

# 1807–2007: THE FIGHT AGAINST SLAVERY GOES ON

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**THE BICENTENARY COMMEMORATIONS THIS YEAR PROVIDE AN OPPORTUNITY TO UNCOVER THE TRUTH ABOUT THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE AND THE WAY IT HAS SHAPED OUR WORLD DOWN TO TODAY.**

It is also important to reflect on the achievements of those who worked so hard to bring about Britain's abolition of the slave trade. But there is another reason for solemnity two hundred years on. Slavery has not gone away.

Anti-Slavery International was founded in 1839 by the same abolitionists who led the campaign 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: at least 12 million men, women and children are in contemporary forms of slavery in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup>

## SLAVERY AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

While the chattel enslavement of Africans was carried out with the full backing of the law, contemporary forms of slavery are defined and prohibited in international law. The *Slavery Convention* of 1926 proscribes 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'. 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, in its definition of slavery. The combined legal definition set out in these two treaties remains in use today.<sup>2</sup>

Working with these legal definitions as a guideline, the circumstances of an enslaved person today include control of an individual; restriction of their freedom of movement; and 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 and find themselves in conditions of slavery.

## SLAVERY IN CONTEXT

Contemporary slavery exists within the context of poverty, discrimination, and power inequalities. Much of this contemporary context is itself rooted in the history of exploitation, colonialism, and social and cultural hierarchies.

Poverty and slavery are related to each other in different ways. Poor groups are vulnerable to exploitation and slavery, while those in slavery-like practices often face insurmountable hurdles to extract themselves from poverty, even if they are able to escape their enslavement. Efforts to combat poverty must therefore pay careful attention to slavery practices, which otherwise may go unchallenged. And truly eliminating slavery involves providing people with the means to create sustainable livelihoods.

Slavery is also closely linked to discrimination against certain groups of people, and especially attempts portray them as sub-human. Elaborate ideologies of racism were used to justify and perpetuate the transatlantic slave trade. The impact of these can still be seen today, in the discrimination and marginalisation of people of African descent. Contemporary forms of slavery are also often justified and bolstered by discrimination and prejudice – against those of a certain ethnicity or religion, low or non-caste status groups, indigenous peoples – and gender discrimination plays a key role in the enslavement of women and girls. Believing someone is less human than oneself makes it easier to abuse them.

The growth and expansion of our modern global economy is rooted in the history of enslavement and colonialism, as the wealth amassed from Africa and other colonies played its part in kick-starting the industrial development of European powers such as Britain, while having a negative impact on the development of the global south. Modern-day patterns of wealth and power worldwide play their part in creating and sustaining the conditions of poverty and inequality that make people vulnerable to contemporary forms of slavery.<sup>3</sup>

## CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF SLAVERY

### 1. Bonded labour, or debt bondage

This is probably the least-known form of slavery today, and yet it is the most widely used method of enslaving people. A person becomes a bonded labourer when his or her labour is demanded as a means of repayment for a loan. The person is 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.

### 2. Unconditional worst forms of child labour

An estimated 8.4 million children are in the 'unconditional worst forms of child labour' worldwide.<sup>4</sup>



## 'at least 12 million men, women and children are in contemporary forms of slavery in the twenty-first century'

### NOTES

1. *A Global Alliance against Forced Labour: Global Report under the Follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work* (International Labour Office, 2005).

2. For more detail on international laws prohibiting slavery see David Weissbrodt and Anti-Slavery International, *Abolishing Slavery and its Contemporary Forms* (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2003).

3. More information on this, and many of the issues discussed in this article, can be found in Sarah Williams, Inderjit Bhogal and Richard Reddie, *Act to End Slavery Now* (Anti-Slavery International and Set all Free, 2006).

4. *Every Child Counts: New Global Estimates on Child Labour* (International Labour Office, 2002).

5. Anti-Slavery International instituted the Anti-Slavery Award in 1991 to draw attention to the continuing problem of slavery in the world today and to provide recognition for long-term, courageous campaigning by organisations or individuals in the countries most affected. You can find out more about James Aguer and previous Award winners at [www.antislavery.org](http://www.antislavery.org) under 'about us'.

6. Klára Skrivánková, *Trafficking for Forced Labour UK Country Report* (Anti-Slavery International, 2006).

► These are practices such as slavery, trafficking, debt bondage and other forms of forced labour, which are considered unacceptable and must be eradicated immediately, regardless of issues such as poverty and lack of educational opportunity, which surround the wider complex problem of child labour.

One example of the worst forms of child labour is children are trafficked into domestic work in countries including the Philippines. Here girls are brought from the outlying islands to the capital Manila and other cities, and forced to work in people's homes. This makes the children even more vulnerable as they are not visible. Moreover, domestic work is often not regulated under labour laws.

