

Slavery in the modern era

Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy, by Kevin Bales

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There are “more slaves alive today than all the people stolen from Africa in the time of the transatlantic slave trade,” writes Kevin Bales. He estimates there are more than 27 million people “enslaved by violence and held against their wills for purposes of exploitation” and the number is increasing. A feature of the new slavery is that slaves become disposable once the slaveholder has used them.

Although officially illegal in every country, a new form of slavery is arising because of globalisation, Bales explains. Transnational companies switch their production to subsidiaries and subcontractors in the developing world and “take advantage of slave labour to improve their bottom line and increase dividends to their shareholders”.

Areas where centuries of slave or slave-like traditions have existed are evolving into new forms. Support structures such as family relationships and state welfare break down. Common lands become concentrated into the hands of an increasingly wealthy elite. Cash crops for export replace subsistence farming. As a result the poor become homeless, refugees and powerless—candidates ripe for slavery.

A “Wild West syndrome” exists in which corruption and state forces protect slaveholders. Bales points out that today’s slaveholders get “all the benefits of ownership without the legalities. Indeed, for the slaveholders, not having legal ownership is an improvement because they get total control without any responsibility for what they own.”

In the last century in the American South a slave owner might pay the equivalent of up to \$100,000 for a slave. This was an incentive to keep a slave alive. Today a slaveholder can enslave a worker for as little as a \$20 debt. It is not profitable to keep them if they are not immediately useful or become ill.

Mauretania

Bales visited and researched a number of countries to find out firsthand what it means to be a slave.

The popular conception of slavery is that of a person captured, born or sold into permanent slavery. There are a few countries that still practise what is known as chattel slavery. Mauretania is one such country. A country of 2.2 million people, it lies at the western end of the Sahara desert in Africa. Iron ore—the price of which is falling—and fish—depleted by transnational fishing fleets—are the basis of the economy. The foreign debt is £2.5 billion, five times export earnings. Per capita income is \$480 and life expectancy is 41 years.

The authorities in Mauretania have abolished slavery many times, most recently in 1980. The government admits hundreds of thousands of “ex-slaves” do unpaid work for clothing and food, but deny this is slavery. Slaveholders argue that their slaves are not really slaves, but “collateral” held against the compensation owed by the government under the 1980 law. Where ex-slaves have been able to farm a piece of land, many of the slaveholders are “reacquiring” it because they think a future government

will enforce the 1980 law. No slaveholder has ever been punished.

Mauretania has seen a rapid rise of urban living and a spread of slavery into the urban economy. Nouakchott, a village of 300 people in 1960 and now the capital, has a population approaching 600,000. Most of the porters, shop workers, blacksmiths and water sellers in the city are slaves. Centuries of slavery have made it an acceptable part of the culture, with Islamic jurists upholding its lawfulness in the Koran. For most slaves, Bales argues, there is actually a sense of security because there is nothing else to do and nowhere else to go in such an impoverished country.

Whilst independent slave organisations still have to work underground, the Mauretanian government has set up its own human rights organisations like the “National Committee for the Struggle against the Vestiges of Slavery in Mauretania”. Its name implies that there are only small pockets of slavery left and the United Nations and Western countries accept these claims. Bales says this is because they see Mauretania as a buffer against Islamic fundamentalism. France defends the Mauretanian police state as the “the most democratic government in North Africa”.

One former government official tells what happened when a group of Western experts planned a visit. “Their visit had been postponed several times, as we weren’t ready. Why did we need to be ready? Because we young people had been requisitioned some weeks before to help the army or the police move the slaves to other regions and destroy any traces that might disturb or upset our visitors.”

Brazil

During the 1960s and 1970s in Brazil, huge slums or *favelas* grew in the mushrooming cities. At the same time the government virtually gave away vast areas of forest in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul to transnationals such as Nestle and Volkswagen, that they could offset against taxes. The plan was for the companies to cut down the forests, replant with eucalyptus trees and send the wood to a government paper mill (which it never constructed).

