

Modern slavery in the United Kingdom

2007 marks the 200th anniversary of the UK legislation abolishing the slave trade. Many people are unaware, however, that slavery continues to exist in the modern world and that forms of slavery are common within the UK. A joint research team, from the University of Hull and Anti-Slavery International, has been exploring the contours of modern slavery in the UK. It found:

- Modern slavery exists in the UK in various forms. All exhibit the common elements of the exploitative relationship which have always constituted slavery: severe economic exploitation; the absence of a framework of human rights; and control of one person over another by the prospect or reality of violence. Coercion distinguishes slavery from poor working conditions.
- It is, however, very difficult to compile precise statistics about the extent of slavery in the UK and official figures are widely recognised to be substantial underestimates. Slavery in the UK often comes to light only when a crisis occurs.
- Trafficking into the UK for sexual or domestic labour involves hundreds or even thousands of women and children. Some children, in particular those from African countries, are trafficked through the UK to other countries.
- Some forms – such as child labour – have existed for years but are increasingly constrained by international conventions to protect the rights of children. Although child labour is prohibited in the UK, there is a connection with the UK through the conditions under which sportswear and clothing, or commodities such as tea or cocoa, are produced.
- Some UK-based companies, knowingly or not, rely on people working in slavery to produce goods which they sell: complex sub-contracting and supply chains, managed by agents elsewhere, often obscure this involvement.
- The UK has tended to address trafficking as an issue of migration control rather than one of human rights.
- Most trafficked people enter the UK legally but become subject to forced labour through a mix of enforced debt, intimidation, the removal of documents and an inadequate understanding of their rights. Statutory agency personnel are often unsure how to assist trafficked migrant workers and keep few or no records as to their subsequent well-being.
- Slavery in contemporary Britain cannot be seen in isolation. Most of those working as slaves in the UK have come from elsewhere, often legally. Slavery is an international issue.



Background

With the growth of globalisation and migration, it has become clear that modern forms of slavery are growing in the UK. This study attempts to map its extent and nature, reviewing the evidence on key areas of slavery in the UK, particularly forced labour, debt bondage, sexual slavery, and child trafficking and labour.

What is slavery?

There is considerable confusion about the nature and boundaries of slavery. Definitions are therefore important.

Defining slavery

There are three essential elements of the exploitative relationship which constitute slavery:

- severe economic exploitation;
- the lack of a human rights framework; and
- control of one person over another by the prospect or reality of violence. Many relationships of enslavement do not involve actual physical violence but the nature of the relationship – appalling working and housing conditions, the withdrawal of passports or ID documents, deceit and abuse of power, the use of physical intimidation – renders the possibility of flight remote. There is much evidence that those who do protest about such conditions may be beaten, abused, raped, deported or even killed.

Slavery and poor working conditions

It is important to distinguish poor – or even appalling – working conditions from slavery. Coercion is the key distinction: the enslaved person has no real alternative but to submit to the abusive relationship. Abuse refers

to the treatment of one person by another specific person and is distinct from being forced into dangerous or difficult work by economic circumstances or other impersonal forces.

Trafficking and smuggling

The UN definition of trafficking for forced labour and other forms of slavery concerns the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, in order to achieve control over another person.

In practice, trafficking and smuggling overlap substantially but there are important distinctions:

- *Smuggling* involves explicit consent to be taken illegally across national borders. The relationship between smuggler and migrant typically ends when the destination is reached.
- *Trafficking* involves ongoing exploitation: even if the person has at some stage consented, this is meaningless because of the deception and coercion involved. Trafficking occurs within as well as across national borders.

How extensive is slavery?

It is very difficult to compile precise statistics about the extent of slavery in the UK.

Official agencies, including the police and the Home Office, acknowledge that there are no reliable estimates for the number of trafficked people in the UK. The Solicitor General has suggested that more than 1,000 women were trafficked into the UK for sexual purposes (mainly from Eastern and Central Europe): this is recognised as

The Polish workers

A group of Polish people came to work in the UK. They had expected to go to Southampton but were brought to Exeter to pack chickens for a major supermarket. Arriving late at night, they waited outside a house whilst inside frightened-looking Afghans threw their own things into bin bags before being driven away. The Poles spoke no English, had no money and didn't know who they were working for. They were not employed directly by the factory supplying the supermarket but subcontracted in a complex supply chain through labour agencies.

