

With 27 million people held captive in the world today, slavery is very much alive in our time.

AGAINST

When Boaz Johnson talks about growing up in the slums of New Delhi, he describes how children he played marbles with sometimes vanished. “I remember this little guy by the name of Keshav who disappeared. We were told that he’d gone to a nice place. But as it turned out, at age fourteen, I met him, and his hands were all shriveled up.” Johnson realized that Keshav had been forced into labor in the carpet industry. His workday began at 4 a.m. and continued until late at night. “When his fingers were no longer good for the fine work that needed to be done,” Johnson continues, “he was discarded.”

Like Keshav, nearly 300,000 children are “employed” in the handmade carpet industry in South Asia. In reality, they are modern-day slaves, forced into labor with little chance of escape. Such children represent only one segment of the business of human trafficking, a business that generates somewhere between \$9.5 and \$32 billion a year.

Approximately 27 million people live in slavery today. That is almost three times the number of slaves brought from Africa to the Americas during the four centuries of the transatlantic slave

trade. There are between 600,000 and 800,000 people “trafficked” across national borders each year, most of them women and children. Those numbers do not include the millions who are trafficked within their own countries. Kevin Bales, co-founder and president of Free the Slaves, a nongovernment organization dedicated to liberating slaves around the world, defines modern slavery by three conditions: 1) individuals cannot walk away, 2) they are controlled by violence, and 3) they receive no payment beyond mere subsistence.

How does this happen?

How do people become enslaved today, in the twenty-first century, when slavery is technically illegal everywhere?

Sometimes victims are kidnapped outright and sold to traffickers. Women may respond to a false employment advertisement and be coerced into the sex trade. Families living in extreme poverty may borrow money to pay a debt—sometimes an unexpected medical bill for as little as \$30—and find themselves forced into “bonded labor,” where the debt is used to keep them in subjugation, unable to escape.

Bales explains that slaves today often become entrapped by one question:

“Would you like a job?” Eager for an escape from their impoverished situations, unsuspecting victims sign up for work sometimes in a faraway (wealthier) country and sometimes near their own hometown. But what appears to be an escape is in reality much worse. For example, destitution in Ukraine is widespread in the aftermath of communism. Seeking better conditions, many Ukrainians leave home in hopes of finding employment. Instead, they end up sold into prostitution or forced into bonded labor.

The world’s poorest countries tend to be the highest sources of slave labor. Boaz Johnson, who now teaches Old Testament at North Park University in Chicago, talks about how people end up in circumstances that allow them to be trapped in slavery. “People will do anything to get out of their poverty,” he says.

Often they don’t know what they’re getting into. Johnson describes a network of Russian gangs that imports women from former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries into the United States. The women believe

The names of trafficking victims in this story have been changed to protect their identities. Cathy Norman Peterson is features editor for the *Companion*.

A person is shown from the waist down, wearing a heavy, coarse burlap sack. Their hands are restrained by metal handcuffs, which are attached to thick, silver-colored metal chains. The chains hang down, and the person's hands are visible, gripping the chains. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

THEIR WILL

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the promises of jobs and a better life, and come to the States because there are no other options for them at home. International gangs, often in league with corrupt local officials, traffic humans across every international border, provoking the United Nations in 2006 to call for a globally coordinated effort to curb the growth of modern slavery.

The Not for Sale campaign is a nonprofit effort to fight the global slave trade. In his book by the same name, founder David Batstone writes, “Widespread poverty and social inequality ensure a pool of recruits as deep as the ocean. Parents in desperate straits may sell their children or at least be susceptible to scams that will allow the slave trader to take control over the lives of their sons and daughters. Young women in vulnerable communities are more likely to take a risk on a job offer in a faraway location. The poor are apt to accept a loan that the slave trader can later manipulate to steal their freedom. All of these paths carry unsuspecting recruits into the supply chains of slavery.”

Johnson describes growing up in such extreme poverty himself. “Of course everyone was poor there. It was awful and smelly. I can still smell that,” he says with remaining distaste. The slums were genuinely dangerous for children. In addition to Keshav, others were taken away. One friend was taken to the United Arab Emirates, where child jockeys are used in the popular sport of camel racing. The sport is dan-

gerous, and in spite of public outcry against using very small children as jockeys, the practice continues. “They would take little kids at age nine. By the time they’re thirteen or fourteen, they’re useless and they’re discarded,” Johnson says.

