

Slavery in the Twenty-First Century

By Howard Dodson

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A recent episode of the award-winning American television series *"Law and Order: Special Victims Unit"* opened with the investigation of a murder of a young African boy who had been dismembered and left at what appeared to be the scene of a ritual religious sacrifice. As the investigation unfolded, the murder faded into the background, and what came front and centre was the discovery of an extensive slave trading operation in twenty-first-century New York City. The victims in this particular episode were young African men and women, who were being bought and sold into sexual slavery or unrequited labour in the commercial capital of the world. Of course, the episode ended with a disclaimer proclaiming that the story was fictitious and any similarity with actual facts and personalities is purely coincidental. However, reel life imitates real life.

The slave trade is back in full force. This modern slave trade, however, is not limited to just young Africans; women and children are also being enslaved in almost every continent. It is estimated that there are over 27 million enslaved persons worldwide, more than double the number of those who were deported in the 400-year history of the transatlantic slave trade to the Americas. What is remarkable is that this unprecedented trafficking largely goes unnoticed. The 27 million victims of the modern slave trade are more invisible to the world's eye than were the 10 million to 12 million Africans who were forcibly sent to the Americas during the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. How do we account for this fact in this age of media and communications overload and transparency?

The first problem is related to the major differences between transatlantic and modern slave trades. The transatlantic slave trade was racially-biased. The victims were Africans who were captured and sold into slavery in Africa and transported to the Western Hemisphere to work in the economies, principally in agriculture and mineral, of the European colonial societies. Combined efforts of abolitionist movements led to the British and American abolition of the slave trade and the eventual demise of slavery itself in the Western Hemisphere during the nineteenth century.

The modern slave trade is quite different. All racial groups are objects of the trade. Though women and children are its principal victims, those who

are bought, sold and enslaved come from almost every continent and are sold into slavery in virtually every country. Unlike the transatlantic slave trade, they are not being recruited to work in any specific geographical area or any clearly defined industry or economy. True, many of the women are sold as prostitutes or concubines, and the children as labourers, but there are relatively few established and stable routes and markets. While the transatlantic slave trade was legal and carried on as a form of legitimate commerce, the modern slave trade is illegal. Records of these underground business transactions are largely hidden from public view; so are the human beings who are bought and sold in this twenty-first-century slave trafficking. The pervasiveness and the relatively invisible nature of this illegal trafficking make it difficult to define and develop a strategy for abolishing it. The question arises: "How should one begin?"

If there is anything that we should learn from the experiences of those who fought to abolish the transatlantic slave trade, it is, first and foremost, to recognize the millions of enslaved individuals as human beings, members of the human family. In their zeal to eliminate the horrors of slavery from their societies, abolitionists embraced and propagated the notion that enslaved Africans were a "lesser breed" of humanity. Victims of modern-day slavery are frequently viewed in a similar way; those who are labelled prostitutes are especially seen as a lower class of human being.

If we are to fully embrace the victims' cause, we are first obligated to recognize that they are also human beings who are caught up in a difficult situation and trying to figure out how to get out of it. They are critically-thinking people faced with limited choices, who are trying to accumulate the economic, psychological, spiritual and emotional resources to get out of such complicated conditions. While some have become "slaves" as their state of being, the overwhelming majority do not adhere with this status. As long as they are resisting their enslavement and searching for alternatives, they are in an enslaved condition as human beings, rather than slave beings.

Since varying forms of modern slavery exist in every society and major community worldwide, persons who would become twenty-first-century abolitionists are obliged to call upon Governments, religious bodies and citizens to launch investigations and convene hearings on the status of slavery and slave trafficking. The existence of millions of enslaved persons around the world challenges us to create a global abolitionist movement. Among the first to join should be those who benefited from the successful movements that ended the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas. I, for one, have signed up.

Biography

Howard Dodson, a noted lecturer, educator and consultant, is Chief of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of The New York Public Library and a specialist in African-American history. He is a former member of the President's Commission on the National Museum of African American History and Culture and serves on the Scientific and Technical Committee of the UNESCO Slave Route project.



Child Slavery A Global Problem

Hundreds of millions of children across the globe are victims of exploitation, abuse and violence each year. They are abducted and recruited into the army, trafficked into prostitution rings or forced into debt bondage or other forms of slavery.

Forced and bonded labour. According to the International Labour Organization, an estimated 246 million children are engaged in exploitative child labour, with almost three quarters of them working in

hazardous environments, such as mines or factories, or with dangerous substances like chemicals and agricultural pesticides.

Human trafficking. The use of children as a commodity for labour or sex is a lucrative international trade. An estimated 1.2 million children worldwide are trafficked each year, and some are arrested and detained as illegal aliens. Girls as young as 13, mainly from Asia and Eastern Europe, are trafficked as “mail-order brides”. Up to 10,000 women and girls from poor neighbouring countries have been lured into commercial sex establishments. Like other forms of criminal activity, trafficking is an underground activity and difficult to address.

Sexual exploitation. About 1 million children, mostly girls but also a significant number of boys, are exploited every year in the multi-billion-dollar sex industry. Such commercial abuse of children is fuelled by local demand, with sexual tourism only a small part of the problem. Since sexual activity is usually regarded as a private matter, Governments and communities alike are often reticent to intervene in cases of sexual exploitation.

Child soldiers. At any given time, over 300,000 child soldiers, as young as 8, are exploited in armed conflicts in more than 30 countries around the world. It is estimated that more than 2 million children have died over the last decade as a direct result of armed conflict, and at least 6 million have been seriously injured or permanently disabled. In addition, between 8,000 and 10,000 children are being killed or maimed by landmines each year.

Source: UNICEF

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