

Apr 19 2013

Modern Slavery: Why dehumanizing the 'Other' concerns all of us

LSE IDEAS

By [Simone Datzberger](#), Ph.D. Candidate, Department of International Relations, LSE



On a continually shifting priority list of issues to be eradicated globally, modern slavery has slowly but steadily crept up a few places on the attention scale.

Apart from local initiatives, the number of global civil society awareness campaigns increased in the past two decades to combat what is often broadly described as forced labor, human trafficking, or enforced prostitution. Within the international community, UN Goodwill Ambassadors such as Ashley Judd, Julia Ormond, Mira Sorvino, and Nicholas Cage shed light on the findings and work done by [UNODC](#) (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes). Other organizations such as the [ILO](#) (International Labour Organization) provide regular updates and statistics on forced labor around the world. Furthermore,

CNN recently launched a [Freedom Project Ending Modern-Day Slavery](#), and *The Guardian* just introduced a [Modern-Day Slavery hub](#), which intends to create a global forum “that investigates both the root causes and potential solutions to modern slavery, elevates global public dialogue, builds alliances on the front lines, and spurs the public, policymakers and corporate leaders to action.” Humanitarian photographer [Lisa Kristine](#) addressed the issue in her [TEDx Maui](#) talk on her heartbreaking photographs capturing the lives of modern-day slaves around the world.

So while awareness campaigns on modern-day slavery are no longer scarce, our ability not to unwillingly and indirectly support modern slavery on an individual level through our daily purchasing behavior and routine remains difficult.

When it comes to slavery, [we wear it, we eat it, and we drive it](#). Despite not “buying into it,” we often unknowingly maintain it. Even if we eschew that chocolate bar made of cocoa beans harvested by children who have never tasted chocolate; or if we carefully double check all fair-trade seals on our coffee and tea bags, modern slavery is implicated in so many products and services that it has become an uncontrollable and unavoidable part of consumerism. According to [Products of Slavery](#), 122 types of goods are currently made using child labor or forced labor in 58 countries. These products include gold, footwear, diamonds, cotton, garments, bricks, sugarcane, rice, cattle, shrimp, bananas, salt, corn, tomatoes, tobacco, coffee, pornography, cocoa, tea, fireworks, coal, rubber, crushed gravel, carpets, and sisal.

In short, slavery is interwoven into the most random aspects of our daily lives. The dartboards in our favorite pub around the corner, the mattresses we sleep on, the high-quality outdoor jacket we snatched up on sale for our next hiking trip are all made of sisal, its supply chains and manufacture often mysterious to us. Those are just a few examples. The 2012 [UNODC Global Report](#) on human trafficking finds that at least 136 different nationalities were trafficked and detected in 118 different countries. Trafficked people are working in the world's restaurants, fisheries, brothels, farms, and homes.

The Big Picture: Some Facts and Figures on the Magnitude of Modern Slavery.

Estimations of how many people are currently enslaved worldwide differ among experts, international organizations, antislavery movements, and academics. This discrepancy mainly arises because of differing approaches to what constitutes a modern slave. For instance, the [Anti-Slavery Society](#) uses a particularly narrow classification by drawing on the 1880 definition of the High Court of Allahabad in India, which states that

(...) a person is treated as a slave or is reduced to a condition of slavery if another exercises power or control over that person:

- 1) to restrain their personal liberty; and
- 2) to dispose of their labor against their will, without lawful authority.

Others, such as the ILO, UNODC, or the civil society organization [Free the Slaves](#), have a much broader definition. Next to forced labor, human trafficking, enforced prostitution, and ritual and traditional forms of subjugation, slavery can also be linked

to debt bondage, religious practices, or state-sponsored forced labor.

By this definition, the number of slaves today is the highest in human history. While one has to take the rapid increase in world population into account, a conservative estimate by Free the Slaves founder, modern slavery activist, expert, and professor [Kevin Bales](#) finds that around 27 million people are currently enslaved. In contrast, the ILO comes to an estimate of [20.9](#) million.

If one agrees with Bales' figure, twice as many people are now enslaved as were taken from Africa during the entire transatlantic slave trade from the 16th through the 19th centuries. According to Free the Slaves, another novelty of modern slavery is the collapse in the price of human beings. While the average price for a slave in past centuries was USD 4,000, it has decreased today to no less than USD 90. Prices vary by country and region.

Combating Modern Slavery

The fight against slavery has seen some success. So far, 154 countries have ratified the [Protocol](#) to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. Unfortunately, many of these countries, especially in Africa, still lack the necessary legal instruments to implement the protocol. Thus, one challenge is to improve the system and maintain its efforts.

Alongside the efforts of the international community, several charitable organizations such as [End Slavery Now](#), Free the Slaves, and [Anti-Slavery](#) are dedicated to eradicating modern slavery, liberating slaves, and reintegrating them into society. Local initiatives, associations, and NGOs such as [Temedt](#) in Mali—which developed a set of collective activities to raise awareness—also exist.

Related to the work done by organizations like Temedt, another challenge is the incessant stigmatization of centuries-long slave trades and colonial rule. In West Africa, for instance, [Hahonou and Pelckmans \(2011\)](#) found that the legacy of slavery continues to shape the everyday lives of millions of citizens, as well as the political landscape, in countries such as Benin, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso. In their study they examine, among others, the examples of Benin and Mali, where the slave-origins of high-ranking politicians remain public secrets. To this day, most politicians hide their roots as slaves or simply avoid the topic. Evoking slavery brings shame, and in some instances, even leads to societal marginalization. The quasi-silence surrounding the issue of slavery and the impact it has on contemporary state and society relations has been consistently neglected by colonial administration and most postcolonial governments. Moreover, ritual slavery and other forms of modern slavery are still widely practiced throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

Another obstacle in combating slavery is that most of the existing tools and efforts are either victim-centered (e.g., trust funds and programs to aid freed slaves) or focused on prosecuting human trafficking gangs and networks. While these are important endeavors, they don't tackle the core of the problem. Why do humans enslave people? What has to change within societies around the globe to bring slavery to an end? In 2011, the New York Times [reported](#) that in the U.S., 100,000 – 300,000 American children are sold into sex slavery every year. This clearly gives rise to the question, *why are there so many pedophiles in our worldwide society?* What can we do to prevent people from enslaving and hence dehumanizing "the other"? As Bales accurately put it:

"The minds injured by slavery include those of the slaveholders. By dehumanizing others in order to enslave them, slaveholders dehumanize themselves." (Ending Slavery, "How to free slaves," 2007).

Photo: ["Congo: Curious Eavesdroppers."](#) CC image courtesy of [babasteve](#) on Flickr.

This entry was posted in [Africa](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).