Now the companies use subcontractors or *empreiteiros* to clear the forests and make charcoal for steel mills. Overseers (*gatos* or cats) are employed to extract profit from the charcoal ovens by preying on the poor of the *favelas*. Renaldo describes how a *gato* works: “One day a gato came and began to recruit people ... the gato said we would be given good food every day, and we would have good wages besides. He promised that every month his truck would bring people back to Minas Gerais so that they could visit their families and bring them their pay. He even gave money to some men to give to their families before they left and to buy food to bring with them on the trip. Along the way, when we would stop for fuel the gato would say ‘Go into the cafe and eat as much as you like, I’ll pay for it’. When we reached the camp we could see that it was terrible: the conditions were not good enough for animals. Standing around the camp were men with guns. And then the gato said, ‘You each owe me a lot

of money: there is the cost of the trip, and all that food you ate, and the money I gave you for your families—so don't even think about leaving'."

The workers are isolated, penniless, imprisoned and forced to hand over their identity and labour cards. Most are burnt, scarred and exhausted after a few months, with the prospect of developing black lung disease. Until 1996 when the government outlawed it, the *gatos* also used child labour at the charcoal sites. Bales says this was due to American business refusing to invest after lurid media reports greeted the arrival of the governor of Mato Grosso in New York. The result was the dumping of many women and children in the nearest towns. The government set up a demonstration site to placate international opinion, but "the landowner was laughing all the way to the bank; he had his workers making charcoal at the usual high profit; the government was paying him rent and building roads, houses and barns on his land; and the foreign charities were providing food and medical care for his workers. All he had to do was meet with groups of foreign visitors occasionally and talk about how this new system was so much better."

Thailand

From a brochure published by a Dutch sex tour company, comes the following: "Many girls come from the poor north-eastern region of the country and from the slums of Bangkok. It has become a custom that one of these nice looking daughters goes into the business in order to earn money for the poor family ... you can get the feeling that taking a girl here is as easy as buying a pack of cigarettes ... little slaves who give real Thai warmth."

Siri is a 15-year-old prostitute with whom Bales met. She explained how "the soreness in her genitals reminds her of the 15 men she had sex with the night before." Siri was sold by her parents for 50,000 baht (\$2,000) to a broker who visited her village. The broker sold her for 100,000 baht to a brothel, who told Siri her debt was 200,000 baht. Siri was beaten and raped into submission and must have sex with 300 men a month just to pay the rent of 30,000 baht.

Many prostitutes return home dying from HIV. Thailand has the highest rate of HIV in the world. In some rural areas it affects 60 percent of villagers.

The so-called economic Asian miracle has made things worse for children like Siri. As agricultural incomes have fallen for peasant farmers a small, steady flow of children southwards has become a flood "modernised and expanded with a vengeance".

Prostitution was made illegal in 1960 but there may be up to 1 million prostitutes in Bangkok, 35,000 of which are enslaved as Siri was. The vice-premier said in 1980, "Within the next two years we need money. Therefore I ask all governors to consider the natural scenery in your provinces, together with some forms of entertainment that some of you might think of as disgusting and shameful, because we have to consider the jobs that will be created."

The brothel keepers abuse the girls to make them submit and the police recapture them if they escape. Many refugees from neighbouring Burma and Laos work as prostitutes in Bangkok. When caught and deported the police usually arrange to sell them back to the brothel owners at the border.

As many as 50,000 Thai women work as prostitutes in Japan. Many work as exotic dancers and bar girls in Europe and the US. One brothel owner in New York City testified she had paid \$6,000-\$15,000 for the 30 Thai women imprisoned in her brothel.

Pakistan

In Pakistan, 7,000 kilns turn out hand made bricks every year. Each kiln is the size of a football pitch and burns continuously for four months to produce 2 million bricks. The industry uses 750,000 people, many of them children, and practises a system known as *peshgi* that has existed for centuries. The kiln owner gives the family a small advance payment to allow them to settle in and buy tools and food. The family gives up its

freedom and labour for a season, receiving payment for each brick produced. In a good week they make about 800 rupees (\$15) which keeps them alive on rice and vegetables. Any unusual event—illness, marriage, drought—will result in the family borrowing money from the kiln owner. Most fall into debt bondage, which passes from generation to generation.

As one former kiln owner, Zafar Iqbal, explained "The idea was that the worker should never have a single spare rupee in his hand so he can run away. The brick workers are completely dependent on the owner's will. The owner and his thugs will repeatedly assault wives and daughters and no marriage can take place without his consent. If a young worker lifts his head or causes trouble, they will put his leg in the kiln oven for a second to burn it. This is common. They make the other workers come to the kiln and they make them watch."

