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# The Human Commodity: Our Global Shame

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The word 'slavery' often conjures brutal images of a long since vanquished historic project, but its practice, more commonly and legally referred to as human trafficking, continues to thrive in every corner of the globe - making it the world's second largest criminal industry.

By Cassandra Clifford for ISN Insights

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People are comparatively cheaper than they were in the 1600-1800s, when slaves were purchased for life. Now ownership tends to last only a few months to a few years, making slaves cheaper to purchase and more easily disposable. In 1850 the purchase price of a slave in the southern US averaged the equivalent of \$40,000 today. According to [Free the Slaves](#), a slave today costs an average of \$90. People have become a disposable commodity, cheap and easy labor one can just toss out when no longer needed. Globalization and the post-World War II population boom have increased access to, and lowered the cost of, transportation, which has in turn contributed to the increased levels of global slavery. Victims are often driven into slavery by severe poverty or acute need for economic gain. Additionally, the ethnicity of today's slave is rarely important.

## Some definitions

*Slavery* was first defined by the League of Nations in 1926 as a "situation where rights of ownership are exercised by one person over another." Subsequently in 1956 the [UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Practices similar to Slavery](#) addressed slavery-like conditions, including debt bondage, serfdom and related practices. Human trafficking can take many forms and is a practice of using illicit means via force, fraud or coercion, for which a person is then held for the purpose of exploitation. The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, defines human trafficking in Article 3, and includes the "*practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs*", as well as the aforementioned elements. Human trafficking does not require travel or transport from one location to another.

While human trafficking is often associated with poor countries, no state is immune - with every country across the globe categorized as a source, transit or destination for human trafficking. Modern slavery comes in various forms: sex trafficking and slavery; debt bondage/bonded labor; domestic servitude; involuntary servitude; child labor and child soldiering. In the case of sex trafficking, the victim is acquired for the purpose of sexual exploitation and/or commercial sex acts. Debt bondage, legally termed bonded labor, occurs when an unwarranted bond or debt, often inherited, is used to enslave an individual. Domestic servitude occurs when a person is enslaved in a

private home and used for household chores and other violations. Involuntary servitude involves a situation in which laborers work under some form of physical or psychological force that prevents them from leaving. Chattel slavery is the long-term ownership of a slave and is most often racially based.

## **Staggering numbers**

Estimates vary as to the number of modern-day slaves. According to the [International Labor Organization](#) (ILO), there are 12.3 million adults and children who are trafficked around the globe for the purpose of forced prostitution, bonded labor and forced labor. Of these victims, the ILO estimates that at least 1.39 million are victims of commercial sexual servitude, both transnationally and within countries.

Those most victimized by human trafficking are women and children, with 56 percent of all forced labor victims women and girls. Kevin Bales, modern slavery expert and president of Free the Slaves, estimates the number to be 27 million, a figure widely accepted by NGOs. [UNICEF](#) estimates there are some 250,000 child soldiers globally, while Human Rights Watch [puts](#) the number at 300,000, with the majority, some 200,000, in Africa. Child soldiers are actively fighting in at least 30 countries around the world, according to both Amnesty International and UNICEF, and PW Singer [estimates](#) in his book, *Children at War*, that 43 percent of all armed organizations in the world use child soldiers, 90 percent of whom see combat.

The entire global economy is impacted by the use of slavery in the production of goods, such as cotton, tea, silk, coca, sugar, steal, carpets, diamonds, etc. The ILO report, [Combating Child Labor in Cocoa Growing](#), estimates that 200,000 children work on cocoa farms in the Ivory Coast alone.

The sale of humans for profit is growing steadily around the globe, and is estimated to be a \$31.7 billion industry, according to the ILO - making it the second largest criminal industry in the world, larger than the drug trade and soon to surpass the arms trade.

## **Toward an enhanced legal framework**

Human trafficking poses both national and international human security risks, including threats to border security and human health, and thus calls for a concentrated worldwide effort to adequately dismantle the illegal markets. This must be done cohesively with the increased establishment and enforcement of laws that prosecute traffickers and provide protection and resources to survivors. Survivors of trafficking must first be treated as victims, as opposed to criminals. In many countries, when trafficking victims are found, they are jailed and deported to their home countries, and children are often placed in juvenile detention centers.

On a global scale, very few cases of human trafficking are successfully prosecuted under international or state law. However, while much remains to be done, especially in the establishment and enforcement of laws to protect victims, significant progress has been made in the last decade. In particular, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime operates under the [UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#), which sets forth how to define, prevent and prosecute global human trafficking. The convention's [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children](#) (2000) has established an international set of guidelines. Additionally, [the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air](#) was established (2003-2004). The enforcement of both protocols is supported by the [United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking](#) (2007).

In addition to these international initiatives, a number of states have successfully sought to increase

the number of prosecutions by creating and enhancing legislation. The US for example passed the [Trafficking Victims Protection Act](#) (2000), and its subsequent reauthorizations (2003, 2005 and 2008) have led to a number of successful prosecutions under US federal law, and a number of US states have passed successful state legislation.

## **How to win the battle**

Organizations and governments must work from the bottom up, putting resources on the ground in the areas most affected. Organizations must therefore educate communities about the realities of trafficking, as well as offer alternative solutions and economic opportunities, such as sustainable trade skills, for vulnerable parties. Both children and adults in affected communities must be part of the process of finding alternative solutions and prevention programs. Enforceable laws must be passed to prosecute those involved on every level, and it is necessary that victims be given access to the tools and resources needed to establish the skills, knowledge and strength needed to avoid falling back into the trafficking market. There is an understated amount of both short- and long-term support and treatment services, including shelters, mental and physical health services available globally.

To sustainably bring an end to modern slavery, four main areas of focus must be addressed. First is the demand for inexpensively manufactured goods and sex services, since this demand is met by the cheap - or free - labor of those who are acutely economically vulnerable. Second, gender inequality and bias must be addressed in all countries to reduce the stigma and abuse of sexual exploitation. Third, there must be a unified international response to strategies of prevention and awareness, and, fourth, impunity must end, for victims will continue to remain silent and not seek medical, psychological or legal attention if they feel there is no available retribution or safe care. History has clearly illustrated that impunity for traffickers only serves to exacerbate its use.

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