They were taken by van to a 2-10pm shift. There was no furniture in the house, but there were mountains of rubbish, piles of syringes, soiled mattresses on the floor and a terrible smell. Twenty people slept there, three and four to a small room. They were threatened with eviction and loss of two weeks' wages by their gangmasters if they told anyone about their conditions. They were also told to be very quiet and not go out in groups or the police would come. They felt intimidated.

They had been recruited in Poland by an English labour agency. The agency had promised the minimum wage (then £4.50ph), good accommodation for £25 per person per week, and lots of overtime. They received neither work nor wages in their first week. Contracts they signed were made without translation. Although they were sleeping on the floor in the kitchen and sitting-room (and the legal maximum rent for those on the minimum wage is under £25), they were told they must pay rent of £40 each. This was deducted weekly from their pay.

Several were given the same National Insurance number. They had tax deducted at a high emergency rate. The Tax Office said it had not yet received payments for them. After deductions, they were getting just £115 a week for 40 hours (£2.88ph). Another £15 disappeared without explanation. Most had not registered with the Home Office because they could not afford the £50 required, but this made them vulnerable to deportation. The workers finally managed to escape after a local trades union became aware of them.

Source: Lawrence, F. 'Special investigation. Polish workers lost in a strange land find work in the UK does not pay', *The Guardian*, 11 January 2005

a substantial underestimate. Others are trafficked for domestic labour. Perhaps thousands of young people have been trafficked through the UK to work as sex slaves elsewhere in Europe or as domestic labour in the UK. There are at least 5,000 child sex workers in the UK, most trafficked into the country. Many people trafficked into this country enter legally but then find themselves compelled to work as sexual or domestic slaves.

There are approximately 1.4 million registered foreign workers in the UK; estimates of the number of illegal workers range from about 300,000 to 800,000. Illegal workers are not necessarily slaves, and those working in slavery may have entered the UK either legally or illegally. The case studies (see boxes) show how even relatively skilled workers entering the country legally may find themselves working in enslaved conditions.

Worldwide, it is estimated that more than 12 million people may be working as slaves. These include at least 360,000 in industrialised countries, of whom at least 270,000 have been trafficked into forced labour. Of these, approximately 43 per cent are trafficked into sexual exploitation, approximately 32 per cent into labour exploitation and about 25 per cent are exploited for a mix of sexual and labour reasons.

The ILO estimates that the worldwide traffic in human beings is worth at least US\$32 billion annually, just under half coming from traffic to industrialised countries. The ILO and UNICEF suggest that in 2004, 218 million children were trapped in child labour worldwide. Of these, by 2006, some 171 million were engaged in 'hazardous work' including in factories, mines and agriculture. In 2003, an estimated 3-4.5 million people were living in the European Union without legal papers, with an estimated 400,000 people a year being trafficked into member states.

Slavery in the UK: some issues

Where are they working?

Migrant workers – whether illegal migrants or legal migrants working illegally – are most at risk of slavery or slavery-like working conditions. They are found in a wide variety of employment, including domestic work, construction, agriculture and food-related occupations, sexual activity, and many marginal economic activities. Many come expecting certain kinds of work but end up doing others: for example, women from the Baltic States were purposely trafficked for illicit activities such as shoplifting (though they had not been told this when recruited).

Who controls them?

