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## FILM REVIEW; Children Trapped in Labor, With Few Reasons for Hope

By DANA STEVENS

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This earnest, unsentimental documentary describes the lot of the 246 million children for whom, as the narrator Meryl Streep says in the prologue, "life is nothing but work."

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It was produced, directed and written by Len Morris, a maker of television documentaries on subjects ranging from schizophrenia to apartheid to singing cowboys in Hollywood. Mr. Morris travels to eight locations -- from a coffee plantation in Kenya to a stone quarry in Orissa, India -- to interview children, their parents and local activists about the phenomenon of under-age labor, which continues to flourish despite laws banning it in every country.

The reasons for this are chillingly articulated by the owner of a carpet factory in India that employs children at its looms: "Children are more obedient and work harder." They are also less likely to organize in protest of unfair working conditions. In many places this film visits, like the jirmals, isolated fishing platforms off the coast of Indonesia, children are literally held prisoner, lured by false promises of well-paid work into a lifelong indentured servitude.

The bleakness of "Stolen Childhoods" is not completely unremitting; the film also celebrates the efforts of a few successful programs to combat the scourge of child labor around the world. Some of these are microeconomic solutions, like the Bolsa Escola, a Brazilian government initiative that pays families for every month of their child's perfect attendance at school, thus reimbursing them the cost of the lost labor.

On a more global scale, Senator Tom Harkin, Democrat of Iowa, observes in an interview that eliminating child labor is in the interests of international security, since the poverty and alienation of exploited children provides a "breeding ground for future terrorists." Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan and environmental and human rights activist who won the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, makes the case for the implementation of fair-trade practices, noting that by the time it hits the grocery shelves in the United States, Kenyan-grown coffee has undergone a 4,000 percent markup. And Kailash Satyarthi, a children's advocate in India who has spent his life rescuing children from sweatshops, speaks passionately of children's resilience and capacity to learn, qualities that are evident in the clips of his young charges singing and dancing as he plays a drum.

After watching "Stolen Childhoods," the average American may be able to do little more than buy a cup of fair-trade coffee on the way home. But as this harrowing yet hopeful film suggests, that's something.

Stolen Childhoods  
Opens today in Manhattan.

Written, produced and directed by Len Morris; co-director and director of photography, Robin Romano; music by Miriam Cutler; released by Balcony Releasing. At the Quad Cinema, 34 West 13th Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 85 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Meryl Streep (Narrator) and Wangari Maathai, Kailash Satyarthi and Senator Tom Harkin.

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