

The Global Slave Trade

There are twenty-seven million slaves in our world today. Girls and boys, women and men of all ages work against their will in the rug loom sheds in Nepal, sell their bodies in brothels, break rock in the quarries of Pakistan and fight wars in the jungles of Africa.

A common form of slavery is debt bondage which traps many in loan agreements they can never pay off. Others are lured by deception and false promises into forced labor situations where they are coerced to stay under threat of violence. Slavery also includes the worst forms of child labor and sexual exploitation of women and girls.

A growing type of slavery is the result of trafficking where people are transported either by force or deception into slavery. In a report by the US department of justice about one million people are trafficked across borders each year and many more within their own country.

The UN estimates that there are three million women and children worldwide who are trafficked into the sex trade and up to fifty percent are under the age of 18. More women and girls are shipped into brothels each year in the early twenty-first century than African slaves were shipped into slave plantations each year in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. The modern global slave trade is larger in absolute numbers than the then African slave trade. The world population was of course smaller then.

The slave business, much of it organized by international criminal gangs, generates \$32 billion annually according to UN estimates.

Since 2003, the UN has defined human trafficking as a crime and the UN protocol has been ratified by more than 110 countries, with procedures for cooperation between countries. However, not many criminals are convicted and most victims receive little help. In fact, many victims themselves are convicted on charges such as illegal entry or unlawful residence. The United Nations' efforts have been grossly underfunded, at less than \$15 million over the past seven years. As one UN official said, "we have the tools but do not have the political will, large scale public

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awareness or the resources" to counter the slave trade."Because slavery is a hidden crime,the great challenge is to raise consciousness and expose it in all its forms.

This huge tragedy has been mostly ignored by the media.But,a modern abolitionist movement is slowly growing,with much help from the powerful book, "Half the Sky" by New York Times columnist Nicolas Kristof and his wife Sheryl Wundunn. (The title comes from a Chinese proverb: women hold up half the sky.) Kristof and Wundunn emphasize by example and in their talks that individual action can turn the tide.

That was true in the 1800s when Thomas Clarkson, a student at Cambridge University first became outraged by slavery while researching his answer for a University essay contest asking the question:"is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will"?. the fact that this was controversial tells one a lot about the period.He won the contest and dedicated the rest of his life to abolitionism, publicizing the horrors of the "middle passage" and organizing the first ever consumer-goods boycott asking the British not to buy slave grown sugar. Clarkson recruited a young Tory William Wilberforce to bring successive abolitionist bills before Parliament succeeding finally in 1807. Clarkson was certainly an early hero of the Human Rights movement.

Edmund Burke presented the challenge two centuries ago,"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men and women to do nothing"

"Half the Sky" has an extensive appendix listing organizations fighting slavery that deserve support. Among them:

Equality Now: www.equalitynow.org

Shared hope International: www.sharedhopeinternational.org

Anti-slavery international: www.antislavery.org (founded in 1839 it is the oldest human rights organization)

Free the slaves: www.freetheslaves.net

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