Mila was nine when she started work as a domestic in Bacolod city in the Philippines. Each day she had to get up at 5.00 a.m. to carry out household chores such as taking care of her employers' children, cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry and ironing. Her employers gave her additional work including helping out in a pre-school, making deliveries, and in one case, looking after pigs. Mila worked for 11 employers, and only one paid her any salary, of 500 pesos (around £5) per month. On two occasions she was sexually assaulted. After the second assault, when she was 15 years old, she ran away and found shelter with Anti-Slavery International's partner organisation, the Visayan Forum. Mila has now been able to finish her education and works full-time for an association of domestic workers set up by Visayan Forum to enable domestic workers to support and help one another.

### 3. *Descent based slavery*

In some parts of the world people are born into slavery as a result of their ethnicity, caste, or social status, for example in areas of West Africa, including Niger. Research estimates that tens of thousands of people in Niger live in slavery, forced to work for no pay for their 'masters', primarily herding cattle, working on farmland or as domestic servants.

People who are viewed as coming from the slave class also face 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.

### 4. *Forced labour exacted by the state*

Some governments are still directly responsible for exacting forced labour. The Burmese Government is

notorious for perpetrating this kind of abuse. Hundreds of thousands of people in Burma have been forced to work as agriculture workers, army porters and construction workers for little or no pay.

In Sudan, forced labour has taken place in the context of civil war. An estimated 14,000 people 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.

Adut Jel is one of the people helped by James Aguer, Chair of the Dinka Committee, who won the 2006 Anti-Slavery Award for his efforts helping people in slavery in Sudan.<sup>5</sup> Adut is from Aweil town, in Southern Sudan. One night after the civil war broke out, Adut was woken by the sound of gun shots. The militia was carrying out a raid. Some villagers were killed, others, including Adut and her children, were abducted. It took 20 days to reach their destination, Darfur, by horse and on foot. Adut's young children kept asking why they were leaving. She told them they had to keep quiet or they would be killed.

When they reached Darfur, they were put to work as labourers, weeding and harvesting vegetables, and grinding millet. They only had plastic sheets on which to sleep under a shelter that was open to the wind and rain, while the 'masters' were in their houses.

They were given no money for their work. They were guarded to make sure they worked hard and at first they were beaten. Adut's children also had to work as soon as they were old enough, taking the sheep and cows out for grazing. Adut thinks her ordeal lasted about seven years.

The Dinka Committee identified Adut and released her about three years ago. We brought her to a transit camp in Aweil and reunited her with her family. Life remains hard as the South begins to recover from the long years of war.

### 5. *Human trafficking*

Human trafficking 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.



*'The growth and expansion of our modern global economy is rooted in the history of enslavement and colonialism'*

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 or 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 the restaurant trade.<sup>6</sup>

#### TAKING ACTION AGAINST SLAVERY

The abolition of the transatlantic slave trade was brought about by a mass movement made up of many sections of society: enslaved Africans resisting their treatment from the moment of capture, and British women and men – black and white, both famous and unknown – campaigning for an end to these abuses.

Crucial to this story, and to efforts against contemporary forms of slavery, is people power. Today we can echo the efforts of ordinary members of the public who fought for abolition. Signing petitions, meeting together to discuss the issues, lobbying Members of Parliament and building a movement for change are all methods that are as important today as they were 200 years ago.

Anti-Slavery International's campaign, the Fight for Freedom 1807–2007, is running throughout this year, aiming to increase awareness of slavery past and present, and to have a practical impact on slavery issues today.

At the heart of this campaign is the Declaration, which seeks to echo the petitions against the slave trade, and asks people to pledge their support for measures to understand the transatlantic slave trade, redress its legacies, and eradicate modern slavery. You can sign online at [www.antislavery.org/2007](http://www.antislavery.org/2007). There are also regular letter writing and email actions as part of the Fight for Freedom campaign. To sign up go to 'join the campaign' on the website, or contact Anti-Slavery International to find out more.

#### 1. Consumer power

In the early 1790s, hundreds of thousands of people boycotted sugar that had been produced by slaves. Today we too can use consumer choices to take a stand against slavery and injustice.

#### 2. Choose fair trade

Fair trade means that decent working conditions are assured and producers are guaranteed a fair price for their goods. Producers also receive a premium that is invested in development projects that combat poverty. Increased demand for fair trade shows small producers that people are willing to pay a fair price for their goods. It ensures that the system grows and that more workers are helped. It also tells large companies that consumers are committed to ethical purchasing. See [www.fairtrade.org.uk](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk) for more details.

#### 3. Choose ethical trade

Ethically traded goods are monitored to ensure that core labour standards are met, including that no forced labour or illegal child labour is used. However, they do not guarantee a fair price. The Ethical Trading Initiative – [www.ethicaltrade.org.uk](http://www.ethicaltrade.org.uk) – is one scheme that encourages companies to work against exploitative labour conditions throughout their supply chains.

#### JOIN THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

The enslaved Africans and British abolitionists of the past may well have been saddened to know that the fight against slavery was still going on 200 years later. In 2007 we have the opportunity to revitalise the spirit that created the momentum to end the slave trade in 1807, and harness it for another truly historic goal: an end to slavery once and for all.

To join the campaign visit [www.antislavery.org/2007](http://www.antislavery.org/2007) or call 020 7501 8933. ■