

The Atlantic

Slavery's Global Comeback

150 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, buying and selling people into forced labor is bigger than ever. What "human trafficking" really means

J.J. GOULD

DEC 19, 2012 | GLOBAL

Share Tweet

TEXT SIZE

- +

Like *The Atlantic* on Facebook or follow us on Twitter to get the Daily, our free weekday email newsletter.

Email

LinkedIn
Email
Print

SIGN UP



Slaves pan for gold in Accra, Ghana. Some have children with them as they wade into water poisoned by mercury used in the extraction process. (Lisa Kristine)

RANGOON, Burma — Earlier this year, Ko Lin, 21 at the time, left his hometown of Bago, 50 miles northeast of Rangoon, with a friend to look for work in Myawaddy, near the Thai border. The two found jobs there as day laborers loading and offloading goods, anything from rice to motorcycles, being illicitly transported by truck in and out of Thailand. After a month, Ko Lin had saved up the equivalent of about US\$150 and decided to rejoin his family in Bago. Stopping first to pray at a local pagoda with, he and his friend met a super-amiable young woman who ended up pitching an opportunity to work in Thailand. Her uncle, she said, could arrange great jobs for them there.

Ko Lin was reluctant but bent to his friend's enthusiasm. The uncle turned out to be a trafficker who sold the two into forced labor in Chonburi, a city 60 miles east of Bangkok. They were taken there by an irregular route that involved walking through the jungle for eight days. Several weeks after arriving in Chonburi, Ko Lin was told he'd now be working at sea. When he resisted, he was knocked unconscious and woke up separated from his friend on a fishing boat in the Gulf of Thailand. From this point on, for months, he rarely if ever had more than two hours of sleep a night, always on a shared, cramped bed; he was given three meals only on days when the captain felt he'd pulled in enough fish to earn it; and when he was fed at all, it was always dregs from a catch that couldn't be sold on the market. His arms regularly became infected from the extended exposure of minor wounds to sea water. If he complained that he was feeling unwell, the crew would beat him. He was injured multiple times by heavy blocks or booms, once having to tend to a head wound with a handful of wet rice. Three months out, Ko Lin was rescued in a police raid.

There are now twice as many people enslaved in the world as there were in the 350 years of the transatlantic slave trade.

Ma Moe, 34, and her husband lived in a suburb about an hour outside Rangoon, poor enough that on some days they had nothing to eat. A friend offered her a job as

a domestic worker in China where, she was told, she could make between \$100 and \$200 a month. Despite her husband's objections, she decided to go. Near the border, her friend told her the trip would soon get rough and she should take some pills so as not to get carsick. The pills knocked her out almost immediately. When she came to, she was in a small village in China; she still doesn't know where. Kept with a few other women in a small house, Ma Moe was then taken around to different villages where she was offered up for sale as a "wife." After a failed escape attempt, when she was beaten by local police, a man from northern China bought her. By now, having spent a month-and-a-half as a Burmese commodity on a Chinese black market, she could hardly eat from the stress and was emaciated. Her owner was concerned—he wanted a child—so he had Ma Moe's blood tested; the results showed that she's HIV-positive; and he ended up abandoning her at the bus station. With no hope of being able to get back to Burma, she prayed to die. But a young newspaper seller, fending off an attempt by another apparent trafficker to get Ma Moe to go with him, called a police hotline for trafficking victims. The police coordinated Ma Moe's transfer to a Burmese anti-trafficking task force, and they ultimately took her home.

There's a plain-language word for the horror stories that Ko Lin and Ma Moe have survived, as anachronistic as it might sound: slavery. Though now universally illegal, slavery still exists, and it's common—here in Burma, across Southeast Asia, and around the world.

