

# 21st century slavery



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A child domestic at work in the Philippines

## A tale of two treaties

The *Slavery Convention* of 1926 outlaws slavery, the slave trade and forced labour, defining slavery as ‘the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised’. In its definition of slavery the 1956 *United Nations Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery* includes debt bondage, serfdom, forced marriage practices, and the sale or giving of children into exploitation. The combined legal definition set out in these two treaties remains in use today.

Working with these legal definitions as a guideline, the circumstances of an enslaved person today include: (i) control of an individual; (ii) restriction of their freedom of movement; and (iii) their lack of consent. These elements of control and coercion, often accompanied by the threat of violence, are central to the existence of slavery. The migrant worker whose passport has been confiscated by his or her employer, the child sold as a camel jockey or the woman forced into prostitution – all have the element of choice and control of their lives taken away from them. According to the International Labour Organization, around the world at least 12.3 million men, women and children live and work as twenty-first century slaves.



Sarah Williams is Campaigns Officer for Anti-Slavery International, co-ordinating their *Fight for Freedom 1807–2007* campaign to highlight slavery past and present in this bicentenary year. Prior to this she helped to lead their four-year *Stop Human Traffic* campaign. Her role also includes organising the annual Anti-Slavery Award, which recognises the achievements of often little-known anti-slavery activists around the world. Sarah studied politics and her background is in campaigning and lobbying on social justice issues for various organisations including Housing Justice, the homelessness charity, and SPEAK, the student prayer and campaigns network.

## Robbed of an education

Bonded labour (sometimes called ‘debt bondage’) is probably the least known form of slavery today, yet it is the most widely used method of enslaving people. Millions of people are in bonded labour, whereby their labour is demanded as a means of repayment for a loan. They are then tricked or trapped into working for very little or no pay, often for seven days a week. The value of their work is invariably greater than the original sum of money borrowed. Whole families can be in bonded labour, including children who are then denied the opportunity of an education.

According to the United Nations, an estimated 8.4 million children are in the ‘unconditional worst forms of child labour’ worldwide. These are practices such as trafficking, debt bondage and other forms of forced labour, which the international community considers unacceptable and which must be eradicated immediately.

One example of the worst forms of child labour is to be found in the Philippines. Girls are brought from the outlying islands to Manila and other cities, and forced to work in people’s homes, often for little or no pay. Locked in the house they are denied the chance to go to school. Work in the home makes children even more vulnerable to other kinds of abuse as they are not visible to the rest of society. Moreover, domestic work is often not regulated under labour laws.

## Case study 1: Niger

### Boulboulou's story

Boulboulou was taken from her parents, who were descent-slaves, at the age of four and sold on for a few kilos of semolina, tea and sugar. Boulboulou was forced to work for a 'master' who owned a large herd of camels. She spent her life guarding, driving and looking after these camels. At 16 she was forced to marry, but she remained living in her master's tent as a slave. Boulboulou gave birth to a daughter, but despite this she was not relieved of any of her daily duties, such as pounding millet, carrying water over long distances, gathering firewood and caring for the camels. If any of the camels escaped Boulboulou would be humiliated and beaten.

Then, at the age of three, Boulboulou's daughter was taken and given as a wedding gift to the master's daughter. In this distressing and helpless situation, Boulboulou decided to escape to look for her family. Some local people helped her to find her parents and directed her to Timidria, a local anti-slavery organisation. Timidria volunteers successfully reunited Boulboulou with her daughter, who is now enrolled in school in the Tahoua region. Boulboulou is now married to a man of her choice with whom she has three children. Today, she leads the life of a free and happy woman.



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### Descent-based slavery

In some parts of the world people are born into slavery as a result of their ethnicity, caste or social status. Research estimates that tens of thousands of people in Niger are forced to work for no pay. People who are viewed as coming from the slave class also face other kinds of ongoing discrimination. 'Masters' consider that they own their slaves, so even when former slaves have been free for many years, the master will assume the right to approve their marriage or inherit their property. Again, children are born into this form of slavery, and are often separated from their parents at an early age to break family bonds and maintain full control over these children's lives.

### State-backed slavery

Some governments are still directly responsible for exacting forced labour. In Myanmar (Burma), for example, hundreds of thousands of people are forced by the government to work as construction workers, farm labourers and army porters for little or no pay.

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In Sudan, forced labour has taken place in the context of civil war. An estimated 14,000 people, including children, were abducted and enslaved by government-backed militia in Sudan during the civil war between 1983 and 2002. Many thousands remain in slavery and are yet to be identified and reunited with their families.

