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British patios fuelling Indian child labour

By Peter Foster in New Delhi

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Children as young as five are routinely being used to quarry stone for the booming British patio and garden landscaping market, one of Britain's leading stone importers has warned.

Chris Harrop, a director of Marshall's Plc, said that large sections of the gardening industry were turning a blind eye to the use of child labour in the sandstone quarries of Rajasthan, western India, in order to maximise profits.

Only about a third of the 200,000 tons of patio stone imported into the UK from India each year was sourced ethically, Mr Harrop said, with the rest often being produced in atrocious conditions.

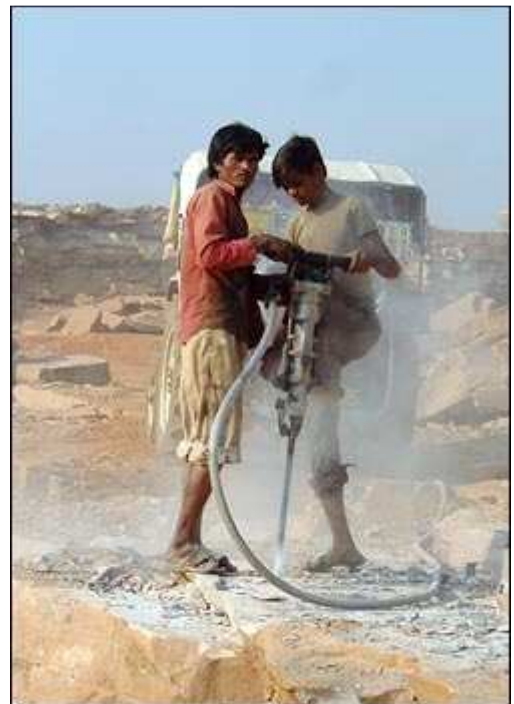
"We want the industry to face facts," he added, "and we want consumers to start asking questions."

If your New Year's resolution is to re-do the patio, then stop and ask yourself where that stone is coming from."

The popularity of gardening makeover programmes has proved a massive boost to the landscaping industry, with stone imports to Britain increasing tenfold over the past decade, according to Customs and Excise data.

Up to 100,000 children are employed in India's quarry industry, which supplies almost three-quarters of the imported stone used in British patios and garden features.

Indian sandstone from Rajasthan is among the most popular, since it most closely mimics the expensive yellow Yorkstone which was traditionally mined in the Pennines but has now been all but exhausted through demand.



Child labour and atrocious conditions are commonplace in India's quarries

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Ethically certified stone typically costs 20 per cent more than the cheapest material available, and with competition for business between landscapers intense, price often triumphs over ethics.

Although workers in the quarries typically earn just 80p a day, a single square metre of paving stone fetches about £35 by the time it reaches Britain.

With such huge profit margins on offer, pressure is now growing on the industry's main trade body to enforce a code of ethics.

Denise Ewbank of the British Association of Landscaping Industries (Bali) said there was an "implied" policy on ethical stone but the issue was becoming increasingly pressing.

"Using ethically certified stone is not a condition of Bali membership," she said, "but this is an issue of intense debate and is already slated for discussion at a board meeting in January."

However, Mr Harrop says the industry's response to his calls to clean up its act has not been encouraging.

"I've visited the quarries in Rajasthan several times," he said, "and you can see entire families, from five-year-olds to grandparents, breaking rocks in the searing heat with no health and safety considerations at all.

"The trouble is that a large section of this industry doesn't want to think about the fact that it is wrong that a 10-year-old should be digging stone for Britain's patios."

Ignorance, says Mr Harrop, is no defence. Unlike the clothing giant Gap, whose Indian suppliers were exposed for using child labour earlier this year, the supply chain for garden stone is transparent.

"Gap can argue it didn't know children were being used to make its clothes, but ours is a small industry and we can trace our supply chains directly from the quarries of Rajasthan to Mrs Smith's garden.

"If consumers knew about the conditions some of the stone was produced in, I'm sure they wouldn't buy it."

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