

# Today's Slavery: Human Trafficking and Church Response

Many Americans think of slavery as a thing of the past. The term conjures up the transatlantic slave trade that brought millions of Africans against their will to North and South America. African families brought here were intentionally separated from each other, beaten, and exploited for others' gain until, their bodies could work no more. This type of slavery is often called *chattel slavery* because people are treated like the property of others.

## Contemporary Slavery

The United Nations' (U.N.) International Day For The Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition is held on August 23 each year to remind people of the tragedy of the transatlantic slave trade. August was chosen because of slave uprisings in 1791 in Haiti, which resulted in the end of the country's colonization by the French and sparked other slave revolts. But while the transatlantic African slave trade came to a legal close, other various forms of slavery have emerged.

Since 1995, "human trafficking" has emerged as an umbrella term that includes a range of ways that one person holds another person in compelled service. The U.S. State Department identifies the major forms of human trafficking as forced labor, sex trafficking, bonded labor or debt bondage, involuntary domestic servitude, forced child labor, child soldiers, or child sex trafficking.



The case popularized in the movie *The Whistleblower* involved U.N. Peace-keeping officers and private security officers in Bosnia. U.N. Peace-keeping forces were also implicated in sexual exploitation and human trafficking in the Congo in 2004.

*The movement of people across boundaries is part of a collective human experience. There is an element of this experience that must be eradicated: the trafficking of human beings through the use of fraud, force, and coercion for the purpose of forced prostitution or forced labor.*

*Now, in the twenty-first century, this practice reaches every corner of the globe, from Asia and Africa to Europe and the Americas. It is also present in the United States, as vulnerable men, women, and children are trafficked into our country from other lands. Moreover, U.S. citizens and residents are trafficked within our country.*

*We, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration, call attention to this tragic reality to raise awareness among Catholics and others of good will about its devastating impact on vulnerable persons. We urge Catholics to work together to identify survivors of human trafficking and to help rescue them from their bondage."*

--Bishop Barnes of San Bernardino, CA, Chairman,  
USCCB Committee on Migration on Human Trafficking,

While charged with the care of those displaced by civil war, these men forced many women and girls to work as prostitutes and aided human traffickers who moved them to other locations for profit.

In most cases, victims are poor and dislocated. Adults and teens may place their trust in a 'recruiter' who promises to bring them to another part of their own country or into another country for work. Yet when they arrive the recruiters or those working with them in the receiving location almost always take their victim's passports, often leaving them paperless in a country in which they don't speak the predominant language. Frequently, victims are beaten, raped, threatened, and threats are made against their families

back home. Women and men are increasingly targeted for forced labor in factories; women in particular are singled out as domestic workers. Desperate parents may sell their child to a trafficker for funds. Children who are refugees, abandoned, or whose parents are very poor are at risk for becoming child sex workers or forced labor.

The common thread in all of these situations is lack of opportunity in the life of the individual or the home country.

## Church Response

Over the past decade the Roman Catholic Church has been increasing its efforts to eradicate human trafficking and assist its victims. Yet the Church has long recognized that forced labor, at its root, is an economic problem as its victims are most often poor and lack economic opportunity. Additionally, the increase in human trafficking speaks to a loss of human dignity and an ever-increasing consumerism.

In the 1965 Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, the bishops wrote ... [W]hatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are supreme dishonor to the Creator.”

Since then the concern for modern day human trafficking has been restated by John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and the U.S. and Mexican Bishops.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) helped form the Coalition of Catholic Organizations Against Human Trafficking, which consists of national and international Catholic agencies working to eliminate human trafficking.

*“Human trafficking will never be truly defeated without eliminating the consumerism, which feeds it, and prosecuting those actors in receiving countries, including our own, that benefit because of the exploitation of vulnerable human beings.”*

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007

While their main focus is on education and assistance to victims, they also are in conversation with government officials and policy makers.



## Human Trafficking In The U.S.

Authorities across the globe and in the U.S. struggle to obtain accurate statistics because of the covert nature of the crimes. However, the U.S. State Department estimates that 14,000 to 17,500 are trafficked into the U.S. each year for the sex trade or forced labor. Many come here with their proper paperwork but are beaten or coerced into exploitive labor upon their arrival. The most common countries of origin for the victims of trafficking into the U.S. include Thailand, Mexico, the Philippines, Haiti, India, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic. U.S. born trafficking

victims are substantially more likely to be forced into prostitution and pornography by physical and verbal abuse.

## *What is Human Trafficking?*

**Forced Labor:** When an employer exploits a worker forcing them to do work which they did not agree to do.

**Sex Trafficking:** When an adult is coerced or deceived into prostitution.

**Bonded Labor or Debt Bondage:** Bonded labor or debt bondage trafficking occurs when an employer or transporter of workers exploit an initial debt the worker assumed as terms of the employment. Most often such costs are related to transporting the worker to the new work location or for housing the worker.

