

# The True Sole of Indonesia's Child Labourers

Fans of the classic Brothers Grimm fairy tales may remember the story of "The Elves and the Shoemaker." It was the tale of a humble shoemaker and his wife who struggled with business until mysterious elves came to help in the middle of the night. The elves made fancy shoes and the couple became the richest shoemakers in the country.

And while the story is more than 200 years old, it still rings true, especially when looking at today's fashion industry.

Flip through a magazine, watch a fashion show or stroll through a mall and you will probably see the latest collection of fancy shoes, venerated as objects of envy, even status symbols. Some fashionistas say, "there's no such thing as too many shoes."

While most of us have at least a few pairs of shoes in our closets, how often do we actually think about who made them? Renowned brands and famed designers come to mind, and we assume there's big money for everyone in the business. To many people, it seems shoes simply appear in shops for us to purchase and take home — they might as well be made by elves.

In the not-so-faraway land of West Java is a backyard of Southeast Asia's fashion industry where elves are indeed at work. Only they're not the fairy-dusted kind that disappear with the moonbeams at daybreak. They're called child laborers. And their lives are definitely no fairy tale.

## Learning the family trade

In a beautiful village in the outskirts of Bogor lives Demung, a 14-year-old shoemaker who has been in the trade for three years. Demung dropped out of 4th grade five years ago for "economic reasons." In a barely furnished, unplastered two-bedroom house with no running water, Demung lives with his parents, grandparents, 20-year-old uncle, two teenage aunts and 11-year-old sister. Demung's father, grandfather and uncle are shoemakers, too. His mother and grandmother are domestic helpers, and his 17-year-old aunt is a factory laborer.

Demung's sister, Erna, is in 5th grade. Most children in their community drop out around this age, but Demung hopes that Erna will finish high school. The teenager initially said he had no desire to go back to school, but later admitted, "I would have loved to continue my studies if my family could afford it. But since it's been too long, I'd better do my job well so that I can someday help put my sister through school."

At 8 a.m. on any Monday morning, Demung and his father make their kilometer-long walk to their boss's workshop. It would be the start to a six-day work week of 54 to 100 hours. The father-son team make 10 to 20 pairs of shoes per day.

## A hazardous environment

Entering the workshop, the atmosphere is actually friendly. Yuli, the owner, inherited the workshop from his father and has worked as a shoemaker since childhood before making his way to become a trusted supplier for a well known Southeast Asian fashion brand and a famous Indonesian designer. Yuli and his employees seem to get along well. His wife was serving the employees coffee.

Despite the likable human dynamics, the strong scents of glue, gasoline and other chemicals are hard to ignore — and this workshop ranks among the better-ventilated ones. Still, it's hard to imagine how anyone could spend every day inhaling these chemicals to make a living.

"I used to get headaches when I entered a workshop," said Demung, recalling his first days as a shoemaker at age 11. "Masks should be worn in a workshop, but they're hardly available here. Even then, I'd have to buy them with my own money."

The spinning sewing machine is the workshop's constant soundtrack. The sharp tools of shoemaking — hammers, nails and sculpting knives — are definitely not suitable for children to use.

"I once got injured while sculpting the sole of a shoe. I cut myself. I was treated with iodine. It took a week to heal, and I kept working in the meantime," Demung said.

Footwear workshops are usually the busiest around Ramadan, because many people want new shoes for Idul Fitri. During this time, Demung often works until 10 p.m. and sometimes until 2 a.m. In August, Demung spent the holidays sick in bed from being overworked.

## **A neglected cause**

Child labor exists because communities don't think it's a serious problem and there is demand in the market. "Consumers don't think about whether their shoes are made by children," Demung said. "All they care about is that the shoes are of good quality and affordable. Whether the minors who make them can go to school or have to give that up for work, that's the government's problem."

Some consumers are even amused when posed with the idea that their shoes might be made by children. "What a clever child! Now I want to learn how to make my own shoes," laughed Dhea, a mall shopper. "But maybe it's just the way it is. Those who can't afford to go to school can get into the shoemaking business. Isn't it good for them, to become independent at an early age?"