The leading demographic accounts of contemporary slavery project a global slave population of between 20 million and 30 million people. The highest ratios of slaves worldwide are from South and Southeast Asia, along with China, Russia, and the former satellite states of the Soviet Union. There is a significant slave presence across North Africa and the Middle East, including [Lebanon](#). There is also a [major slave trade in Africa](#). Descent-based slavery persists in Mauritania, where children of slaves are passed on to their slave-holders' children. And the [North Korean gulag system](#), which holds 200,000 people, is essentially a constellation of slave-labor camps. Most of the world's slaves are in sedentary forms of servitude, such as

hereditary collateral-debt bondage, but about 20 percent have been unwittingly trafficked by predators through deception and coercion. Human trafficking is often highly mobile and dynamic, leveraging modern communications and logistics in the same basic ways contemporary business does generally. After the earthquake of 2010 devastated Haiti, [Hispaniola was quickly overrun](#) with opportunistic traffickers targeting children to sell into forced domestic work or brothels.

As pervasive as contemporary slavery is, it's remained marginal as a global issue until relatively recently. There are a couple of big reasons why—one having to do with the scale of the problem, the other with the idea of slavery itself.

The Scale

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates the number of slaves in the world today at around 21 million. Kevin Bales, of [Free the Slaves](#)—the U.S. affiliate of the world's oldest human-rights organization, the U.K.-based Anti-Slavery International—(and the author of *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*) puts it at 27 million. Siddharth Kara of Harvard's [Carr Center](#) for Human Rights Policy says more than 29 million.

That range represents a tightening consensus. In the 1990s, some accounts had the global slave population as high as 100 million; others had it as low as 2 million. "It was nuts," says Bales. "I traced all these numbers back. The 100-million number, I finally found this guy in India who'd said it at a UN conference. I asked him, 'How did you get that?' And he said, 'I don't know, it was just a guess.' So nobody had the number."

Bales's 27 million—which as a statistician he considers a "conservative estimate"—is derived from secondary-source analysis. "It's still not great," he says, "in the sense that it's not based on random-sample surveys at the grass-roots level. We're doing that now, though, building much sounder numbers, and they're still coming

out in the same range. ... So we're getting closer."

In which case, assuming even the rough accuracy of 27 million, there are likely more slaves in the world today than there have been at any other time in human history. For some quick perspective on that point: Over the entire 350 years of the transatlantic slave trade, 13.5 million people were taken out of Africa. That's equal to just half the the world's slave population today.

The Idea

Some of what's obscured contemporary slavery, then, has been a matter of quantitative analysis; but some has been conceptual: In the West, and particularly in the United States, slavery has long settled in the public imagination as being categorically a thing of the past.

One consequence of this is that when people apply the idea of slavery to current events, they tend to think of it as an analogy. That is, they tend to use the word to dramatize conditions that may be exploitive—e.g., terrible wages or toxic working environments—but that we'd never on their own call "slavery" if the kind of forced labor we used to call "slavery" still existed. "In 1994, when I was in the United Nations Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery," Bales recalls, "a group came in and said they wanted the UN to declare incest a form of slavery. And we were like, incest is incest; you don't have to call it slavery."

But there's an inverse consequence to seeing slavery as a thing of the past, too: It can mean having a harder time recognizing slavery when it's right in front of us.



A slave in Kathmandu, Nepal, stacks 18 bricks at a time, each weighing four pounds, carrying them to nearby trucks for 18 hours a day. (Lisa Kristine)

Right after the end of the Cold War, people in Western cities—in Berlin, Paris, Amsterdam, London, New York—started noticing something pronounced about migration patterns out of the just-collapsed Soviet Bloc: The "immigrants" were disproportionately young women and girls. It took no one long to understand that these were prostitutes—or much longer to understand that they weren't operating freely; criminals were trafficking them out of Eurasia effectively as black-market goods, like opium or Kalashnikovs.

The dominant rhetoric that the coalition of Christian conservatives and anti-prostitution feminists who took the lead on this issue used at the time wasn't "slavery" but "trafficking for sexual exploitation." Around the same time, a movement started against sweatshop labor that developed its focus not broadly on the issue of forced labor but narrowly on the conditions of the sweatshops themselves, sometimes even just on safety issues within them.

