

WEAVING COMMUNITIES

One organization's efforts to end child labor and sustain livelihoods

by Judith Ritter

As many former Peace Corps volunteers know, the intensity of the experience—its challenges and joys—may fade over the years, but the lessons live on, often inspiring later efforts to serve the community. Peace Corps experiences became the foundation of a lifetime of service for former volunteers Maureen Orth and Stephanie Odegard. Both are successful in their careers—Orth as an award-winning journalist and special correspondent for *Vanity Fair*, Odegard as the founder of a company known for its stylish, modern and child-labor-free rugs—and both express their



Robin Romano

Girls can now stay in school.

social concern through their work with RugMark, an organization established

to abolish the use of child labor in the handmade-rug industry.

RugMark works to end illegal child labor in the carpet industry and bring education to children in India and Nepal. Its approach is unique because RugMark works not only with factories in the carpet weaving country of origin, but also in North America where RugMark enlists the support of importers, designers, retailers and consumers of handmade rugs. In Nepal and India, the organization monitors factories and provides education to former child weavers. In the North America and Europe, RugMark invites



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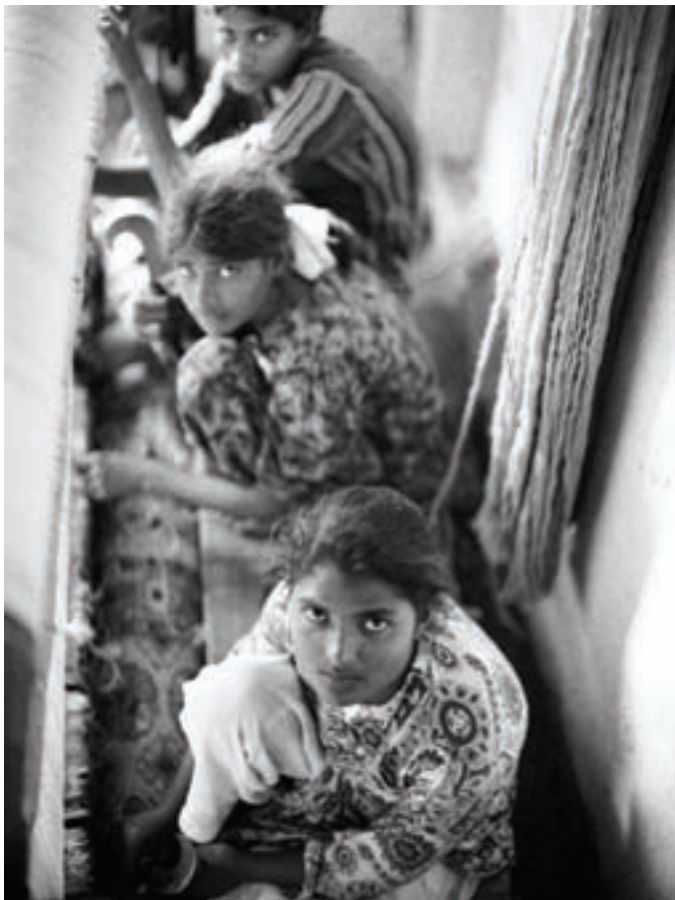
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Nearly 300,000 children in India, Nepal and Pakistan are spending long days working in poor conditions. Child labor also drives down adult wages and keeps entire communities in poverty.

interior designers, rug designers, and purveyors of rugs to commit to manufacturing, selling, and providing clients with carpets certified by RugMark as child-labor-free. The result is a satisfied consumer who can purchase and enjoy a beautiful carpet that is not the product of child exploitation.

Odegard's company, Odegard, Inc., was the first in the US to join RugMark. In the late 1970s, she volunteered in Fiji where she set up marketing possibilities for traditional crafts. Now, three decades later, as the head of a company that sells custom-made carpets, her commitment to the development of indigenous crafts is stronger than ever. "During my time in Fiji I became committed to this idea as my life's work. At the base of this is affording every child the opportunity for education which inevitably means an end to child labor—RugMark is helping me fulfill my goals, while addressing the mission of peace", says Odegard. As a longtime RugMark board member, Odegard is preserving traditional crafts

and creating a better life for artisans.

And a better life is needed, especially for the children. It is hard for many of us to believe that in the 21st century child labor is a major problem throughout the world. Yet, it is. According to Nina Smith, executive director of RugMark USA, over 218 million children are victims of child trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation, bonded child labor, child domestic work, or have been recruited for armed conflict or drug trafficking. "Many of the worst forms of child labor are found in places where RugMark operates, such as India, Nepal, and Pakistan. There are nearly 300,000 children working in intolerable conditions in the carpet industry to provide rugs for North American and European homes. Children as young as 4 to 14 are kidnapped or trafficked and sold into debt bondage or forced labor."

Although so many children are suffering physically and mentally, RugMark's work is having a profound effect. Since 1995, RugMark has freed

more than 3,000 children from looms and deterred thousands more from entering the work force. Education programs funded in part by the sale of RugMark certified rugs and by donations to RugMark help rehabilitate these children by providing daycare, literacy training, formal schooling and vocational training. One example of RugMark's success is found in Nepal, where, over the last 12 years, child labor in carpet production dropped from 11 percent to 3 percent. "We are credited for much of this success because during the same years that child labor decreased, the number of licensed factories we inspected in Nepal grew to 65 percent," says Smith.

With each percentage point that RugMark market share increases, it is estimated that 750 children are rescued from the workplace and 1,000 more are saved from entering the industry. As Smith puts it, "That is definitely progress!"

"When you're in the Peace Corps you are immediately drawn to how

