

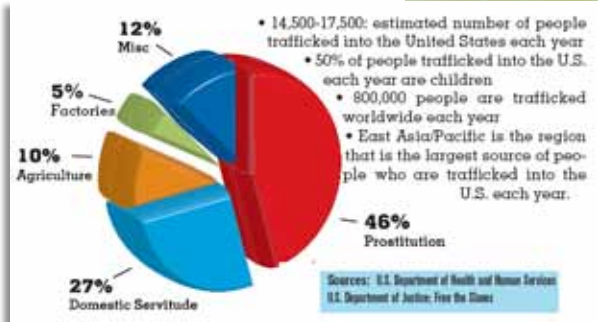
Human slavery— what can I do?

by Karen Lehman

Since the Delegate Assembly of Mennonite Church USA unanimously passed the Statement Against Human Trafficking, Modern Day Slavery at the 2009 Convention in Columbus, Ohio, I have been asking myself the question, “Now what?” Is it enough that we joined other united voices in opposition to human trafficking and declared that our Statement Against Human Trafficking was needed? Should we feel any additional responsibility now to collectively and visibly work to stop this modern day version of slavery? What if nothing further comes out of this initial step that the church has taken? Can we afford to sit by and do nothing?

If we agree that a statement is not enough, that there is more that we can do to stop this terrible crime against humanity, what might that look like in action? I suggest, in what follows, that there is much that we can do, personally and collectively. Starting at a grassroots level, perhaps in a neighborhood or a church group, we can begin taking responsibility and action. By educating ourselves and each other, by raising awareness, we can take measures against this shameful practice of human exploitation.

Since July 2009, when the Statement Against Human Trafficking, Modern Day Slavery was written, the statistics have increased dramatically. Human trafficking is now declared the fastest growing criminal industry in the world, rising from third to second place. The number of foreign nationals trafficked in the US continues to grow as does the number of US citizens who are victims of enslavement. Statistics on the number of children already in slavery and those at high risk to be sold or taken into slavery are shocking. What is even more alarming for me, personally, is to learn that the place where I live, just outside of Washington, DC, is the top destination for human traffickers in the country. It’s happening in my own backyard.



Sex trafficking (prostitution, pornography, and selling brides) continues to be the most profitable sector in illegal human trade. Labor trafficking, while not as lucrative as sex trafficking, is also widespread and includes domestic servitude, small to large-scale

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labor operations (farms, sweatshops), and major multinational corporations.

Before I started to research the subject for this article, I believed that poverty was the major cause of human trafficking. I was wrong. While poverty and inequality are clearly factors in the vulnerability of certain populations of people to being enslaved, the real reason for trafficking is that it is highly profitable and the risk is low. As long as demand exists and the risks are minimal, trafficking of humans will continue to flourish. It is a daunting issue.

Again, I come up against the question, "What can I do?" Shockingly, the answer lies at the very heart of the problem. If human slavery is fueled by a demand for high profits, you and I are supporting trafficking by our need to be cheap, to buy the lowest cost goods we can find, and by not being aware of where our goods are made or grown. In our ignorance, our shopping habits are directly contributing to forced labor. Our Mennonite culture of thriftiness, then, actually promotes the demand for low-priced products, which in turn increases the demand for slave labor to produce those goods and products below cost.

What I can do is to start to look at my shopping practices. Where do I buy my food, my clothes, and all of the other things I need? Do I know where these items come from and if fair labor was used in the growing and distribution of the items? If I am willing to pay a fair price for the items I purchase, in order that the person making or assuring the delivery of my purchases is paid a fair wage, I can make different, more educated purchasing choices. In doing so, I can actually impact the demand for forced or enslaved labor. My shopping focus, then, changes from getting a bargain to a commitment to do my part to reduce human trafficking. As long as we demand cheap goods, large retailers will continue to force production and importation from the lowest cost manufacturers and

producers they can find, typically where forced labor is most likely to be utilized.

A quick Google search on the topic of Human Trafficking can provide information on work that is happening now to raise awareness and help victims. Websites also offer information on organizations working to stop human trafficking, lists and information on goods and products most likely made by slave or child labor, and current efforts to pass human trafficking legislation. Changing our buying habits, supporting efforts already in place, and joining forces with others in pressuring for legislative reform are concrete ways we can help.

While Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) and Ten Thousand Villages do not specifically have programs on Human Slavery, they are both leaders in working with families and those living in poverty around the world by investing in and promoting sustainable living, which ultimately gives poor people options in helping themselves. By supporting organizations such as MEDA and Ten Thousand Villages, we are helping to support fair trade and sustainable business practices.

Heightened awareness and the desire to do what I can, no matter how large or small, is what I believe we are called to do. The enslavement and victimization of humans will likely always be with us in one form or another, but sitting by and feeling helpless does not have to be our reaction. Join me in answering the question “What can I do?” by joining our collective forces in doing something. ☑



Resources

Books

- Bales, Kevin and Ron Soodalter. *The Slave Next Door: Human Trafficking and Slavery in America Today*. Berkley, CA: U of California P, 2009.
- Batstone, David B. *Not for Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade—and How We Can Fight It*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.
- Kristof, Nicholas D. and Sheryl WuDunn. *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. New York: Knopf, 2009.
- McCormick, Patricia. *Sold*. New York: Hyperion Paperbacks, 2006.
- Smith, Linda with Cindy Coloma. *Renting Lacy*. Arlington, VA: Shared Hope International P, 2009.
- Zheng, Tiantian, ed. *Anti-trafficking, Human Rights, and Social Justice*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.

Websites

- Mennonite Church USA. “Let My People Go” Bible study. 2010.
< <http://www.mennoniteusa.org>>. (Click on Delegate Actions)