Luis CdeBaca, the U.S. ambassador at large to monitor and combat trafficking in persons, sees both of these frameworks as inhibiting and, intentionally or not, ways to feel too comfortable about addressing the issues in question. "If we say the problem with domestic servants is that they're not covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act, and so let's just go out and make sure they get covered by labor laws

around the world, we get to ignore, for example, the fact that domestic servants are being locked in and raped. It's not a wage issue; it's a crime issue. If we look at prostitution and we devolve back to the old debates about whether prostitution should be legal and regulated, should it be illegal and criminalized, we won't say, '... hey, why doesn't the 13th Amendment apply to a woman in prostitution just as much as to a woman on a farm?' Then we end up missing the reality of modern slavery."

Pattern Recognition

CdeBaca thinks we've been using euphemisms about slavery in our recent history scarcely less euphemistic than were "servant" or "peculiar institution" before the U.S. Civil War, noting current preferences for "gender-based violence" or "rape as a weapon of war" to describe what goes on in eastern Congo. "If rape becomes the more comfortable word than slavery," CdeBaca says, "you know slavery is a highly emotive term."

But if the president of the United States has nevertheless embraced the term "slavery," as Barack Obama now has with [his speech](#) at the Clinton Global Institute in September, you know it's also an emotive term whose time has come—or come again. The State Department, meanwhile, answers the question "[What is modern slavery?](#)" by implying, virtually to the point of stating, that it now considers "slavery" the umbrella term for crimes of "trafficking":

Over the past 15 years, "trafficking in persons" and "human trafficking" have been used as umbrella terms for activities involved when someone obtains or holds a person in compelled service.

The United States government considers trafficking in persons to include all of the criminal conduct involved in forced labor and sex trafficking, essentially the conduct involved in reducing or holding someone in

compelled service. Under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act as amended (TVPA) and consistent with the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol), individuals may be trafficking victims regardless of whether they once consented, participated in a crime as a direct result of being trafficked, were transported into the exploitative situation, or were simply born into a state of servitude. **Despite a term that seems to connote movement, at the heart of the phenomenon of trafficking in persons are the many forms of enslavement, not the activities involved in international transportation.**

(Emph. added)

CdeBaca understands the [Trafficking Victims Protection Act](#) and the [Palermo Protocol](#) that State mentions here, both dating from 2000, to be crucial preconditions for the change in social conceptions about human trafficking and forced labor that have followed. Usually the dynamic is the other way around, CdeBaca says: A social movement grows and, if it's successful, after 10 years or so, Congress passes legislation or the UN (or some other international body) passes a resolution. With contemporary slavery, more than a decade of governmental and trans-governmental initiatives have seeded the social conversation, which has in turn articulated an emerging consensus around the language of slavery.

CdeBaca thinks this consensus is hugely consequential, not just domestically in the U.S.—where Obama has now both embraced the term "slavery" and issued an [executive order](#) to remove human trafficking and forced labor from federal contracting—but globally. "The fact that we're able to come into a place like Burma, which has come so far so fast just in the last 10 or 12 months, with this unified message is wonderful," he says, "because the government here isn't going to have to unlearn those differences. When we talked to the government [on Friday], they were talking about forced labor and forced prostitution as though they're the same

concept. We didn't have to talk through 'here's why you need to care about forced labor as much as you care about forced prostitution,' or 'here's why the girls in the brothels matter.' They got it. And I think it's because they come into this at this moment, now."

The New Abolitionism

It's to the not-modest credit of modern civilization that the awareness of slavery has always given rise to anti-slavery movements. Abolitionism today may be more complex than what went before it only because it has to be. Contemporary slavery is, as Ethan Kapstein wrote in *Foreign Affairs* back in 2006, "a product of the same political, technological, and economic forces that have fueled globalization"—or as Andrew Forrest, the chairman of Fortescue Metals Group and founder of the anti-slavery group [Walk Free](#), has it, "Slavery is the dark side of globalization."

In essence, organizations like Walk Free, or the Global Business Coalition Against Trafficking ([gBCAT](#)), want to harness the good, or at least potentially good, aspects of globalization to eliminate its most evil aspect. Forrest believes that it now makes maximum sense for global big businesses to integrate their risk-management strategies with their corporate-social-responsibility strategies and their procurement strategies, cleaning their supply chains of any involvement with forced labor once and for all. Forrest believes in the constructive power of potential shame, too, being focused currently on a campaign to recruit major corporations around the world to sign Walk Free's "zero tolerance for slavery pledge."