### Human trafficking

Human trafficking, as defined by the United Nations, involves the movement of people away from their homes, through violence, deception or coercion, in order to exploit them through forced labour, servitude or slavery-like practices. Trafficked people are forced to work against their will and traffickers control their freedom of movement, where and when they will work and what pay, if any, they will receive. For children, the act of moving them away from home to exploit their labour (regardless of deception or coercion) constitutes trafficking.

The scale of trafficking is very difficult to gauge because of its illicit nature. But, at a minimum, hundreds of thousands of people are trafficked, for both sexual and labour exploitation, each year. For example, West African children are recruited into domestic labour or selling goods at market; women are trafficked from countries such as Albania and Moldova and forced into prostitution in France, Italy and the UK; men are trafficked from Mexico and forced to work on farms in the USA. Recent research by Anti-Slavery International has

documented migrant workers trafficked into forced labour in the UK in industries such as agriculture, construction, food processing and packaging, nursing, hospitality and catering.

## Education and action

Two hundred years ago the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade was brought about by a mass movement of British people. Today, people power is also vital to efforts to end all contemporary forms of slavery. By meeting together to raise awareness and discuss these issues, signing petitions, lobbying Members of Parliament, voting intelligently and spending our money wisely we can play our part.

Churches, schools, colleges and universities have a special part to play in helping people to understand and respond to the injustices of this world. Pastors and educators share a moral responsibility to denounce those things that are antithetical to love, justice, peace, hope and freedom, and crush the human spirit. Their prophetic words bring to light a rotten, sometimes hidden, reality characterised by selfishness, exploitation, humiliation and degradation ... and then offer a vision of what should be: a world characterised by selflessness, co-operation, generosity and dignity. By educating, enthusing and empowering others to speak and act against contemporary slavery, pastors and educators help to set today's captives free.

■ Sarah Williams

## Organisations

### Anti-Slavery International

Many people think slavery no longer exists. Yet we know that in the world today at least 12 million men, women and children are forced to lead lives as slaves. In 2007 we have a huge opportunity to open people's eyes to the realities of modern-day slavery and to engage them in the struggle for its ultimate eradication.

Anti-Slavery International was founded in 1839 by the same abolitionists who led the campaign against the transatlantic slave trade in 1807 and fought for the abolition of slavery in 1833. We continue to work for an end to all forms of slavery throughout the world and are the leading organisation in this field.

Anti-Slavery International's *Fight for Freedom 1807–2007* campaign seeks to revitalise the abolitionist spirit of the past and harness it for the



eradication of slavery today. We are also calling for measures to better understand the transatlantic slave trade; action to tackle the legacies of the trade in enslaved Africans, such as racism and discrimination, and the development of countries affected by the transatlantic slave trade.

For further information and to sign the 'Fight for Freedom Declaration', visit [www.antislavery.org/2007](http://www.antislavery.org/2007)

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### Set All Free

*Set All Free* has been established by Churches Together in England to commemorate the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 2007 in ways which challenge modern society to engage with Christian values. The project aims to highlight how the abolitionists' values can transform our relationships on an individual, community and society level.

*Set All Free* has a holistic approach to the bicentenary, aiming to:

#### REMEMBER

- the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade
- the abolitionists – Black and White; male and female; mostly Christian
- the role of the Church in both slavery and abolition



**REFLECT** on the consequences of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery on:

- racism
- under-development
- commerce

**RESPOND** to legacies of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade by:

- taking action to end modern forms of slavery
- working to effect healing and reconciliation

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## Case study 2: Philippines

### Mirabel's story

Mirabel is from the Visayas in central Philippines. Her family earn a living through growing bananas, corn and coconuts. At the age of 13 Mirabel left school to start working to help provide for the family.

Mirabel did domestic work for several employers in neighbouring provinces. After a couple of years a neighbour offered her the chance to be a domestic in Manila. She was promised a high salary and given a wonderful picture

of what life in Manila would be like. Mirabel's neighbour took her to the regional capital, where she was left in the hands of traffickers, who took her to Manila by boat with 22 other recruits.

Mirabel was forced to work as a domestic from 5am to 11pm. She had to do the laundry, iron and look after the employer's dog. She had to climb on the roof of the house to sweep it and to cut trees. Mirabel was forced to sleep on the floor without a blanket, and was only allowed to eat food which had gone off. Her employer hit her, and she was never

paid her promised salary. One day Mirabel tried to escape, but on turning to a local official for help, the official returned her to her employer.

After several months, Mirabel was able to call a telephone hotline set up by a local organisation, Visayan Forum. The local authorities managed to rescue Mirabel. Visayan Forum provided her with shelter and helped her to file a case against her employer. While at the shelter, Mirabel was able to receive counselling to help her deal with her experience.