

# Ending the Practice of Slave Labor

## History of the Current Situation

### Early Ages

Slavery began with the development of civilization, since hunter-gathers could not afford such an expensive luxury during their time. Western slavery dates to early Mesopotamia, where male workers were highly valued and females were often called upon for sexual services.<sup>1</sup> In the Greek city states, slaves were mostly used for agricultural and mining work and were used in imperial warfare. The slaves that were in Athens had no conventional rights, as opposed to Spartan slaves that still held on to certain rights, even if they still served under strict masters. The Roman Empire was spread across the Mediterranean region, where slave trading was a lucrative business.<sup>2</sup> Roman slaves were used for multiple purposes, but had no conventional rights, which led to serious uprisings; however, Roman slaves were often given the opportunity to increase their rank through challenging and vigorous work.

### The Slave Trade

The Mediterranean region was a focal point for the early slave trade. The Portuguese used slaves on their plantations in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century and which they exported to Europe where workers turned the raw products into manufactured goods such as textiles. The money made from the textiles was then used in order to purchase more slaves in Guinea (the Slave Coast), which jump



started the early transatlantic slave trade; where an estimated 13 million people were forcibly taken from their homes.<sup>3</sup> Soon after, Spain and other European countries entered the trade in order to cash in on free labor for their cotton, tobacco, and sugar farms. Slaves were traded from Africa by European colonies through the notorious 'Middle Passage' - the voyage of slave ships from the west coast of West Africa that carried slaves to the Americas and the Caribbean – in exchange for luxury goods such as sugar, rum, and textiles.<sup>4</sup>

### Pathways to Abolition

<sup>1</sup> "A Brief History of Slavery." *New Internationalist*. <https://newint.org/features/2001/08/05/history/>.

<sup>2</sup> "History of Slavery." *History World*. <http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=ac41>.

<sup>3</sup> "The Transatlantic Slave Trade." *The Equal Justice Initiative*. <https://eji.org/report/transatlantic-slave-trade/>.

<sup>4</sup> "The Middle Passage." *Free the Slaves*. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p277.html>.

There had long been discomfort over slavery and the treatment of slaves in the new world in some quarters of society during the colonial period. However, opposition to slavery began to accelerate in the early-1800s with the British public questioning the ethical reasoning behind, leading to the eventual abolition of the Atlantic slave trade with the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807 (UK).<sup>5</sup> Following the ratification of the Slave Trade Act, various other countries also began taking measures to abolish slavery; the last country being Brazil in 1888. Brazil imported more slaves than any other country during the transatlantic trade, with over 4.9 million slaves brought from Africa to their coast during the early 1500s to 1866.<sup>6</sup> Slaves were attractive in Brazil due to the lucrative sugar and precious metal industries. As the metal industry declined, the coffee bean economy in Brazil was flourishing. Slaves were often used on these plantations for cheap, yet harmful, work. Because the abolition of slavery did not come about until the 1880s, it is common to find natural born Brazilians who are only a couple generations removed from slavery even today.

Concurrently, abolition laws fell on deaf ears in other parts of the world due to the epidemic of slavery, with prominent cases in Africa and debt bondage in Asian-Pacific countries.<sup>7</sup> The Convention to Suppress the Slave Trade and Slavery signed in Geneva by the League of Nations in 1926 was the first international convention with the intent to suppress slavery and the slave trade.<sup>8</sup> This decision followed the Brussels Act of 1890 where the signatories “declared that they were equally animated in the action of putting an end to the traffic in African Slaves.” Even though this act was a bold start in setting guidelines for similar anti-slavery acts in the future, the direct effects were lackluster, failing to set forth procedures that reviewed incidences of slavery in the signatory states, in addition to not creating a body that would monitor such cases.<sup>9</sup>

## Contemporary Slavery

Even though there have been multiple conventions and regulations passed by the United Nations, as well as countries across the globe, there are still governing bodies that do not wish to comply. According to The Global Slavery Index in 2021, there were over 49 million individuals who are still forced into servitude, whether it’s by



<sup>5</sup> “Slave Trade Act 1807.” *Electronic Scholarly Publishing*.

<http://www.esp.org/foundations/freedom/holdings/slave-trade-act-1807.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> “Brazilian Independence.” *History Guild*.

[https://historyguild.org/brazilian-independence/?srsltid=AfmBOoqw2yrZUovmQJX3mR4xP9cW1vELN0JeCS-8L\\_9hr7bVxnbX86z](https://historyguild.org/brazilian-independence/?srsltid=AfmBOoqw2yrZUovmQJX3mR4xP9cW1vELN0JeCS-8L_9hr7bVxnbX86z).

