MODERN-DAY Slavery

Tens of millions of people around the world, including children, are forced to work as slaves. What can be done to help them?

BY REBECCA ZISSOU

In Ghana, young boys enslaved in the fishing industry work on Lake Volta.
In many ways, Mabel is a typical teen. She goes to school, hangs out with her friends, and daydreams about her future. But for years, Mabel’s life was anything but ordinary.

When Mabel was a young girl, her mother died. She was sent to live with her grandparents in a poor village in the West African nation of Ghana. They couldn’t afford to take care of her. As a result, they sent her to work in the fishing industry on Lake Volta, one of the world’s largest man-made lakes.

There, Mabel was held captive as a slave. She was forced to work up to 17 hours straight with little food and no pay. Every day, she woke early to gather firewood and cook. Then she spent her days folding fishing nets on the lake. Strong winds constantly threatened to overturn the wooden boats and drown everyone onboard. At night, she had to make dinner for the other workers.

“I hardly slept at all,” Mabel told reporters years later. “Every evening, I hoped that there would be a storm so I wouldn’t have to go out on the lake.”

Since then, Mabel’s life has improved dramatically. When she was 15, aid workers raided the lake and brought her to safety. She was able to attend school for the first time and now dreams of becoming a nurse.

It may sound hard to believe, but Mabel’s story is like those of millions of people worldwide. According to the Global Slavery Index, more than 40 million people are trapped in modern-day slavery. It doesn’t always look like the slavery we read about in history books. It includes about 25 million people who are essentially forced to work without pay in a variety of circumstances. The other 15 million people are mostly girls and women trapped in forced marriages. They are basically treated like slaves by their husbands and their husbands’ families.

Like Mabel, many of today’s slaves are from poor communities in Africa or Asia. Poverty, corruption, crime, and discrimination make people in these parts of the world vulnerable to human traffickers.

“People tend to think of slavery as a historical problem,” says Katharine Bryant of the Walk Free Foundation, an antislavery organization. “But millions of people are still being exploited.”

Now, new initiatives are calling attention to the crisis. The efforts involve pressuring lawmakers around the world to enforce antislavery laws, encouraging companies to ensure that their supply chains aren’t using forced laborers, and raising awareness about the issue.

“Modern slavery is a hidden crime,” says Bryant. “So it’s very important that we talk about it.”

As Old as Civilization

Slavery is as old as civilization itself. It existed in the earliest societies in Mesopotamia in 6800 B.C. During that time, slaves helped build the world’s first cities. In the Roman Empire, prisoners of war and people who couldn’t pay their debts were sold into slavery. Some of them were forced to fight to the death as gladiators in the Colosseum, starting in 80 A.D.

Beginning in 1525, more than 12 million Africans and their descendants were forced into slavery in the Americas. Many had been kidnapped. They were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean and sold at public auctions to the highest bidder. Generations of slaves worked...

‘I hardly slept at all.’
—MABEL, FORMER SLAVE FROM GHANA

In Uzbekistan, children are forced to pick cotton (above left), and in India, many young people toil under horrible conditions making cheap bricks.

Watch a video on a slave in the fishing industry at UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM
on cotton plantations in the South. Many plantation slaves suffered regular beatings.

In December 1865, ratification of the 13th Amendment abolished slavery in the United States. At the time, about 4 million people were enslaved. They made up 13 percent of the country’s population.

Today, slavery is illegal in almost every country. Yet it continues to exist all over the world. Modern-day slaves aren’t captured, stacked like cattle on slave ships, and sold in chains at public auctions. They are men, women, and children lured by the promise of a job and a better life. And they are people forced to work with little or no pay, or coerced to sell their bodies.

**Slavery in the U.S.**

According to some estimates, there are currently 58,000 people enslaved in the U.S. Many of them are domestic workers, including housekeepers.