Slavery today is driven by the same political, technological, and economic forces as globalization itself.

Projects like this won't necessarily be easy; in fact, their success will necessarily be a tough question. There are certainly precedents for it: Nike may be one of the most slave-free garment manufacturers in the world today, because it got hammered for

its labor practices in the 1990s by a very successful campaign against it as a brand—brand equity being a very important, very bottom-line issue for a company like Nike. But what if we're looking instead at a mining company that needs to procure concrete for railway tracks to get its materials out, and the best-deal concrete is made by slave labor in Abu Dhabi by some nameless supplier? There's no brand equity at stake there. Mineral extraction is a similarly faceless industry. We all know who makes our cell phones; few of us know who makes the tantalum and coltan that go into them. That doesn't have to be note of cynicism, but it does get at the complexity of the challenge in leveraging global business's better angels against its worst instincts.

There will meanwhile be new opportunities for political will against slavery, particularly now that Obama has used the word—new legislative efforts, new instruments of international cooperation—and there will be new opportunities to build important anti-trafficking capacities, with law enforcement, with victim care and rehabilitation, and so on.

And then there will be social-awareness campaigns—which may represent the one strand of the contemporary anti-slavery movement skeptical observers are more inclined to be cynical about than they are about the leadership of global business. If you're tempted to think that way, consider before anything else that here in Rangoon, it's not only perfectly reasonable but a vital public-service announcement to say, "Kids, this is how you recognize it if someone's trying to trick you into slavery, and this is what you do about it" When I asked Ma Moe, who'd been sold into slavery by a friend, what was the most important thing she wanted people to understand about her experience, she lit up emotionally in a way she hadn't up to then, insisting emphatically on how crucial it is that people in Burma—especially young people—get the coaching they need to insulate themselves and their families against the risk of being trafficked, particularly given how sophisticated traffickers are at profiling victims and preying on trust.

Neither is any of this the hard part compared with the complex task of changing or

putting an end outright to kinds of social norms that heighten the risk of capture by traffickers, particularly in contexts governed by the [caste system](#) or other forms of entrenched social hierarchy. Which aren't uncommon across South and Southeast Asia, and which can create barriers to human empathy every bit as powerful as what morally and psychologically enabled the open slave trade of the 16th-19th centuries.

Precedents

On the global level, there are historical reasons why a heightened social awareness of slavery could prove more effective than we might first be inclined to think.



"Stowage of the British Slave Ship 'Brookes' Under the Regulated Slave Trade, Act of 1788" (Thomas Clarkson)

As Bales likes to remember, there have been three major anti-slavery movements in the modern era prior to the nascent contemporary one. [The first was started in 1787](#) by Anti-Slavery International—or as it was called at the time, the Society for Effecting the Termination of the Slave Trade—in London. Twenty years later, the

slave trade in the British Empire was finished. This movement worked entirely through social mobilization; in fact, it was one of the first major social movements in the West. The Society inundated parliament with huge petitions against slavery, 517 altogether. It passed around anti-slavery cameos that fashionable women wore in bracelets and pins. And it disseminated Thomas Clarkson's drawing of the Liverpool-based slave ship *Brookes*, illustrating the horrible reality that slaves were forced to cross the Atlantic packed together like sardines, lying in their own excrement and vomit, for months. This picture was extremely shocking—and effective.

The second anti-slavery movement was marked by some of the most pivotal moral leadership in U.S. history, but it was also thwarted by a virtually total social division between the North and the South, and it **culminated an enormous war** that resulted in upward of **three-quarters of a million deaths** and new troubles for the United States' former slaves that have cast long shadows since.

Hierarchical societies still create empathy barriers as powerful as what enabled the open slave trade of the 16th-19th centuries.

