

# Child brides galore in India

## *UNICEF's shocking finding*



More than a third of the world's child brides are from India, leaving children at an increased risk of exploitation despite the country's growing modernity and economic wealth, according to a UNICEF report. Nearly 25 million women in India were married in the year 2007 by the age of 18, said the report, which noted that children in India, Nepal and Pakistan may be engaged or even married before they turned 10.

Millions of children are also being forced to work in harmful conditions, or face violence and abuse at home and outside, suffering physical and psychological harm with wide-reaching, and sometimes irreparable effects, the report said.

"A society cannot thrive if its youngest members are forced into early marriage, abused as sex workers or denied their basic rights," said UNICEF Executive Director Ann Veneman.

Despite rising literacy levels and a ban on child marriage, tradition and religious practices are keeping the custom alive in India, as well as in Nepal and Pakistan, the report said.

More than half the world's child brides are in south Asia, which also accounts for more than half the unregistered births, leaving children beyond the reach and protection of state services and unable to attend school or access basic healthcare.

Only 6 percent of all births in Afghanistan and 10 percent in Bangladesh were registered from 2000-08, the report said, compared to 41 percent in India and 73 percent in the tiny Maldives.

Also, about 44 million, or 13 percent of all children in south Asia, are engaged in labour, with more than half in India. Children in the region have also been seriously affected by insurgency and instability, as well as natural disasters.

Especially in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, past or ongoing conflicts have broken down most child protection systems, leaving children especially vulnerable, the report said.

Trafficking of children for labour, prostitution or domestic services is widespread, especially within Bangladesh and India, and within the region, as well as to Europe and the Middle East.

"Insufficient emphasis has been placed on protecting child victims of trafficking and ensuring that any judicial proceedings brought against them are child sensitive," the report noted (Reuters, 6 October 2009)