<sup>7</sup> “Debt Bondage” *Anti-Slavery*. <https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/debt-bondage/>

<sup>8</sup> “Convention of 1926.” *UNOHCHR*. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/SlaveryConvention.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> “General Act Slave Trade.” *Government Info*.

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-27/pdf/STATUTE-27-Pg886.pdf>.

involuntary work, sex trafficking, or debt bondage, slavery is still a pressing issue in our society today.<sup>10</sup> According to the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons Agency of the United States Department of State, modern slavery is defined as the “act of recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, and obtaining an individual for commercial sex acts or forced labor by ways of either force, fraud, or coercion.”<sup>11</sup> Contemporary slavery is not only occurring in developing countries, it is also plaguing developed countries as well. However, the countries with a high percentage of slaves relative to their population are North Korea, Uzbekistan, Cambodia, India, and Qatar. These countries (as well as other Asian-Pacific countries) are prime manufacturers of consumer goods, leading to a demand for low cost labor, which slaves provide.

## Direct Causes of Modern Slavery

There is no singular cause of slavery, rather a variety of complex situations relating to each other. An overwhelming stance—as taken by the International Labor Organization (ILO)—is that contemporary slavery is based upon vulnerability, which is caused by a handful of variables, not just poverty as some might think. Many impoverished people are slaves, but not all slaves are poor.

### **Profitable for Big Business**

The global economy is dominated by large corporations in many sectors, particularly in agriculture, technology, fishing, and the production of luxury goods. However, the acquisition of low cost labor for these companies comes at a high price, especially for individuals who are in desperate need for work. The ILO states that 27.6 million individuals are victims of forced labor and sexual exploitation.<sup>12</sup> The fishing, agricultural, textile, and mineral industries are the worst offenders, with over 90% of the world’s laborers in these fields being victimized daily. Still, forced labor is not the same as exploitation in the workplace (sweatshops), since the workers in those situations still receive payment, albeit small, and are not threatened with the loss of their employment. It is estimated that over \$150 billion USD is earned annually by companies who are enslaving individuals in the private and public sectors.<sup>13</sup> During recent years, the ILO has released an abundance of acts and propositions to combat the use of slave labor throughout the world. Nonetheless, it is apparent that many of these acts do nothing to identify and eradicate slavery within the work place.

Underdeveloped nations are not the only ones who suffer from widespread slavery. Developed nations that rely on major supply chains for their economy are just as responsible as nations who condone slavery. With so many supply chains using migrant workers and forced labor, developed nations who might not have slaves should still be held accountable. For example, industries in the United Kingdom are particularly reliant on the use slave labor in their supply chains; one of the biggest culprits being the cannabis industry. Cannabis farms are discovered weekly, but

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<sup>10</sup> “Global Slavery Index.” Walk Free. <https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/map/>.

<sup>11</sup> “What is Modern Slavery?” *US Department of State*. <https://archive.is/MJ4Mz>.

<sup>12</sup> “Statistics on Forced Labor.” *International Labour Organization*. <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/statistics/lang--en/index.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.

little is done to properly investigate them. Workers who are in these farms are often teenage slaves brought over from Vietnam—one of the most prominent transgressors of forced slavery.<sup>14</sup> Young, vulnerable, Vietnamese men are trafficked by organized crime gangs and forced to work in farms across Britain, while girls and women are brought to work in nail bars or the sex industry.<sup>15</sup> When these farms are raided, everyone in the vicinity is arrested, including the individuals forced into work. The workers are often then sent to an immigration detention facility because of their illegal status. Since the workers are underage, these cases breach multiple anti-slavery acts, including child labor laws. The UK has recognized the problem, but it seems that they have struggled to eliminate it.

For instance, in 2015, the UK passed the Modern Slavery Act which had a transparency supply chain provision. It required businesses that make over £36 million in profit to annually publish a statement that shows that they are actively combating slavery within their company; this also includes foreign subsidiary companies within the chain.<sup>16</sup> It is quite easy for businesses to simply lie in their reports, leading to questions about how effective these plans are in the fight against slavery. This act has had varying amounts of success; while it has brought engagement and awareness to the cause, its provisions are directed towards legal industries, and the cannabis industry is far from that. Another imperfection is that the convention mostly deals with the coercion and recruitment part of trafficking, as opposed to focusing on the victims within these situations.