**Involuntary Domestic Servitude:** This is a particular form of exploitation where an employer socially isolates domestic help. Sexual abuse, physical abuse, and or excessive labor demands are common.

**Forced Child Labor:** While certain forms of child labor are allowed in many countries, forced child labor happens when a child is not allowed the option of stopping work. Most often this happens to children living with families other than their own and the money they earn go to this family or other non-family members and does not benefit the child in any tangible way.

**Child Soldiers:** Children can be forced to serve paramilitary or other organizational interests. While some are forced to act as combatants; others are forced to work as cooks, spies, or sex slaves to the soldiers and or their leaders.

**Child Sex Trafficking:** Individuals and groups, particularly organized crime, buy children, trick runaways, or coerce children into performing sexual acts to make a profit. (98 % are female.)

- Estimated global annual profits from human trafficking: \$31.6 billion (U.S.), nearly half of which is generated in industrialized economies.
- Human trafficking recruiters are 53% men, 42% women, and 6% men and women working together.
- 12.3 million adults and children were trafficked in 2009, at a rate of 1.8 people per 1,000 worldwide.

*The 2010 Trafficking  
in Persons Report*

## *Case Study 1: From India to the U.S.*

Ravi was among hundreds of workers lured to the United States from India by an oilrig construction company operating in the Gulf Coast. Lacking skilled welders and pipefitters to help rebuild after Hurricane Katrina struck the area in 2005, the company brought Ravi and others from India on H-2B visas, promising them permanent visas and residency. But, the promises were false. Instead, Ravi was forced to live with 23 other men in a small room with no privacy and two toilets. The camp was lined with barbed wire and security guards, so no one on the outside knew Ravi's whereabouts. The company charged so much for food and a bunk bed that Ravi was unable to send any money home or repay the money he borrowed for his travel expenses to the United States. When the workers began organizing to protest their working conditions, the company began arbitrary firings and private deportations of the protest leaders. Those who remained filed a class action lawsuit and applied for TVPA immigration services.

## **Additional Resources**

- UN. Gift: Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking Fact Sheet. [un.gift.hub](http://un.gift.hub)
- Feldman, Sara. "The United States' Response to Human Trafficking: Achievements and Challenges," USCCB Migration and Refugee Services, April 2011.
- "Trafficking in Persons Report," U.S. State Department, 2010 & 2011



## ***Case Study 2: From the Philippines to the U.S.***

Maria came to the United States with some 50 other Filipino nationals who were promised housing, transportation, and lucrative jobs at country clubs and hotels under the H2B guest worker program. Like the others, Maria dutifully paid the substantial recruitment fees to come to the United States. But when she arrived, she found that there was no employment secured for her. She did not work for weeks, but the recruiters seized her passport and prohibited her from leaving their house. She and other workers slept side-by-side on the floors of the kitchen, garage, and dining room.

They were fed primarily chicken feet and innards. When the workers complained, the recruiters threatened to call the police or immigration services to arrest and deport them. A federal grand jury indicted the two defendants for conspiracy to hold the workers in a condition of forced labor.



Case Studies from the Trafficking in Persons Report, U.S. State Department, 2011

### **Questions for Discussion**

- What are some of the differences between chattel slavery and contemporary human trafficking?
- Catholic Social Teaching frames human trafficking as fundamentally an economic issue. Why is this so? How is it related to consumerism?
- What structures of sin allow trafficking to flourish?
- Trafficking preys upon human weakness and vulnerability and exploits it for profit. What does its rapid expansion say about contemporary society and the community's ability to protect the dignity of the human person?
- How can the most vulnerable communities be informed of the risk of human trafficking?
- Victims of human trafficking who are lucky enough to escape the captors have often endured physical and mental abuse in a culture unknown to them. What role can the Church play to help heal these victims' wounds?
- Human trafficking is increasingly discovered in the U.S. How can you find out about cases being investigated in your state or town? Who is helping the victims? How can you share this information?

### **What You Can Do**

- Educate others on trafficking in the U.S. and worldwide
- If you think you have come in contact with a victim of human trafficking, call the **National Human Trafficking Resource Center at 1.888.3737.888**. This hotline will help you determine if you have encountered victims of human trafficking, will identify local resources available in your community to help victims, and will help you coordinate with local social service organizations to help protect and serve victims to begin the process of restoring their lives. For more information on human trafficking visit [www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking).

*Llama la línea gratuita y confidencial: 1-888-3737-888*

- Denunciar casos de trata;
- Conectarse con servicios en su localidad;
- Pedir información o recursos en español sobre la trata de personas y la esclavitud moderna.