UK enforcement agencies estimate there may be as many as 10,000 gangmasters operating across the various industrial sectors. Most employ migrant labour in agriculture, food processing and packing, construction,

A Latvian woman

In her early 20s, she arrived in London on her own initiative, leaving her young children behind. She was recruited by an employment agency at £100 fee. They moved her to Hull, taking her passport, ostensibly to send to the Home Office for registration. After four months she hadn't received her passport back (it had not been sent off). This later affected her benefit status and, without it, she felt unable to leave the agency. She regularly worked 16-hour shifts in factories, under threat of losing her job and accommodation if she refused. Overtime was never paid. She was transported to work double shifts in Barnsley, sleeping in a car between shifts. Spurious deductions for 'administration charges' and 'transport costs' were the norm and there was evidence of systematic theft through the deliberate miscalculation of wages. Sometimes migrants worked two shifts only to be paid for one. Her protestations were met with threats of dismissal. She was placed in a bedroom with two men she did not know. Her general mood was *'Terrible. Having to live in a room with two men. You can't dress. You can't do anything.'* She didn't know where to go to for advice, her English wasn't strong and she had no friends. She described herself as *'trapped.'*

Source: Case study by research team

catering, leisure, hotels, cleaning, textiles, and social and health care. Many operate legally. However, thousands of migrant workers working apparently legally do so under levels of exploitation which meet the international legal definition of 'forced labour', one form of slavery.

How has government responded?

There has been recent legislation and a Human Trafficking Centre has been established to co-ordinate responses. However, migration is such a controversial issue in the UK that the approach to trafficking has at times emphasised law enforcement at the expense of the protection needs of the victim. The UK has thus tended to address trafficking as an issue of migration control rather than one of human rights. Victims are often deported back to the original country from which they were trafficked: here they may be threatened, assaulted, re-trafficked, or face humiliation from their families. Generally, the regulatory environment is complex and poorly resourced.

How do they get here?

Most trafficked people enter the UK legally through regular migration routes and work visas. What then subjects them to forced labour is usually some mix of 'debt bondage' (the requirement to pay back debts which, because of low or no wages and illegal deductions, they are never able to do), the removal of documents and an inadequate understanding of their

rights. Statutory agency personnel dealing with trafficked migrant workers are often unsure how to assist them or who to refer them to and keep few, if any, records as to their subsequent well-being.

Are UK companies involved?

Some, possibly many, UK-based companies rely on supply chains which involve the use of slave labour both in the UK and abroad. The complex chains of subcontracting through a variety of labour agencies and networks, both in the UK and abroad, means many companies are unaware of or can deny knowledge of the conditions under which their goods are produced. Big brand fashion retailers and food and related retailers squeeze developing world suppliers and this pressure on prices, when passed down the supply chain, translates into exploitation of workers. Employers in developing countries find ways around corporate codes of ethical trading and UK-based corporations do not police them in any meaningful way.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that the following measures are needed:

- National action complemented by international law and collaborative action.
- Policy and service responses which regard those in slavery as victims first and foremost.
- A more robust stance against the exploiters and proper resources for enforcement agencies. Since the 2004 Asylum and Immigration Act, there has yet to be a single prosecution brought for trafficking for labour exploitation.
- Training in awareness of how to identify slavery conditions. Local service providers – including local authorities and advice agencies, housing bodies, church groups and trades unions – are often those which slaves first contact.
- A public awareness campaign.

Vietnamese men

Two Vietnamese men in their twenties were promised a job at a hotel in the UK, paying £18,000 each to their agent in Vietnam for this arrangement. They came to the UK under the government's work permit scheme with a promise of receiving £4.95 per hour for their work. A representative from an agency supplying workers to major hotel chains met them at the airport and took their passports. They were put to work in a hotel. They worked for two months without receiving any pay, only food. They attempted to strike but, almost immediately, their families in Vietnam received threats. They approached the local Citizens' Advice Bureau via a Vietnamese-speaking person they met on the street. They are too frightened to approach the Vietnamese Embassy, but want to warn others.

Source: Citizens Advice Bureau

About the project

This joint research project undertaken by the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation (WISE) at the University of Hull and Anti-Slavery International. The study was undertaken by a review of published literature and unpublished policy papers provided by service delivery agencies, a review of websites across the world (particularly in Western Europe), and interviews with key actors.

For further information

The full report, **Contemporary slavery in the UK: Overview and key issues** by Gary Craig, Aline Gaus, Mick Wilkinson, Klara Skrivankova and Aidan McQuade, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 978 1 85935 573 2, price £14.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk.

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