

Global Human Trafficking, a Modern form of Slavery

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Steve McQueen, director of this year's Oscar winner for best film "12 Years A Slave," mentioned in his acceptance speech last month that [21 million people](#) are living in slavery today. That quoted figure comes from the 2012 report issued by the United Nation's International Labor Organization (ILO) that has been attempting to gather international data for over a decade now. In the Asia-Pacific region where most of the world's forced laborers come from at 56%, an estimated 11.7 million people, followed by Africa at 18% or 3.7 million people live in bondage. Considering that at the peak of America's slavery prior to the Civil War that ultimately declared it illegal, the total was [four million people](#), fathoming that over five times that number are currently suffering in slavery here in the twenty-first century, casts some serious doubts on whether us humans are evolving as a species at all.

The following statistics come from the [2012 ILF report](#). The global economic meltdown in recent years has only given rise to conditions ripe for escalation of modern slavery. A total of 18.7 million people or 90% become forced laborers in the private sector of individual homes or private enterprise as opposed to the 10% or 2.2 million people that suffer state-imposed forms of forced labor. Of those 18.7 million forced to work in private settings, 4.5 million (or 22%) are forced into sexual exploitation while 14.2 million (or 68%) are victims of forced labor such as in agriculture, domestic work, construction or manufacturing.

The most concentrated area of forced labor victimization is in central and southeastern Europe at 4.2 humans out of 1000 followed by 4 out of 1000 in Africa. Slavery is lowest in developed nations and the European Union at 1.5 per 1000 people. The world average is 3 people in every 1000 are forced into labor.

An appalling 26% of all modern slaves or 5.5 million are children under 18, the majority underage girls forced into child prostitution and pornography. Other children are forced into working in sweat shops while young boys 12 and older are frequently recruited and forced to become child soldiers. The majority at 56% (11.8 million) of the world's forced laborers remain in their home country. As an example India has been identified as a nation where many of its own poor citizens are forced into slave labor. However, of the 44% (9.1 million) that are forced into labor across borders, the vast majority being women and children are sold into the highly profitable sex trafficking trade often operated by organized crime rings.

Though slaves around the world today may not be legally beaten, shackled or sold as property like African American slaves suffered for over two centuries between 1619-1865, an estimated [32 billion dollars](#) is generated annually in an underground industry classified as a type of slavery - human trafficking. Many sources estimate profits far greater than the United Nations total of 32 billion. Only guns and drugs are more lucrative criminal

enterprises.

According to the UN, transporting individuals from their homes to another location against their will into involuntary servitude or forced labor involves at least 2.5 million human trafficking victims worldwide at any given time. Seventy nine percent of victims of the human trafficking trade fall into the slavery category of sexually abused women and underage children. Female victims are both women and girls snatched up from their only familiar environment, forcibly taken across borders, and there all alone in a strange land surrounded by cruel, depraved strangers speaking in foreign tongues, they are forced into prostitution although some become domestic work as nannies, maids, cooks or factory workers. Fifteen percent of human trafficking victims are men most often forced into conditions of hard labor.

Because many nations neither have the will nor the formal mechanism in place to assess how many humans are slaves, actual numbers have been difficult to attain. Plus due to the common perception of slavery being so stigmatized with shame, along with fear of potential immigration problems or violent retribution from slave trade perpetrators, many victims understandably resist going to authorities and reporting this largely invisible crime against humanity. Some are victims of the Stockholm syndrome where they actually identify with their enslavers.

Of course the illicit nature of both slavery as well as prostitution as part of the seedy underbelly of a brutally violent industry covertly run by organized crime, also acts as a formidable barrier resulting in severe underreporting and relatively few cases ever being brought to prosecution. All of these factors have contributed to a growing international problem that has been slow for organizations of both victim advocacy as well as national and transnational law enforcement agencies to effectively come together to tackle its immensity.

Yet since last month's Oscar winning film delving into this enormously important subject matter, more recent developments just in this last week alone are beginning to shine a sliver of light and modest reason for optimism on this long overlooked and indelible human stain. Last Thursday the pope many believe comes closest to embodying the spirit of the most famous saint Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis himself met privately with four ex-slaves to top off a two-day global [conference](#) bringing much needed attention to the blight of modern slavery. The pope is calling for an orchestrated partnership and two pronged approach between churches around the world offering spiritual guidance and compassion to victims and international law enforcement spearheading the coordinated investigative crackdown necessary to arrest what Francis calls this "scourge" on humanity from spreading beyond its current worldwide operation.

Police chiefs from the continents of North and South America, Africa, Asia and Europe were all in attendance, including countries where the problem of human trafficking has been most severe - Albania, Brazil, Nigeria and Thailand. It was reported that this rather weighty topic of global slavery was discussed in the pope's meeting last month with President Obama.

