

Call It Slavery

The abolition of slavery was the great cause of 19th-century humanitarians. In the 21st century, it needs new champions.

BY JOHN R. MILLER

“SO YOU’RE GOING TO RUN THE STATE DEPARTMENT’S trafficking office!” a friend exclaimed when he heard the news. “What qualifications do you have to run a motor pool?” That was back in 2002, and despite a history of involvement in human rights issues as a congressman from the state of Washington, I was almost as much in the dark about human trafficking as my friend. Like most Americans, I assumed that slavery had ended in the 19th century. As I was to learn during the next four years, slavery may be illegal, but it still flourishes around the world, even in the United States. Despite the phenomenal increase in worldwide humanitarian concern, it remains one of the most curiously neglected issues of our time.

During my years as director of the U.S. State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, and later as ambassador at large on modern slavery, I met with many survivors of slavery: sex slaves; farm, factory, and domestic servitude slaves; child soldier slaves; even children enslaved as camel jockeys in the Persian Gulf states.

In an Amsterdam hospital I encountered Katya, who recalled how, as a Czech teenager with a disinte-

grating marriage and a two-year-old daughter, she was told by a “friend of the family” that she could make good money waiting on tables in Amsterdam. A Czech trafficker drove Katya and four other girls to the Netherlands, where he linked up with a Dutch counterpart. After they took the girls’ passports for “safe-keeping,” the men drove Katya to a brothel in Amsterdam’s red-light district. When Katya said that she had come to work in a restaurant, she was told that she owed the traffickers thousands of euros for transporting her across Europe. When Katya continued to resist, she was told she must do the men’s bidding if she hoped to see her daughter alive. She was freed only after several years, through the efforts of a friendly taxi driver who enlisted a gang to intimidate her captors.

In Bangkok, I met a teenager named Lord at a Catholic shelter. She told me that her parents in the hills of Laos had sold her at the age of 11 to a woman who promised to educate her. She was then resold to a Bangkok embroidery factory, where she was forced to sew 14 hours a day without pay. When Lord protested the first time, she was beaten; the second time, she was shot in the face with a BB gun. She was locked in a closet; her captors poured industrial chemicals on her face. Bars across windows and doors kept Lord and other girls from leaving. They were finally rescued in a government raid.

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A Filipina mother holds out a photograph of her missing daughter, who hasn't been heard from since she was recruited to work overseas as a maid.

In Uganda I talked with Nancy, who had been abducted at gunpoint along with her sister from their family's garden by the Lord's Resistance Army, then forced to march to a remote camp where she was trained to kill. (I did not have the heart to ask if she had been forced to kill relatives and friends, a common practice.) Nancy tried to escape, was caught and beaten, then was turned over to a rebel commander to serve as his concubine. Nancy escaped only when her jaw was shot off in a clash with government soldiers and she was left behind to die.

In the United States I met with Susan, an African-American woman in her twenties who had been terrorized since her teens by her Minneapolis pimp. He exerted such control over her that she didn't know how to buy groceries, take a bus, or interact with people outside "the business."

It is not a coincidence that the vast majority of the former slaves I met were women and girls. Sex and domestic servitude slaves are the largest discrete categories in human trafficking across international bor-

ders. As many as 80 percent of all slaves are women or girls, making human trafficking, as antislavery activist Michael Horowitz calls it, "the great immediate women's issue of our time." Not surprisingly, feminists, along with faith-based groups, have become the biggest advocates of abolition.

Because slavery is universally illegal—though it was banned in Saudi Arabia only in 1962 and in Mauritania in 1981—its existence is subterranean. There are no reliable estimates of the number of people held in bondage. The U.S. State Department and the International Labor Organization put the figure in the millions. The State Department estimates that as many as 17,500 slaves are brought into the United States every year, from many different countries, and it is likely that trafficking within the United States involves several times as many people. As is the case elsewhere in the world, most American slaves toil in brothels, massage parlors, and other sex businesses, or as domestic servants. A large proportion of those who come from abroad arrive by perfectly legal means, often in the

company of “handlers” who help them obtain tourist or business visas.

As I grappled with the enormity of the crimes I encountered and the near silence that surrounded them, I turned to history for insight, and especially to the example of William Wilberforce (1759–1833), the great British reformer who led the 20-year campaign in Parliament to abolish the slave trade in the British Atlantic. In 1807, Parliament officially outlawed the horrible trade that every year saw thousands of human beings carried off from Africa to sugar plantations in the West Indies and to other

rights organizations and other groups to pay attention to slavery. Freedom House, for example, does not weigh slavery in *Freedom in the World*, its respected country-by-country annual survey of human rights around the world. One reason is that victims of slavery tend to be isolated, relatively poor, and badly educated. They don’t hold press conferences. But people deprived of their political and religious rights are often educated and articulate. If they can’t speak for themselves, they have spokespersons who can.

