Tanzania since 2006, to educate them on the hazards of tobacco and promote the adoption of alternative crops.

The farmers responded positively and, between 2006 to 2014, maize and rice production increased by 352 percent and 277 percent respectively, while pigeon peas and sunflower

increased by 5,739 percent and 247.6 percent respectively (Fig 2), while output for other crops has also increased.

Tobacco, production on the other hand rose by 483 percent from 2006 to 2010, and then dropped by 79.6 percent by 2014 and continues to decline.

Testimonies from farmers confirm increased production of alternative crops has resulted in improved socio-economic status, with many farmers living in improved housing

and are able to send their children to school, even up to college, things they could not afford previously when they were growing tobacco.

Although farmers

have reported bumper harvests in alternative crops, viable sustainable markets remain a major challenge. Middlemen quote lower, unprofitable prices and this year, most farmers still have last seasons' harvests, which is a disincentive for them to continue farming.

Relevant authorities should assist these farmers through market search and provision of storage facilities like the warehouse receipt.

Providing support to tobacco farmers to adopt alternative crops and assisting them with proper marketing like the warehouse receipt system, will increase production of alternative crops and reduce tobacco farming.

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## BIDI ROLLING - TRAPPED IN CYCLE OF SILENCE

exploitation of workers. Bidi company owners came up with an innovative solution to move the production into the workers' homes, in effect making bidi a cottage industry.

Besides helping manufacturers circumvent regulations, this work-at-home method had the added effect of bringing women into the bidi work force. Manufacturers say they are performing a national service by providing work for women.

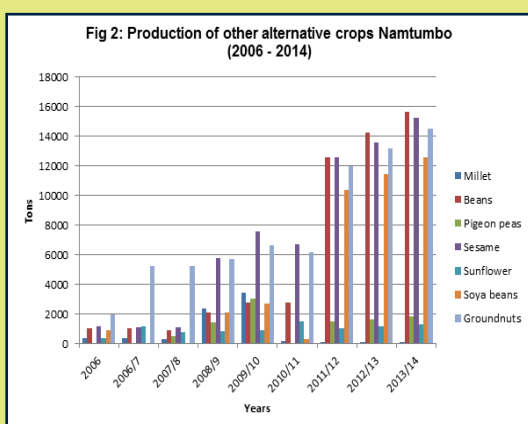
"If they didn't do this, what other job could these women do?" said one bidi company owner, an employer of 50,000 women. In terms of worker comfort, "it's just like knitting," he says. "It's a fine-tuned, nice job."

The world of bidi-rolling could well be called the never-ending cycle of abuse. The women and girls who roll bidis work from dawn to dusk for piecework, paid pittance for working in a crouched position all day from 9am to 11pm, breathing in tobacco fumes lethal to their health.

Women's health takes a beating. They suffer from backache and knee problems and the tobacco dust makes them feel dizzy. Over the long term, many develop chronic bronchitis, asthma and even tuberculosis. Some complain of a burning sensation in eyes and throat. Many also suffer rheumatic syndromes, allergies, stomach troubles and hemorrhoids.

It is aptly said that the wellbeing of women in any society is an indicator of how developed that state is. The bidi industry's practices indicate that India still has a long way to go.

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# HEALTH SACRIFICED IN TOBACCO FARMING IN BANGLADESH

Tobacco growing is a labour-intensive activity. Starting from the day the seedbed is laid, to the day the leaves are cured in the kiln, tobacco farming families and hired workers come in contact with toxic substances, inhale an assortment of chemicals, and are exposed to nicotine poisoning through the leaves.

The harmful effects of tobacco cultivation on food security and the environment are well documented in Bangladesh. Concerns of the health effects of tobacco use are recognised and acted upon. However, the association between tobacco cultivation and health problems are less known.

Research on 300 tobacco farming households (1,357 family members) in two major tobacco growing areas of Bangladesh found higher rates of reported health effects among tobacco farmers.

Unlike food crop cultivation, stages of tobacco growing are hazardous to health. As the leaves ripen from the ground upwards, these need several "pullings" (picking mature leaves and removing damaged ones) till entire harvest.

All family members, including women and children, have to be engaged in the pullings. This causes illnesses such as backache, fever, numbness, urinary problems and sore eyes. Additionally,



female workers reported mental stress, sleeplessness and depression.

Use of agro-chemicals, particularly pesticides, is integral to tobacco cultivation and higher than other agricultural crops. Direct observation of tobacco fields showed that workers applied pesticide without using protective equipment.

From sapling stage to curing, tobacco farmers are in touch with the leaves. Illnesses related to handling of wet leaves included weakness, vomiting, dizziness, increased salivation, chills, sweats, and abdominal pain, which were not seen in the control group of food crop farmers in the same areas.