### **Desperation in Relation to Poverty**

Debt bondage (also known as peonage) is when people give themselves over to an employer to pay off a withstanding debt. This process often involves brutal work and is passed down through the family. Also, employers tend to inflate the debt in order to “pay” for a victim’s food, shelter, and water, subsequently making the debt almost impossible to pay off.<sup>17</sup> If a victim of peonage becomes too old or sick to work, the employer forces relatives to contribute, leading to a higher concentration of child laborers. Even though a significant number of individuals who are enslaved do not face poverty, economic disadvantage plays a crucial role in increased vulnerability, leading to victims believing that slavery is their only option. The International Palermo Protocols (2000) declare that “effective action to prevent and combat trafficking in persons, especially women and children, requires a comprehensive international approach in the countries of origin, transit and destination that includes measures to prevent such trafficking, to punish the traffickers and to protect the victims of such trafficking, including by protecting their internationally recognized human rights...” and requires the criminalization of bonded labor as a form of trafficking.<sup>18</sup> However, it is still common in

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<sup>14</sup> “Vietnam.” *Global Slavery Index*. <https://cdn.walkfree.org/content/uploads/2023/09/27170612/GSI-Snapshot-Viet-Nam.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> “UK Police Criticized for Failure to Help Enslaved Cannabis Farmers.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/26/uk-police-criticised-failure-help-enslaved-vietnamese-cannabis-farmers>.

<sup>16</sup> “UK’s New Slavery Laws Explained.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/dec/14/modern-slavery-act-explained-business-responsibility-supply-chain>

<sup>17</sup> “Debt Bondage.” *End Slavery Now*. <http://www.endslaverynow.org/learn/slavery-today/bonded-labor>.

<sup>18</sup> “Palermo Protocols.” *UN Human Rights*. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolTraffickingInPersons.aspx>.

countries such as Mauritania, India, and Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> Bonded labor is a major contributor to their economy with a large presence in multiple industries, such as the production of tea, bricks, silk, fish, and vanity goods. In addition, bonded labor also poses a threat to global security. Victims who are looking for stability and a means to fight back against the individual who exploited them are frequently recruited by extremists – especially in Pakistan and India, which often leads to violence.<sup>20</sup>

It is estimated that over 10 million people are victims of modern slavery in India.<sup>21</sup> Even though bonded labor has been prohibited for decades, the practice is still persistent, especially in rural areas. Bonded labor in India stems from multiple causes such as the historically prejudiced caste system, poverty, social injustice, and the government’s unwillingness to go against the status quo. Child labor is also prominent due to cultural expectations; children are expected to contribute to the economic advancement of their family but often have no choice; being victims of bonded labor by default. Instances of bonded labor because of poverty, caste-based discrimination, and governmental ignorance produce a variety of policy reformations. These include a complete ban on bonded labor and compulsory education – to improve literacy and reduce vulnerability.<sup>22</sup> Even though India continues to grow in development, it remains to be seen whether or not its government will invest in the protection of human rights in the labor force.

### **Cultural Acceptance**

In order to accurately determine the root causes of modern slavery, it is crucial to observe it in the context of globalization. By only examining slavery in isolation, social justice issues which impact this problem are overlooked. Examples of these issues include gender discrimination, educational inopportunity, and racial equality.<sup>23</sup> The previously outlined problems serve as obstacles that must be overcome in order to put an end to this horrendous industry. It’s obvious that cultures which cultivate an accepting view of treating women like objects who can be exchanged have a higher concentration of slaves; as well as making women vulnerable to slavery – especially trafficking.

Women are not the only ones who suffer in this system; migrant workers also face enormous discrimination, too. At the current time, there are over 232 million migrant workers around the world – with half of that population being women;<sup>24</sup> these individuals travel to countries to seek work but face little social protection in the labor market. This makes them increasingly vulnerable to slavery and trafficking. Migrant workers are often scorned when they arrive at industrialized countries in order to find work. Prejudice brought upon the workers by various governments and organizations makes it difficult to create policies that protect the rights of these individuals – which often leads to exploitation. For example, migrant workers from countries such as India, Nepal, and

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<sup>19</sup> “Bonded Labor in Pakistan.” *Scientific Research Publishing*. [https://file.scirp.org/pdf/AA\\_2016112910404595.pdf](https://file.scirp.org/pdf/AA_2016112910404595.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> “A \$110 loan, Then 20 Years of Debt Bondage.” *CNN*.

<http://thecnnfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/2011/06/02/a-110-loan-then-20-years-of-debt-bondage>

<sup>21</sup> “India.” *Global Slavery Index*. <https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/country/india/>

<sup>22</sup> “Bonded Labor in India.” *University of Denver*. <http://www.du.edu/korbel/hrhw/researchdigest/slavery/india.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> “Root Causes of Slavery.” *End Slavery Now*.

<https://fightslaverynow.org/why-fight-there-are-27-million-reasons/economics-and-human-trafficking/root-causes/>

<sup>24</sup> “International Labour Standards for Migrant Workers.” *ILO*. <https://archive.is/SsHxg>.

Pakistan compose a significant portion of Qatar's population.<sup>25</sup> These individuals migrate to Qatar in search of a better life for themselves and their families. However, once they arrive they often have their passports stolen by their employers and face abhorrent working and living conditions. Bounded by contracts they do not understand, workers are almost always discriminated against and forced into work by default.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, even if said workers are receiving payment, albeit, very little, the working conditions they face make their situation equivalent to slavery in that regard.