Clarity about what is going on before our eyes, I discovered, can be a potent weapon. On a visit to Japan in 2004, I held a press conference to highlight the

peculiar fact that Tokyo had issued 85,000 visas to female “entertainers” from the Philippines in 2003. The Japanese government quickly responded, and by 2006 the number of visas was down to 5,700. Not all governments are as sensi-

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British outposts in the Americas. Even so, slavery was not abolished in the British Empire until 1833, the year of Wilberforce’s death.

In modern parlance, Wilberforce was a “values” politician. He was an evangelical Christian who confronted centuries of institutional support for slavery, even within organized religion. Evangelicals and their Quaker allies took on the task of making Britain see that the long-accepted and rarely questioned institution of slavery was an abomination. Wilberforce had more than moral force at his command; he was a masterful strategist and orator. Edmund Burke compared him to Demosthenes. Even James Boswell, who maliciously described the stooped, five foot one British parliamentarian as a “dwarf,” expressed amazement after watching him deliver a speech: “I saw what seemed a mere shrimp mount upon the table; but as I listened, he grew, and grew, until the shrimp became a whale.”

For today’s antislavery activists, I realized, much of the task is the same as it was in Wilberforce’s time: to awaken others to an abomination that most people barely recognize. It is a measure of the challenge that remains that activists still need to persuade human

tive to American opinion as Japan’s, but the State Department’s annual *Trafficking in Persons Report*, which rates the efforts of 170 countries to suppress slavery, has been a useful attention getter on many occasions.

In Wilberforce’s day, slavery was shrouded in euphemism by its defenders: “field hand,” “laborer,” and “house-boy.” Today, the news media and academics unthinkingly use words—“forced laborer,” “child soldier,” and “sex worker”—that have their own anesthetic effect, and along with others I have insisted on calling slavery by its right name. I have never understood why we constantly use the bloodless, bureaucratic term “human trafficking.”

Today’s slaves are not dragged off in chains, but they are just as effectively deprived of their freedom by force or threats. They are bought, sold, and leased. For years during the Bosnian civil war a sex slave auction operated in Belgrade, and many auction sites thinly disguised as sex tourism sites have functioned on the Web. Slaves may receive some pay for their work, but their wages amount to no more than the subsistence provided to peo-

ple in bondage in the past. Because it is illegal, the trade is dominated by organized crime. It takes a network of workers to persuade a woman like Katya to leave her home country, to sell and transport her, and to keep her terrorized for years. Some law enforcement officials believe that the trade in humans is the third-largest source of profits for organized crime, after drugs and arms.

Unlike the slaves of yesterday, those of today are not captured in raids or warfare, but usually are either deceived into or in some cases willingly enter into slave status, then find themselves trapped. Yet, as in the past, the slave trade is defined by greed, sexual exploitation, beatings, and rape. Race is still a factor. In Mauritania, lighter-skinned descendants of Arab invaders sometimes ensnare darker-skinned Africans in slavery as shepherds or domestics. In India, the survivors of sex and agricultural slavery I met tended to be darker-skinned members of lower castes.

In most countries, what distinguishes the victims is not their color but their foreignness or otherness. Most of the survivors I talked to were attracted by the promise of a job in a distant land. Once there, they found themselves in unfamiliar surroundings and unable to escape. It is difficult to flee when you know neither the local language nor the geography, and when you have no friends or family outside your small world to turn to for help. I rarely met survivors who had been enslaved in their own community. Moldovan women are enslaved in Dutch brothels, Indonesian men on Malaysian construction sites, and Filipinas in Saudi Arabian homes.

Poverty often propels people into slavery, causing families, for example, to sell their children. But the equation is not always simple. In Indonesia, Save the Children found that some impoverished villages produced many slavery victims while similar villages nearby produced very few. A study in Nigeria showed that the villages that sent the most victims to Italy were not the poorest ones but those where television was available. As that study suggests, visions of opportunity drive many victims into the hands of modern slave traders, and often these slaves are people with some resources of their own. An Indonesian woman named Nour



An ounce of prevention: Bulgaria's Diva Foundation warns local women to be wary of recruiters promising to find them glamorous jobs abroad in fashion and other fields.

whom I met in Saudi Arabia paid a recruiting agency thousands of dollars to obtain work as a maid in Saudi Arabia, where she hoped to earn far greater sums to send home. But her masters confined Nour to a house, and beat her until gangrene forced the amputation of several fingers and toes.

