
The Modern Slave Trade In The UK

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The celebrations of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007 provided a good opportunity for us to consider whether slavery has, in fact, ended. Many people believe that slavery belongs to the past and at best, only exists in underdeveloped countries, but in reality all our lives even in the developed world are touched by it. Our clothes may be stitched by women in Bangladesh earning £7 per month for 80 hour weeks; well below a living wage even by Bangladeshi standards. The tea that we drink might have been grown by bonded labour in India. We should also be aware of the enslavement of human beings in dirty, dangerous and difficult work in Britain, in the running of our homes, the care of our elderly and disabled and in keeping our sex industry alive. Many vulnerable people are trafficked or smuggled into the UK. Natasha from Russia and Liu Bao Ren from China are two enslaved migrants currently living in the UK who were invited to give their testimonies as a contribution to this exhibition.

Slave ownership today is illegal. All the related activities of abduction, deceit, coercion, violence and abuse are criminalised to varying degrees across the world and certainly in Britain. It is, therefore, even more shocking that slavery exists despite all the tools at our disposal. The relative cost of buying a slave has plunged and it is possible to buy and sell women in the sex trade for as little as £2,000. Therefore, modern slave traders have little incentive to look after their investments. This has both positive and negative repercussions. They use violence more indiscriminately in order to control their slaves, they show little concern if enslaved people are disabled by the violence inflicted on them. This is because the outlay can be recouped quite quickly. They become 'disposable' in our one-use and throwaway consumer culture. As it is cheaper to replace a runaway slave, not much money or energy is invested in chasing after them. The positive aspect of this is that modern slavery may be 'temporary' although we cannot be certain because it is largely hidden from view.

The Global Picture

According to the International Labour Office (ILO) slavery is a permanent feature often based on descent, where a person is under the total control of another, amounting to ownership. In this very narrow sense, slavery exists today only in a part of West Africa and Sudan. Kevin Bales, Director of Free the Slaves, defines slavery as 'the total control of one person by another for the purpose of economic exploitation'. This definition would exclude women in forced marriages, which is recognised as a type of slavery by various UN Conventions. Therefore it may be more accurate to look at modern slavery as entrapment – physical, psychological and financial – often sustained through threats of

violence or actual violence. While no human being legally owns another human being today, men, women and children continue to be bought and sold, starved, imprisoned, beaten, sexually violated, physically abused and made to work 18 hours a day, 7 days per week for little or no pay. The scenarios are many and varied: a massage parlour where a trafficked woman sells her body; a beach where cockle pickers work in unsafe conditions; the kitchen of a middle-class family where the 'servant' sleeps; or the bedroom in which a man imprisons his 'foreign' wife.

As there is no agreed definition of slavery, there is no consensus on numbers. Kevin Bales estimates that there are 27m enslaved people in the world today of which 15 to 20 million are in bonded labour i.e. working for nothing to pay off a debt. The ILO estimates that 12.3million people are engaged in forced labour but it is generally accepted, even by governments, that it is likely to be an underestimate. Of this total, the ILO believes that 1.2 million children have been trafficked internationally. Conservative estimates for the number of people enslaved in Britain range from 5,000 to 25,000. As 'illegal' immigrants are more likely to be enslaved and as many estimates put the number of illegal immigrants at half a million, it is possible that the number of enslaved people is as high as that.

Routes Into Slavery

Across the world slavery is fuelled by poverty. While current economic systems are in place and the profit motive drives all development, world inequality will continue to grow. The gap between the rich and poor is growing: a UN study published in December 2006 found that one per cent of the world owned forty per cent of the wealth. War, conflict, persecution, and environmental degradation are some of the other reasons that force people to flee. Most of these people end up becoming impoverished in neighbouring countries; only a small percentage of these refugees find their way to the West.

However, slavery in Britain is driven by immigration controls. Those people whose passports are in the hands of someone else be it a 'trafficker', an 'agent', a violent spouse or even the government as in the case of failed asylum seekers are vulnerable to extreme exploitation. Not all contemporary migrants end up in slavery, of course. People come to Britain to marry, to study, to work, to run businesses or a combination of any of these. However, all those who have no independent means of survival and cannot look to the state for support as 'illegals' are likely to end up in forced labour of one kind or another: agricultural, construction, domestic labour or sexual exploitation.

Some people are trafficked while others are smuggled into the country by gangs. The key distinction between trafficking and smuggling is that those who are trafficked have been coerced or duped into coming to Britain to do exploitative work; those who are smuggled into Britain paid someone to help them break the immigration laws of this country. The

latter will not receive any help from the Government as they will be held to be complicit in criminal activity.

Trafficking can take place within or across borders, but smuggling happens only across borders. Those who are smuggled into Britain are often asylum seekers as they have no legal way of coming here. Only a minority of asylum seekers succeed in their claim; those who fail are forced into destitution and slavery.

Statistics

Estimates of the number of people who have been trafficked are unreliable. It is a hidden problem and many governments do not keep any records. According to a widely quoted US Government report in 2004, 600,000–800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year. Of this number, 70 per cent are women and 50 per cent are children. The majority of these victims are forced into the commercial sex trade. Non-sexual forced labour is made up of 44 per cent men and boys, and 56 per cent women and girls. Women are over-represented among domestic workers and those who are trafficked for labour in the care sector.

The Legal Situation

There was no legislation dealing with trafficking until the UK Government criminalised all forms of trafficking in the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and the Immigration and Asylum Act 2004. The 2004 Act introduced new offences of trafficking for slavery or forced labour, human organ transplant or other forms of exploitation. Trafficking offences carry a maximum penalty of fourteen years imprisonment.

There have not been many prosecutions under the existing laws on trafficking, compared to the number of victims, arrested, detained and deported.

The Gangmaster Licensing Act 2004 which came into force in 2006 was enacted in order to regulate recruitment agencies which abused the employment rights migrant workers who were often paid starvation wages. However, it applies only to the agriculture, horticulture and processing and packaging sectors which means that the enslavement of workers in the catering, construction and care industries goes unchecked.

The UK Labour Government signed up to the *Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings* in March 2007 which obliges governments to treat people who have been trafficked as victims and not as criminals who have breached the immigration laws of their destination country. Many anti-slavery campaigners argue that no distinction should be made between trafficking and smuggling if the end result is forced labour.