

Bitter Harvest

Slavery isn't history - and we're reaping its fruit

By Kimberly French

You, in all likelihood, own items that were produced by slaves: Chocolate. Hand-woven carpets. Cotton. Coffee. Tea. Tobacco. Sugar. Tomatoes. Cucumbers. Oranges. Grains. Clothing. Sneakers. Soccer balls. Gold. Diamonds. Jewelry. Fireworks. Steel. Glassware. Charcoal. Timber. Stone. Tantalum (a mineral used in laptops, pagers, personal digital assistants, and cell phones). Products in all of these industries have been found made with slave labor, then sold in the global market.

More items that you consume every day are tainted by slavery in less direct ways. “Your computer terminal may be made in Japan, but that company may reward executives with sex tours of enslaved prostitutes in Southeast Asia,” says Barney Freiberg-Dale, founder of Unitarian Universalists Against Slavery, one of several Unitarian Universalist groups working to fight modern slavery.

All of us who are lucky enough to be housed, clothed, and fed every day benefit from prices kept low by slave labor. Global companies we invest in, or whose stocks are part of our mutual or pension funds, provide higher returns because they buy from suppliers that pay workers very little—or not at all.

As participants in the world's largest consumer economy, with its drive for lower and lower prices, we contribute to the global economic pressure for slave labor. We are all complicit.

But didn't slavery end in the nineteenth century?

Many of today's new abolitionists admit to having held that same assumption, until a news story or pamphlet or lecture shocked them out of it.

Or you may have thought the reports of human trafficking that periodically make the news—such as sex slavery rings or forced migrant farm work—were isolated cases, somewhere far from you. I did.

The truth is that slavery exists in virtually every country of the world and in almost every U.S. state, according to human rights organizations, scholars, government agencies, and journalists. A growing antislavery movement has been hard at work documenting and exposing this troubling fact. Surveying their reports and interviewing antislavery spokespeople is eye-opening, answering not only my question about the nineteenth-century “end” of slavery but raising other questions as well.

In fact, legal slavery did end. Slavery is illegal in every country of the world. Nonetheless there are more slaves today than ever before: 27 million, twice as many as the number of Africans enslaved during the four centuries of the transatlantic slave trade, according to a calculation that slavery expert Kevin Bales calls conservative. Bales, a sociologist at Roehampton University in London who spoke at the UUA's 2003 General Assembly, estimates that 50,000 people are forced to work as slaves in the United States today.

How can this be? If slavery is illegal everywhere, how can there be slaves, and in such numbers?

In the United States our image of slavery is defined by our own horrific history. The antebellum slavery that was practiced here is called chattel slavery, meaning one person is owned completely by another and can be inherited as property.

Today's slavery is different. Simply put, slavery is one person forcing another to work without pay, using the threat of violence or psychological manipulation. Ownership no longer defines slavery.

When slaves could be legally owned, when buying slaves required a substantial financial investment, there was an incentive for owners to take care of their “property,” to provide for their slaves' housing, food, health, children's care, and other needs. In contrast, when today's slaves are no longer economically useful, they are cast aside, worked or starved into permanent illness or death, sometimes even killed.

So why are there so many slaves now?

First, the world's population has nearly tripled in fifty years, most dramatically in developing countries, creating a huge pool of people who are desperately poor, vulnerable, and easily preyed on.

At the same time, globalization has transformed national and local economies. Corporations turn to unregulated suppliers in developing countries, and keep pressing for lower costs. In some cases, suppliers use forced, unpaid labor.

In many countries, widespread corruption allows slavery to thrive and grow.

The most common form of slavery today is debt bondage, a tradition throughout southern Asia that keeps a society's lowest castes or tribes perpetually in debt to their masters. The number of bonded laborers in India, Pakistan, and Nepal is estimated in the millions. They

must work however much the master says and ask for permission for their every move. Bonded laborers have told human rights workers they are paying off loans as small as \$10 to \$50 . But the interest is always more than they can pay, and the debts are passed on through the generations.

Forced labor exists in many countries, including the United States. Wartime slavery is a problem in countries like Sudan, where government-backed militias and raiders have been kidnapping and enslaving village children and women since at least the mid-1980's, according to United Nations reports. Even chattel slavery persists: The military dictatorship of Mauritania has repeatedly declared slavery abolished, yet the U.S. State Department reports that 90,000 people are held there as chattel slaves.

The pitfall of focusing mainly on the most concentrated and brutal slavery hotspots is that we can compartmentalize slavery as something that is happening somewhere else, to someone far removed us, with little we can do. In fact, we need look no farther than our own country to find the fastest-growing form of slavery, called contract slavery, in which the poor, weak, young, and vulnerable are tricked with promises of legitimate work.