This first time conference on slavery in the twenty-first century comes fresh on the heels of the [pope's apology](#) to the world for all the damage his religion has inflicted on the thousands of innocent victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by pedophile Catholic priests and clergymen through the ages. In the US alone from 1985 to 2000 an estimated [1,400](#) sexual

abuse lawsuits were filed against priests resulting in billions of dollars in settlements reached. Papal critics and abuse advocates view the pope's personal apology as a genuine first big step in the right direction toward bearing some responsibility for the sins of his church. But many still await the pope's specific concrete plan of action to substantively tackle and begin making further inroads toward resolving this endemic pandemic he inherited.

Benjamin Skinner wrote in his eye-opening landmark [book](#) *A Crime So Monstrous* (Free Press, 2008) that "there are more slaves today than at any point in human history" – six years ago citing 27 million people living in bondage – a full six million more than ILO's latest 2012 count. The estimated variance of numbers is a testimonial to the enormity of difficulty compiling and accurately tracking slavery's pervasiveness in the modern world. It seems highly unlikely that at such an early stage of still organizing a global commitment toward its eradication that slavery is actually decreasing in the ensuing years since Skinner's book was published. If anything, the human trafficking industry has been expanding both its area and scope of operations, particularly in east Asia.

Less than a month ago at the Vatican a new initiative released by multiple faiths represented announced a Memorandum of Agreement and Joint Statement establishing the [Global Freedom Network](#) designed to abolish modern slavery and human trafficking by 2020. Its statement on slavery:

"The physical, economic and sexual exploitation of men, women and children condemns 30 million people to dehumanization and degradation. Every day we let this tragic situation continue is a grievous assault on our common humanity and a shameful affront to the consciences of all peoples."

In efforts to educate and inform the public about modern slavery and human trafficking, a series of ongoing articles have been covered by such newspapers as the Observer and Guardian, both announced as UK winners of the [Anti-Slavery Day Media Awards](#) last week. The Guardian launched a series called "modern day slavery in focus" that depicts the atrocious conditions of [Nepalese workers](#) in the Middle Eastern nation Qatar in preparation for the 2022 World Cup.

Similar to the Sochi Olympics, a common pattern has emerged with construction of massive stadium complexes for major international sporting events that under pressured deadlines pre-set the stage for inhumane work conditions with high potential for human trafficking of forced slave laborers. The Guardian tells the tragic story of a [sixteen year old boy](#) from Nepal attempting to escape poverty back home arriving in Qatar to work in a cramped forced labor camp exploited by a trafficking broker that produced a forged passport claiming the boy was 20. Instead of receiving the promised pay wage, the 16-year old was forced to sign his life away in indentured servitude but within two months was dead. Nepal's foreign employment board estimates that 726 Nepalese migrant workers died overseas in 2012, marking an 11% increase from the previous year. More foreign workers abroad especially from Asia are being misled and lured into this world of exploitation, corruption and deception that increasingly results in slavery and death.

In a related matter, the UK Parliament is in the throes of drafting Europe's first modern anti-slavery bill calling for lifetime sentences for convicted human traffickers. Debate centers around simplifying the law to increase the rate of conviction. Last week Oscar winning

director [Steve McQueen](#) weighed in his criticism calling for the bill to be rewritten so as to not turn victims of slavery themselves into criminals. A revised reworking is underway.

Even a [publicity stunt](#) was just announced of an April 15th Guinness record breaking event of a whirlwind 7-city tour across Europe in just 24 hours emphasizing awareness of human trafficking to raise money for the leading US anti-trafficking policy organization ECPAT-USA. This week also marks the third annual human trafficking awareness week at [Chico State University](#) in California. Last weekend a [bi-national conference](#) with delegates from El Paso, Texas and across the border city Juarez held a joint conference on modern slavery and human trafficking to reduce its occurrence between Mexico and the US.

It appears that lawmakers and church faiths alike from the local to international level in conjunction with local, national and Interpol policing agencies are mobilizing task forces like never before to generate momentum in addressing the plight of modern slavery. A number of advocacy organizations in recent years have been fighting to make this destructive and sinister human rights violation among the worst kind a global priority and it appears their efforts are finally now just beginning to pay off. But real progress towards eradicating slavery requires a lot more than just an ephemeral, "flavor-of-the-week" cause and mindset.

These recent small steps only highlight humanity's seminal starting point in the modern era to collectively exercise the political will to prioritize, fund and coordinate a concerted effective global effort and campaign over the long haul to ultimately end slavery on this planet once and for all.

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