As Wilberforce saw, well-intentioned reformers rob the abolitionist cause of some of its power by seeking to improve the conditions of slavery rather than end the institution itself. In the 18th century, the high-minded Dutch boasted of having the cleanest slave ships. Today's reformers call for better ventilation in factories for coerced workers and condoms and health inspections for those who may be enslaved in prostitution. The 21st-century Dutch are leading exponents of the idea that legalizing and regulating prostitution can reduce sex slavery. But as they have discovered, it is hard

to promote a legalized sex trade, with its inevitable links to organized crime, without becoming a magnet for slave traders, and city officials in Amsterdam are now working to shrink the city's famous red-light district. Germany, which has also embraced legalization, has almost 10 times the number of people engaged in prostitution as neighboring France, and, correspondingly, more trafficking victims.

There is no dearth of multinational agreements designed to address trafficking, including the United Nations' Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2003). But in all my travels, I never encountered a government that attributed a specific action to an international covenant. Indeed, some of the governments with the worst reputations for non-enforcement, such as Mexico and Equatorial Guinea, were among the first to ratify the UN protocol. The UN's own moral authority in this area has been compromised by the fact, documented in a 2004 report to the organization by Prince Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein of Jordan, that UN peace-keeping troops in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other countries have been guilty of rape and of using food and money to entice children into sex.

There is no substitute for solid national laws and vigorous enforcement, and obtaining both requires moral suasion from abroad and, most of all, constant effort by non-governmental organizations in each country. Prosecutors convicted more than 3,000 slave owners and traders around the world in 2007, up from just hundreds seven years ago. But far too many countries still treat slave trading lightly. In Germany and other European nations, convicted traffickers often get only suspended sentences or probation. Near Chennai, India, I met members of three generations of a lower-caste family—a boy, his father, and his grandfather—who had been freed by the government after many years of servitude as bonded laborers, working to pay off a debt to a local businessman who ensured that the debt grew ever larger. (With their millions of victims, India and Pakistan are the great exceptions to the rule that most modern slaves travel across national borders.) Just when I was feeling pleased with the provincial government's efforts, the father pointed to the rice mill where they had toiled. It was still operating, and the owner had not been punished—he was bringing in more slaves to replace those who had been released.

A situation in which the educational stakes are higher is difficult to imagine. Preventive education is vital, especially

in alerting potential victims to the risks they face in traveling abroad in pursuit of opportunity. Efforts on the demand side can also be effective. In San Francisco, a mandatory "john school" for men caught soliciting prostitutes that showed them the link between the sex industry and slavery and other ills produced a dramatic drop in recidivism rates; the program has been replicated in other cities. A final imperative is to rescue and protect victims. Most countries summarily deport rescued slaves, but the burden of shame often prevents them from returning to their home villages. Toward the end of my tour as ambassador I saw more shelters being opened, but much more assistance is needed to help these traumatized and poorly educated people make new lives.

When Britain turned against slavery, it threw its military power against human traffickers. After Parliament passed the Slave Trade Act in 1807, Wilberforce and others prodded the British Admiralty into using part of the British navy to seize slave ships traveling to the Americas, regardless of which country's flag they flew. Britain sacrificed the lives of 600 sailors, but it liberated hundreds of thousands of slaves on the high seas.

There is no military solution for modern slavery. But the United States can continue to campaign for clarity, for action, and for abolition. Our own record bears blemishes and deep stains—both historic and modern—but we have probably done more than almost any other country to eradicate this scourge at home and abroad. Even before the Slave Trade Act, critics argued that Britain had no right to impose its moral values on the world. Wilberforce rightly replied that freedom is a universal value. And when critics insisted that Britain should not act unilaterally—it tried without success to enlist other European nations—his friend and ally, Prime Minister William Pitt, responded, "This miserable argument, if persevered in, would be an eternal bar to the annihilation of evil. How is it ever to be eradicated if every nation is thus prudentially to wait until the concurrence of all the world should be obtained?"

Thus, more than 200 years ago in facing Britain's own moral quandary, Pitt and Wilberforce posed the abolitionist challenge to all nations in all times. Today we need hundreds of Wilberforces in more than a hundred countries to finish the abolitionist revolution. ■