The Department of Justice estimates that 14,500 to 17,500 people are trafficked into the United States annually. Slavery cases are being investigated in forty-six states. In this country, most slavery victims are foreign-born and are found working as farm workers, live-in domestics, or prostitutes. Slavery has also been found in small businesses that typically rely on low-wage temporary labor, such as restaurants, nursing homes, and small manufacturers.

A 2002 case that resulted in federal sentences of ten to fifteen years for three family members who contracted farm labor from Florida to North Carolina shows how contract slavery works:

In early 2001 three Mixe Indians from Mexico each paid \$250 to be smuggled into the United States. Penniless and stranded in an abandoned trailer with thirty others in Arizona, the three men agreed to go with a recruiter promising them jobs picking oranges in Florida. For three days they were packed in vehicles with no food and no stops to relieve themselves.

They were met in Florida by the Ramos brothers, who wrote a check to the recruiter and said each man owed \$1,000 for transportation. Anyone who tried to leave without paying would be beaten. The workers were housed in a filthy converted bar, six to a room, on bare mattresses. They worked twelve hours a day, six to seven days a week, under twenty-four-hour surveillance by guards with weapons. Each week the Ramoses deducted exorbitant fees for rent, food, work equipment, and daily transportation from the workers' "wages," then claimed to credit whatever remained to their "debt." The Ramoses were found to have

“employed” thousands of undocumented workers in a similar pattern over a decade, according to Florida State University's Center for the Advancement of Human Rights.

Variations of this scenario are replayed every day in industries and countries throughout the world:

- Cacao plantations in Cote d'Ivoire, which produce half of the world's cocoa, have lured teenage boys from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Liberia with promises of jobs, then paid them nothing and beaten them into submission. Thus, a small but significant portion of the chocolate imported to the United States and Europe is slave-produced.
- Tens of thousands of children as young as six have been kidnapped or tricked to work in India's Carpet Belt in Uttar Pradesh, where they may be kept round-the-clock in the rooms where they are forced to weave.
- Wealthy people in New York, London, Paris, and other Western cities have promised young women jobs as nannies or household help and a chance to go to school, then forced them to work without pay. Joy Zarembka, director of the Break the Chain Campaign in Washington, D.C., told me she was shocked to discover an enslaved domestic worker on her very own street.
- Girls in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia have been promised factory or restaurant jobs, then forced to work in brothels in their region or in Europe and the United States.

This list could go on and on. The story often turns out the same way: Once the victims arrive to work—with no money, no idea where they are, no understanding of their rights, and unable to speak the local language—they are told they must work to pay a debt for transportation or perhaps an advance paid to their families. They may be beaten, humiliated, or threatened with harm to themselves or their families. They are often kept in deplorable conditions, forced to work long hours with little sleep, forbidden to talk to outsiders. Their debt is never paid.

Slavery has been with us since the birth of civilization. About 11,000 years ago, humans began to form agrarian communities and organize themselves into hierarchical societies. Those at the top of the hierarchies enslaved others for domestic, agricultural, and construction work.

As long ago as Aristotle, people have argued that slavery may in fact be a condition of civilization. William Harper, a nineteenth-century proslavery judge and senator from South Carolina, argued: “Without it, there can be no accumulation of property, no providence for the future, no taste for comfort or elegancies, which are the characteristics and essentials of civilization.”

Contemporary slavery is more complex and victimizes more people than ever before. And yet the new abolitionists see reasons to hope.

“We don't face the problems we faced in the past,” Kevin Bales says. “We don't have to win the legal fight. We don't have to win the moral argument. In many ways it's simply a resource question and an awareness question.”

Free the Slaves, the U.S. branch of the London-based Antislavery International, estimates that it costs \$32 to free a slave family in northern India—not to buy their freedom, but to support local organizations that help slaves escape or walk away, then provide education and long-term rehabilitation so they don't fall back into slavery. At that rate, the cost to help every enslaved person on earth step to freedom can be roughly estimated at \$10 billion—about the same cost as Boston's Big Dig.

In recent years, the new abolitionists have seen heartening successes. Pressure on Congress led to the 2000 passage of the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act, specifying new slavery-related crimes and expanding protection for victims. Slavery investigations and prosecutions in this country have increased threefold.

The United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime, ratified in 2003 , includes a large section on human trafficking. For the first time slavery cases are being prepared for trial before the International Criminal Court.

Underlying these successes is one essential factor: better public awareness. In order for antislavery strategies to work, governments and corporations must know that people are watching and that they demand an end to slavery.

Journalistic exposés and political action have curtailed slavery in Brazilian forests and mines and Dominican sugar fields. Grassroots organizations have helped free tens of thousands of slaves in India and other countries.

“Whether we like it or not, we are now a global people,” Bales writes in *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* . “We must ask ourselves: Are we willing to live in a world with slaves? If not, we are obligated to take responsibility for things that are connected to us, even when far away. . . . What good is our economic and political power, if we can't use it to free slaves? If we can't choose to stop slavery, how can we say that we are free?”



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