The International Labour Organization differentiates the "child laborer" from the "working child." In developed countries, many high school students earn pocket money by working part time in supermarkets or restaurants. The child laborer, in contrast, is a minor who spends more than four hours a day at work — or any time at all doing hazardous work — and has to give up education, rest and recreation.

Most village officials in Ciomas admit that they have teenagers at school who "help their parents" run a footwear workshop, but balk when asked to be introduced to an individual. None of the villages surveyed have data on child labor in their famous footwear industry because shoemaking is considered informal work. Even the ILO's latest data is from 2006, the year it finished a child labor eradication project in Ciomas. The ILO concluded that there was a "negligible" number of minors working in the footwear industry.

The truth is, while child laborers only make up a minority of shoemakers in Ciomas, they are still common among financially struggling families.

Asked why he employs a child laborer, Yuli said: "Not a child, but a teenager. Most start by observing shoemaking friends. One friend attends school, the other works. The teenager compares and becomes interested in shoemaking."

At the end of the week, Demung and his father, Odi, take home a joint wage of Rp 150,000 (\$15). If Rp 150,000 is the price of one pair of shoes, and Demung and Odi make 60 pairs a week, then they only take home less than 2 percent of the money made in the supply chain — a conservative estimate.

Odi said that he's proud to have his hard-working son follow in his footsteps. Demung's mother Susi, though, had something else to say. "I look at other children his age and think, he should be in school. I'm sorry to see him work with his father, leaving early in the morning, coming home at 10 p.m. or 2 a.m.," she said, choking back tears. "Someday, Demung wants to build a house. He wants to provide for his sister's, and later, his future children's education."

## **Happily ever after?**

Most people assume that education is the solution to child labor. After all, school children from affluent families don't become child laborers like Demung.

However, many neighbors in the community complained that even if school tuition fees were free, surprise expenses such as books and uniforms are still troublesome. Demung and his parents' total monthly wages amount to Rp 900,000 per month, most of which they spend on rice. Even protein and vegetables are luxuries on such an income, let alone an education.

"If the government made school compulsory for kids my age, I think that would make my family suffer. Who would help us make ends meet if I didn't work? And would it be possible for this 14-year-old to go back to elementary school?" Demung said.

Achmad Marzuki, executive director of the Network of Indonesian Child Labor NGOs (Jarak), said the reasons why children in Ciomas drop out of school has little to do with tuition fees. Rather, it was because the national education system accommodated neither the needs of working children, nor the more immediate financial needs of the family.

In order to break the vicious cycle of poverty and exploitation that traps child laborers, schools in Ciomas need to prepare the youth for the local job market, but in a way that they could someday work their way out of manual labor into white collar jobs, such as footwear design, marketing and entrepreneurship.

“Government-run vocational training centers in Ciomas provide sewing, embroidery and welding programs. It makes no sense to the local situation, and the government should know better,” Marzuki said.

Marzuki added that in order for school attendance to increase among working children, schools should offer flexible hours, be easily accessible from children's homes and provide practical skills to solve day-to-day problems such as money management, labor rights and health care.

Having the government implement policies to eradicate child labor is one way to begin solving the problem. Another part of the equation is sparking a consumer push for fair trade footwear. This includes fair pay, the exclusion of children from hazardous work, safety precautions for adults doing hazardous work and providing the children of employees with proper education. Another way is the refusal to buy products from companies that treat their workers otherwise, and speaking up about the footwear industry's injustices.

Will Demung have his happily ever after? A house built from his hard-earned cash, attending Erna's graduation?

The moonbeams dissolve with the Tuesday dawn, and the shoemaker's elf prepares for another laborious day in the workshop. The shoemaker boss and his wife are yet to be rich and famous, and it looks like their elf has to wait even longer.

'The Shoemaker's Elf: Reality and Hope'

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