Countries that invoke fear into the immigrant community is felt more deeply among individuals who were brought somewhere against their will. The issue lies within the act of achieving liberation for all regardless of race, gender, education level, and so on. Therefore, as the abolition of slavery continues, policies that are created must reflect the needs of oppressed individuals.

## National Efforts in the Eradication of Modern Slavery

While various countries have passed their own policies regarding the slavery industry, there are also multiple provisions that the United Nations has passed as well. New policies are passed frequently, but these are the ones that have had lasting effects throughout the world. The most renowned protocol is the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000), which focuses on the prevention, suppression, and eradication of trafficking in persons.<sup>27</sup> This proposal illustrated a universal set of guidelines to combat these heinous cross-border crimes. After recognizing an international problem, the Convention would set parameters regarding the enforcement of law in the offending state. However, it received criticism due to the lack of underlying moral principles and its inability to tend to the specific needs and circumstances of every signatory country.<sup>28</sup> With over 125 signatories, the broad solution ignores the local and regional crime context of certain states. All criticisms aside, this instrument was overwhelmingly influential in the creation of other protocols internationally and domestically.

Moreover, in 2010 the UN passed the Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons, which focused greatly on the rehabilitation of victims by supplying financial, legal, and humanitarian aid.<sup>29</sup> This aid comes from a Trust Fund organized by the United Nations, where countries are encouraged to provide funds that will be distributed amongst the victims who are located around the globe. From this the UN and private groups have established other policies that have had their fair share of successes and failures.

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<sup>25</sup> "GCC Estimate of Migrants by Nationality." *Gulf Labor Markets and Migration*. <https://tinyurl.com/2y67skhc/>.

<sup>26</sup> "Qatar Government Admits Fatalities." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/14/qatar-admits-deaths-in-migrant-workers>.

<sup>27</sup> "UNCATOC." *United Nations*. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/CTOC/>.

<sup>28</sup> "UNCTOC and its Ambiguities." *E-International Relations*.

<http://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/25/the-un-convention-against-transnational-organized-crime-and-its-ambiguities/>.

<sup>29</sup> "UN Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons." *United Nations*. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/United\\_Nations\\_Global\\_Plan\\_of\\_Action\\_to\\_Combat\\_Trafficking\\_in\\_Persons.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/United_Nations_Global_Plan_of_Action_to_Combat_Trafficking_in_Persons.pdf).

The Convention for Domestic Workers provides another example.<sup>30</sup> This convention was ratified in 2011 by the International Labor Organization as a human rights guideline for domestic workers. It provides written rights to workers such as daily and weekly rest hours, protection against violence, and a minimum age limit. Workers also have a right to a clear contract about their employment and they are furthermore not required to reside at the house of their work. Civil rights—such as access to the justice system—social, and labor rights are integrated within this policy, which is a refreshing change from the stark separation of the two in previous conventions. However, while this convention strives to be inclusive to “all domestic workers”, there are multiple exclusions listed in subsequent articles within this document. This convention boasts about universality and basic rights for all workers, yet fails to extend those protections in the same breath.

Even though each policy has had different results, there is overwhelming agreement that it is important that victims of modern slavery must have access to adequate rehabilitation services.<sup>31</sup> This can involve many steps, but assisting the unique situation of the victim is advised. Securing basic needs like water, food, and shelter is an essential way to start. Then by providing services such as access to a justice system, counselors, and education, victims are more likely to be able to rehabilitate into society. Furthermore, it is imperative that research be done on the successes of other long-term solutions and build from there. As solutions continue to adapt, encouraging community involvement is also recommended. Local acceptance is vital to rehabilitation, reintegration, and demobilization. By encouraging individuals around the globe to get involved, it is possible to bring an end to this horrible industry, as well as provide assistance to those who have suffered.

## Questions to Consider

How can nations across the globe eradicate modern slavery without ignoring the needs of previously affected victims?

To what degree can the United Nations control non-complying governments who refuse to participate in future anti-slavery acts?

How can we build long-term capacity building solutions in order to strengthen agencies that fight against slavery?

How slavery used in the manufacturing of goods be abolished if it is profitable for governments and businesses alike?

Is it necessary to solve social issues (such as gender discrimination, racial equality, etc.) before we achieve the eradication of slavery?

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<sup>30</sup> “Convention for Domestic Workers.” *International Labour Organization*.

[http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:2551460](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:2551460).

<sup>31</sup> “Comparative Perspectives on the Rehabilitation of Slaves.” *University of Florida*. <https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/168/Fegley-Vol110Issue1.pdf>.