Human traffickers operate in the shadows. That makes it difficult to know the exact number of slaves in each country. But nearly 60 percent of the world’s slaves are thought to be in India, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Uzbekistan. That means that the majority of slaves worldwide are in just five countries (see map, below).

In those nations, hundreds of millions of people live in poor communities without economic opportunities or access to proper schooling. That makes them easy prey for human traffickers, who promise them work and opportunities.

Sometimes, parents are tricked into selling their own kids. Traffickers often promise that the children will get an education and earn money to send back home. But once the kids have left their villages, they’re put to work in factories, mines, homes, fields, restaurants, hotels, and sometimes brothels. They aren’t allowed to go to school, see their families, or play outside.

Like child laborers, child slaves work in hazardous conditions for hours on end. But unlike other child laborers, says Bryant, slaves are “owned” by their captors and can’t return home.

In Southeast Asia, for example, kids as young as 7 are forced to weave rugs in dark rooms with no fresh air. In West Africa, they get up at 6 in the morning to harvest cocoa beans all day long in the scorching heat. In Latin

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**Slavery & You**

Many of the items you use every day are produced by slaves

- **Electronics** Many of the materials in phones and other high-tech electronics—such as coltan, tungsten, and tin—are mined by slaves in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

- **Clothes** Almost 50 percent of the clothes sold in the U.S. are made in China and Bangladesh, two of the top importers of cotton from Uzbekistan. Every year, the Uzbek government forces kids as young as 10 to harvest the cotton.

- **Makeup** Palm oil, much of which is produced by slave labor in Malaysia, is used in 70 percent of our cosmetics.

- **Chocolate** Most of the world’s cocoa comes from West Africa, where more than 2 million children in countries like Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria harvest the crop that supplies the world’s major chocolate makers.

- **Seafood** The U.S. imports most of its shrimp and many kinds of fish from Southeast Asia, where slavery is widespread in the fishing industry—especially in Thailand and Indonesia.

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**In Thailand**, the fishing industry is full of enslaved workers who are trapped aboard boats for long periods.
America, they work on farms where they’re exposed to toxic chemicals, picking crops until their fingers bleed. “We were confined in one room and made to work for a period of 12 hours,” says Ravi, a former child slave at a carpet factory in India. “I would think of running away. But the thought of running away would always be followed with the fear of getting caught.”

For girls, one of the most dangerous forms of modern-day slavery is sexual slavery. The Global Slavery Index estimates that almost 5 million women and girls worldwide are held as sexual slaves. Many of them are enslaved in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand.

Some of these girls are kidnapped from their villages. Others are sold into prostitution by their own families who are desperate for money. They’re often taken to cities where they’re held captive in brothels.

Wiping Out Child Slavery
Antislavery advocates say that ending forced labor will require a global effort. That’s because modern-day slavery is driven in part by a worldwide demand for cheap labor. This type of labor allows companies to produce inexpensive goods. That includes clothes, sneakers, and electronics. Those products are then sold throughout the world, including in the U.S. (see “Slavery & You,” below).

But experts say that some progress has been made. In recent years, governments, humanitarian groups, and other organizations have increased funding to help end slavery worldwide. Many countries have also strengthened antislavery laws and increased penalties for human traffickers.

In addition, several companies have pledged to end the use of slave labor in the making of their products. Mars, Ferrero, and other chocolate manufacturers recently promised to eliminate slavery on farms that supply their cocoa by 2020. And in recent years, more than 250 retailers have agreed not to buy cotton harvested by child slaves in Uzbekistan. Gap, H&M, and American Eagle are among these retailers.

Kailash Satyarthi, a children’s rights activist, founded an organization that’s working to end abuses against children. He says it’s important that young people educate themselves about the problems facing kids around the world and spread the word.

“I would think of running away. But that would always be followed with the fear of getting caught.”

Bryant, too, says education is key. “As consumers, we have a responsibility to think about the products we’re buying and how they were made.”

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