Especially at risk

One girl Johnson knew when they were children was taken away when she entered adolescence. “Her parents

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were poor—I think they may have been given \$150 or something like that. She was sold into prostitution to the red-light district in New Delhi.”

Reflecting on the common disappearance of girls from his neighborhood, he says, “Actually the moment you saw a pretty girl, you knew that her life was going to be hard. As an eleven or twelve year old, you almost would say, ‘I wish you weren’t so pretty.’” He continues, “For a little kid to think in

those categories is unimaginable.”

In an effort to protect his children from such fates, Johnson’s father devised an alternative. Although he was Christian, he enrolled Johnson and his younger sister in a Hindu school across town. Each morning he put Boaz on the front of his bicycle and his daughter on the back fender and rode them to the school. Johnson estimates that it was only about four miles from his home, but at the time it felt like a world away.

They arrived early each morning and remained there every day until dark.

His father told Johnson not to reveal his background to his classmates or to his teachers. He warned, “No one should know where you come from.” The school was made up of high caste people, and Johnson came from the home of outcastes.

In fact, Johnson was unable to admit that truth for much of his life. “When I said that the first time, I said that very hesitantly.” He pauses and repeats the sentence, as if still practicing saying the words out loud. “Yeah. ‘My mom comes from an outcaste family.’”

Johnson talks about returning to the slums in New Delhi after he graduated from seminary. He was teaching children language and mathematics, and he would say to his young students, “You can do it. You can get out of here.” Their response was to look at him with a blank stare and ask, “What are you talking about?”

“I was not able to say to them at that point, ‘I did it,’” he says. “I wish I had said that. I wasn’t able to say that I did it.”

Trafficking in the U.S.

Trafficking does not just occur in New Delhi or the United Arab Emirates or Eastern Europe. As one of the world's wealthiest countries, the U.S. is a country of demand. The U.S. State Department estimates that between 14,500 and 17,500 victims are trafficked into the United States every year.

Americans tend to avoid using the word "slavery" to talk about current conditions of enslavement, says Kevin Bales, preferring to reserve that word to talk about historical ideas of slavery—what was once legalized slave trade. Instead, they lean toward expressions such as "human trafficking." In truth, Bales says, trafficking only refers to what happens at the end of the trip.

After completing a PhD and teaching internationally for several years, Johnson moved to the suburbs of Chicago with his wife to teach at a community college and start an international church. In his preaching Johnson would mention his experiences with people who had suffered in captivity. Throughout the world, he had encountered parents who would say, "I don't know where my daughter is. Can you find out?" When he was teaching in Odessa in Ukraine, he met a couple of young women who came back home. "They were very, very depressed and narrated stories of being in Germany and raped several times. They were beaten up. They were very severely broken." Somehow those women were able to escape.

After hearing Johnson's stories, his congregation, which was composed of immigrants from various countries, began to recognize the signs of slavery in their own community. People would start to tell him, "I met this young lady in the grocery. She was hiding...from me. And I tried to reach out to her." So Johnson, together with members of his congregation, began to help.

One woman from the church noticed a young woman who was caring for some children in her neighbor-

hood. The nanny seemed especially depressed, but the woman from Johnson's church couldn't figure out how to approach her. Even when she tried, the nanny was too frightened to speak to her. Eventually another member of the church, who could communicate in an Indian language, spoke to the girl and heard her story.

When Reshmi was fourteen and living in Bombay, a wealthy family that had emigrated to the U.S. invited her to come to the States to be their nanny. They made her promises: "Come with us and we will provide for your education. All you need to do is be in the house and help us with the kids, but you'll be given education, food, whatever you need."

So Reshmi left her home in Bombay and came to Illinois. But the wonderful promises never materialized. Still a young girl herself, Reshmi was forced to get up early in the morning and work until late at night caring for the children. She was not permitted to go outside the house. She was physically and emotionally abused. She received no education. She had been in the house nine years when the woman from Johnson's church noticed her.

Reshmi's story illustrates the fact that while many believe slaves to be "invisible" in their communities, slaves often work in the public eye—in restaurants, in neighborhoods, at local construction sites. But they remain unnoticed because no one expects to find them in such familiar places. Batstone writes, "To learn that slaveholders press children into forced labor in the cacao plantations of the Ivory Coast may not surprise us. But we regard it as unthinkable that an otherwise upstanding citizen might be a slaveholder."