The **third movement** is less well known but offers a precedent for contemporary abolitionism that may be in some ways as compelling as the first. This was a global movement, which included luminaries like **Mark Twain** and **Sarah Bernhardt**, against the enslavement of between 5 and 10 million people in the Congo as the personal property of King Leopold II of Belgium. The purpose of this enslavement was to feed new technologies, particularly pneumatic rubber tires. But the breakthrough for this movement was also thanks to new technologies: portable cameras that enabled abolitionists to do **magic-lantern shows** in big theaters across Europe and America—a kind of documentary film before documentary films—graphically demonstrating the routine physical mutilation of Congolese slaves who failed to meet their "rubber quotas," which truly freaked viewers out and helped mobilize the public broadly. After this anti-slavery campaign was able to show the

photos it had captured, social indignation turned to outrage, and Leopold, who'd completely denied everything until then—he could, because there was no proof of what he was doing—gave up, ended the enslavement, and, in 1908, relinquished the Congo to the Belgian government.

Let's see what the fourth one does. The most optimistic view says that as massive as slavery is today, it's also on the edge of its own extinction, needing only the right push. If the global slave population is 27 million, it's still 27 million out of a total of 7 billion, making it—and here's the paradox—the smallest fraction of the global population to be enslaved ever. If slavery generates between \$30 billion and \$45 billion a year to the global economy, it's a big industry, but it also amounts to the smallest ratio of the global economy ever represented by slave labor and slave output. While slavery has grown in absolute terms, it's shrunk in relative terms, and so, the theory goes, it's increasingly vulnerable.

A possibly less optimistic but still hopeful variation on this theme—well clear of the most pessimistic view, at any rate, which would be that slavery is simply endemic to global capitalism—is that slavery isn't just growing more slowly than the rest of the world is; it's also increasingly toxic to the rest of the world; and it's increasingly toxic in ways that the rest of the world will be forced to defend itself against. The same interests responsible for human trafficking and forced labor are, after all, also responsible for fostering other types of crime, as well as the kinds of corruption that slave-labor operations need for survival. If developed countries let slavery go unchecked, it will threaten to corrode the bilateral and multilateral agreements, and the international rule of law, that the whole global economy depends on. If developing countries don't check it, it may or may not mean slower short-term growth, but it will definitely complicate long-term growth growth, or stunt it altogether, as outside investors bring more scrutiny and demand more transparency. In the meantime, the more visible an issue slavery becomes globally, the less inclined I'd be to forget some of the most consequential uses that mobile technology and social media been put to around the world in the last two years—or to ignore the analogies between these uses and the tactics of the first and third

modern anti-slavery movements.

The relationship between a country's tacit willingness to abide slavery and that country's risk of being left behind by the currents of global civilization isn't one that Burmese officials are necessarily inclined to discuss candidly. When I asked Brigadier General Khin Maung Si, chief of police and head of the human-trafficking office in the ministry of home affairs, about his government's emerging commitment to eliminating forced labor, he spoke only of poor economic conditions as a cause of slavery, not of slavery as a cause of economic stagnation. But it's a relationship that his government's new commitments acknowledge implicitly.

It's also a relationship that the leading exponents of the second modern anti-slavery movement were emphatic about and staked their political reasoning on. As *The Atlantic's* first editor, James Russell Lowell, [wrote](#) in the magazine's endorsement of Abraham Lincoln for president in 1860:

The inevitable tendency of slavery is to concentrate in a few hands the soil, the capital, and the power of the countries where it exists, to reduce the non-slaveholding class to a continually lower and lower level of property, intelligence, and enterprise. ... We do not, of course, mean to say that slaveholding states may not and do not produce fine men; but they fail, by the inherent vice of their constitution and its attendant consequences, to create enlightened, powerful, and advancing communities of men, which is the true object of all political organization.

This reporting was supported by [MTV EXIT](#).

 Share  Tweet  Comments

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



J.J. GOULD is the editor of TheAtlantic.com.

 Twitter

From The Web



Ads by Revcontent

10 Signs That You May Have Ms

HealthCentral

Get New Car Smart With The Top 10 Cars of The Year

Kelley Blue Book

Why Guys Are Choosing This Razor

Harry's

Best Hair Dryer for the Holidays

Dermstore