Women reported respiratory disease

when the leaves are brought out of kiln and at the time of sorting of leaves for baling. Gastro-intestinal diseases of various forms (ulcers, stomach pain, inflammation, acidity, etc.) were also seen in chronic form.

However, farmers do not get proper treatment for the illnesses reported. Bangladesh is the 15th largest tobacco producer in the world. About 50,000 hectares of land is under tobacco cultivation, producing about 85,000 tonnes of tobacco leaves.

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## TOBACCO LEAF NOT SO GOLDEN IN CAMBODIA

While declining, tobacco farming in Cambodia is seen to be profitable and no other crops can replace it. There is concern that tobacco control measures would hurt farmers and negatively affect the country's economy.

Nearly 90 percent of Cambodia's tobacco farmlands are located in Kampong Cham. However, tobacco is grown in only six of the province's 16 districts. The harvested land for tobacco has been declining from 8,334 hectares in 2010 to 6,161 hectares in 2013.

Cambodia produced 8,423 tonnes of tobacco in 2013, and its bulk (7,837 tonnes) is grown in Kampong Cham. Tobacco farmers are not full-time tobacco growers as they also engage planting other crops.

Tobacco farming is a capital and labor intensive activity involving many stages: soil preparation, planning, weeding and fighting pests, harvesting, and drying

leaves. Thus, paid labor is needed to sustain large tobacco farms.

Farmers who have quit planting tobacco cite difficulty in growing the crop, less profitability (if family labor is paid), and unstable market prices (subjective price from the tobacco buyers) as other key reasons to stop.

While farmers who are ready to shift planting other crops still need information on suitable alternatives (corn, sesame, vegetables), availability of markets, and extension of support services such as trainings and initial farm input subsidies to keep them going.

Overall, tobacco farming is becoming less significant as a contributor to Cambodia's agricultural sector. Land planted with tobacco is declining, and more rapidly in recent years. paid labor is not easy to find because the young generation opts to work for wage in cities and the increasing costs for farm

operations given limited access to formal financing and credit institutions.

Cultivated lands for corn, soybean, sesame, peanut, and mung bean have been increasing the past few years. About one third of former tobacco growers found their lives were better after switching to these crops while about 50 percent of farmers reported no worsening of their lives after stopping tobacco.

Farmers should be encouraged to grow crops other than tobacco. Support and assistance, either from the government or microfinance institutions, in form of technical or loan should be available for those who wish to switch crops from tobacco to other crops.

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# UNFAIR CONTRACTS AND MISERY IN ZAMBIA'S TOBACCO FARMS



Zambia has an estimated 18,000 registered tobacco growers, the majority of whom are small-scale farmers. The influx of migrant commercial tobacco farmers from neighbouring Zimbabwe has contributed to the numbers.

Zambia is among the top 20 producers of tobacco leaf globally, producing mainly burley and Virginia varieties. According to the International Labour Organization, about 60,000 hectares of land are planted with tobacco.

Small-scale tobacco farmers, often with low literacy and poor education, sell to local subsidiary companies through pre-arranged contracts over which they have little control. Their lack of understanding of the contract can land them with problems.

Abson Tembo, a retired Zambia Air Force officer, got his retirement package and ventured into tobacco growing for the first time. He ended up losing all his capital. Alick Theo, another tobacco farmer, was brought to court for failing to repay his loan following one bad harvest.

Because tobacco companies determine the leaf grading system and impose high interests rates, tobacco farmers prefer to sell their produce to unauthorised dealers and are sometimes forced to even

migrate for fear of being penalised for the loans they can no longer repay.

Indebtedness among tobacco growers has not been properly documented. Many farmers are perpetually indebted because the farm inputs, loaned by the tobacco industry, often cost more than the market price of tobacco leaf, thus eroding their take home income.

As their debts continue to build up, farmers are forced to carry on growing tobacco to avoid losing all their assets. This situation provides tobacco companies with the means to control the tobacco farmers. The tobacco leaf traders are exploiting poor farmers who are forced to engage their family members to work on the farms - usually women, children and people smuggled from the neighbouring country of Malawi.

Tobacco workers, including children and breastfeeding women, are subjected to hard labour. They are not provided with protective clothing to avoid direct contact with tobacco leaves, which can cause nicotine poisoning and exposure to high levels of toxic pesticides.

Storing harvested tobacco leaves poses another hazard as small-scale tobacco farmers utilize their homes, then breathe polluted air with no proper ventilation.

Tobacco farmers need better protection from unscrupulous leaf traders and the many health hazards of growing tobacco. They also deserve fairer and standardised leaf prices.

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Women grading tobacco leaf in an enclosed warehouse with no ventilation