Half a percent of the population holds one-third of the farmland. Massive rural unemployment has resulted in 15 million landless peasants. Children are kidnapped to ensure payment of debts or forced to work themselves. The school system has all but broken down in the countryside. In 1989, a Brickmakers Revolution took place, with a mass walkout just as the brickmaking season was starting. The kiln owners doubled the piece rate and in 1992 the government abolished bonded labour and the *peshgi* system. However as *peshgi* is the only source of credit for the poor, millions of bonded labourers are now back to pre-1989 conditions.

India

Up to 20 million people are in debt bondage in India. It is worse than in Pakistan because there is no piece rate and interest is payable on debts.

An agricultural system known as *koliya* exists. A worker gives up his or her freedom of movement and gets a kilogram of rice or wheat a day and a plot of land to grow other food in exchange. Shivraj, a bonded labourer, explains how "I've always been here, so were my father and grandfather. We've always been here and we've always worked for the same master. When my father died I had to take over his debt; that was almost thirty years ago. When he died he owed the master 1,200 rupees (\$33), a lot of money!" Shivraj almost managed to pay the debt off three years ago—it was down to 200 rupees (\$6)—but could not make it to the next harvest without borrowing again to buy seed and fertiliser.

The government has set up rehabilitation schemes, but landlords and officials carry out every kind of fraud and cheating imaginable. Shivraj's brother Munki applied for a government grant to set up on his own. Local officials paid 35,000 rupees (\$1,000) into his master's account. Munki still works for his master, but now owes 35,000 rupees to the government.

Leela has managed to get out of debt bondage through government training schemes and the gift of two oxen for helping as a midwife. However she and her husband sharecrop, giving half their produce to their landlord. The government classifies Leela as "semi-attached": someone like Shivraj is "attached" because he works directly for a master.

Children make up a large part of bonded labour. As many as 45,000 work 12 hours a day in firework factories in Sivakasi in Tamil Nadu state, in exchange for a cash advance to their parents. Girls become *devadasi* or "married to a god", in temples where priests use them as prostitutes. Bales found that the practice of men selling their wives into prostitution to pay off their marriage debt is growing.

Western countries

Bales introduces his book with the story of Seba, a 22-year-old woman from Mali, that a French family brought to Paris as a child. She worked from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. without a day off and was regularly tortured. There may be as many as 3,000 household slaves in Paris and the situation is similar in other Western capitals. Much of modern slavery is hidden behind a mask of fraudulent labour contracts and made worse by immigration laws that reinforce the master-slave relationship. When Laxmi Swami ran away from her Kuwaiti royal family masters in London after years of physical abuse, she was in violation of immigration rules that compelled her to leave the country when her masters did. The Indian

High Commission returned her to her royal masters because she could not afford her fare home.

In the last chapter, Bales ask the question: What can be done? Throughout the book he shows how globalisation has created new forms of slavery that trap the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society. International conventions and national laws are useless, he says, against “the combined strength of a sexist culture, rationalising religion, amoral exploitative economy and corrupt governments”. The United Nations and Western governments turn a blind eye when it is in their interests to do so. Media interest is invariably short-lived.

Bales answer is for activists in non-governmental organisations to build an anti-slavery movement, with the aim of putting pressure on profits. Donors, he says, should link aid to government programmes that give land to slaves along the lines of the “mule and forty acres” promised (but, as he points out, never given) to former US slaves. Western governments must put tighter controls on businesses that profit, even indirectly, from slave labour. Activists must educate consumers and ask them to make a small sacrifice. Investors must make their investments more ethically.

This prognosis is inherently contradictory and futile. The continued existence, and expansion, of slavery today is proof that the solution does not lie in pressuring governments and institutions into mending their ways. The root causes of these horrors are to be found in the objective workings of the capitalist system. Today's globally operating corporations are universalising the most brutal levels of exploitation, while demanding governments eliminate the social gains to cut costs and raise profits.

The new forms of slavery that Bales exposes is only one manifestation—albeit the most diseased—of this process. It will only be abolished as a product of the growth of a broad, anti-capitalist social and political movement of the working class.



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