The women from Johnson's church were able to help Reshmi escape her situation, but it took a long time. Her employers had confiscated her passport—a common tactic used to keep international victims enslaved. Eventually Reshmi received legal assistance

BREAK THE CHAINS

The Department of Women Ministries has initiated a denomination-wide partnership that aims to both educate the church about human trafficking, and to put an end to it. The project name Break the Chains comes from Isaiah 58:6: "This is the kind of fast day I'm after: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts" (*Message*).

Women Ministries is working with two organizations to address human trafficking. The first is the Hindustani Covenant Church in India, which is actively engaged in ministries of compassion to women in the slums and red-light district of Pune, India. The second partner is International Justice Mission, a human rights agency that secures justice for victims of slavery, sexual exploitation, and other forms of violent oppression. Students at North Park University have started their own chapter of IJM, which focuses on prayer, advocacy, and fund raising.

The Break the Chains project is not just about raising awareness. As is evident on the website and in conversation with executive director Ruth Hill, the goal is to effect true change. Hill hopes people who hear about trafficking through this project will ask, "Lord, how do you want me to respond?"

For more information on Break the Chains and what individuals and churches can do to stop human trafficking, go to www.covchurch.org/humantrafficking.

For further reading:

Kevin Bales, *Ending Slavery: How We Free Today's Slaves* (University of California Press, 2007)

David Batstone, *Not for Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade—and How We Can Fight It* (HarperOne, 2007)

Gary Haugen, *Good News About Injustice: A Witness of Courage in a Hurting World* (InterVarsity Press, 1999)

and her papers, but the process was long and arduous.

“She has a lot of scars,” Johnson says. But she has also begun the road to healing. She married a man from the church. She became a Christian because, Johnson says, “she was so thankful to this group of people from our church and she wanted to know what made them stand beside her.”

What can we do?

Such stories can be overwhelming, the statistics mind-numbing. Dozens and dozens of nongovernment organizations (NGOs) exist to stop the abduction and sale of human beings. There are as many approaches to the problem as there are NGOs—some try to get children off the streets, others offer skills training for destitute families, some work to halt the corruption and graft in law enforcement that encourages government officials to look the other way, others try to bring traffickers to justice. There are campaigns to stop prostitution and others to criminalize those who solicit sex.

“In a matter of seconds, we can go from knowing next to nothing about children in India to knowing that fifteen *million* of them are enslaved in short, brutal, dead-end lives of bonded servitude,” writes Gary Haugen in *Good News about Injustice*. Haugen, who is president of International Justice Mission, says, “In our hearts we feel like deer frozen by headlights. The very information that should move us is so overwhelming that it actually paralyzes. It is like a big meal that is supposed to provide fuel for our body but actually makes us feel like lying down and taking a nap.” Yet Haugen encourages fellow believers to do exactly the opposite, citing Jesus’s admonition to his disciples: “But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, TNIV).

Ruth Hill heeds that command. The Department of Women Ministries of the Evangelical Covenant Church has initiated a project to address human

trafficking (see sidebar on previous page). The project has two goals: to inform the church about the crisis and to provoke a response. Hill, executive director of Women Ministries, hopes people will ask themselves, “Now that I know about this—what am I going to do with this knowledge?”

Johnson, too, encourages fellow followers of Jesus to actively have hope. “The church needs to be involved,” he says. He tells the congregation at DeerGrove Covenant Church in Palatine, Illinois, where he now attends, “Your neighbor’s house may be a holding place for slaves that are brought in from other countries. You have to keep your eyes open and be willing to get involved.”

Getting involved means taking action wisely. Haugen urges the importance of gathering enough information about the victim, the situation, and the perpetrator to identify the best means of intervention. The Administration for Children and Families (www.acf.hhs.gov) has established a trafficking information and referral hotline (888-373-7888) for anyone who suspects they have encountered victims of human trafficking. Social service workers at the hotline will connect callers with local resources and agencies.

Once victims are rescued, Christians can do a great deal to help with healing. “Take them to the grocery store. Teach them English,” Johnson suggests. Eventually, he says, recipients of that care may ask, “Why are you doing this?”

“What an enormous difference we could make—what a witness we could be,” writes Haugen, “if even a fraction of the Christian community in the Western world took up in earnest the ministry of seeking biblical justice in the world. If even one in ten Christians, for example, asked God where he might use them—to go, to send, to pray—there would be a witness of justice in the world that history has only yet yearned to see.” □