

The Wound That Shames Our Present

All countries – whether as the origin, transit or destination location for victims of trafficking – are somehow affected by this affront to humanity, yet it remains one of the world’s greatest ‘hidden’ crimes. There has, however, been a growing movement determined to shed light onto the darkest elements of this illegal activity.

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE STANDS OUT amongst British politicians of yore as a shaper of history and a driver of change. One of England’s leading abolitionists, Wilberforce was instrumental in the passage of both the 1807 Slave Trade Act and the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act, which signaled the beginning of the end of the transatlantic slave trade. As a matter of history, the buying, owning and selling of human beings by other human beings is considered a distant evil, with the image of African men in shackles and chains on American plantations belonging far in the past. With abolition cited as one of humanity’s ultimate triumphs, it would pain Wilberforce to know that now, over two centuries later, there are more people in slavery today than in the entire 350 year history of the slave trade.

The crime of human trafficking is the world’s fastest growing, second largest illegal trade after the drug industry. The United Nation (UN)’s Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons defines human trafficking as ‘the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of



persons, by the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of power or of vulnerability, or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.' Put more simply, human trafficking is modern day slavery – or what British Secretary for Work and Pensions Iain Duncan Smith has called “a wound which shames our present.”

What this amounts to is millions – 27 million, at the highest estimate – of men, children and mostly women, coerced or misled into appalling conditions, far from home and often with no opportunity to communicate with the outside world. In many cases, victims willingly travel to foreign countries with handlers who have promised them the chance to work for a better life, perhaps as domestic aids, hotel workers or restaurant staff. Those 'recruited' include those tricked by false agreements, abductees, children sold by parents, runaways and orphans. Upon arrival, they are transferred to the criminals who will effectively become their owners; their passports are seized and they are told they must work off a 'debt'

before being freed. In almost all cases, victims are hidden away in abhorrent living conditions and threatened, drugged or violently forced into submission.

Perhaps surprisingly, it is only in the last decade that governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society groups and ordinary citizens have come together to address the challenges posed. The aforementioned Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons was signed by the UN in 2000, and there has since been broad consensus on the appropriate response: 142 countries have ratified the protocol, and 128 countries have enacted laws prohibiting all forms of human trafficking.

In June of this year, the United States State Department released its 2011 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, in which countries were ranked on a tier system according to their actions with regards to the prevention of trafficking, the prosecution of traffickers and the protection of victims. During the presentation of the report, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton highlighted successes in legislation that came about in the last decade, noting that as First Lady during the Bill Clinton administration she was unable to even get human trafficking on the agenda.

Ambassador Luis CdeBaca, appointed by President Barack Obama to coordinate American government activities in the global fight against contemporary forms of slavery, noted that unlike a decade ago, the language of abolition has reached the highest levels of government: “The fact that a form of slavery still exists in the modern era and that it must be confronted is now spoken of by heads of state and CEOs, at shareholder meetings, in church groups, and around the blogosphere.” CdeBaca and Clinton both acknowledged that while trafficking is now “a priority issue in [American] foreign policy today,” much work remains to be done in the US and worldwide.

Following the TIP Report, this summer has seen a flurry of positive activity relating to the fight against human trafficking. For example, in Mexico, President Felipe Calderon approved several changes to the country's constitution, requiring those accused of human trafficking to be imprisoned during trials and guaranteeing anonymity for victims who denounce the crime. In mid-July, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's Regional Office for South Asia released its 'Journey of Hope' publication, highlighting initiatives to combat human trafficking in India. Additionally, several significant trafficking operations were disrupted in the Philippines, Ukraine and Florida, US, emphasising the global reach of the problem (and, in the latter case, shattering the illusion that trafficking is only an issue in poorer, non-western and developing countries).

Indeed, there has been an increasingly vocal push – driven in large part by NGOs like STOP (Trafficking UK), the Poppy Project and unseen(UK) – for the United Kingdom to play a greater role in dealing with human trafficking both at home and abroad. The United Kingdom Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC) was launched in 2006 in order to provide a central point for the development of expertise and cooperation across sectors, and has since come under the purview of the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA). Several inquiries have led to parliamentary briefing papers, all-parliamentary meetings and two major human trafficking police operations. However, one significant challenge to the anti-human trafficking movement in the United Kingdom – as well as in other North American and western European countries – is the sheer lack of numbers. No systematic and reliable collection of data on victims or perpetrators exists, making it impossible to measure the success of efforts to decrease trafficking activity. At last guess, the Home Affairs Committee estimated that there are at least 5,000 trafficking victims in the United Kingdom – a relatively low amount when compared to other countries, but still unacceptable.

In May 2010, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats committed in the Coalition Agreement to make tackling human trafficking a priority. However, it took months of campaigning by Anti-Slavery International, campaigning website 38 Degrees and The Independent on Sunday for the government to end its quibbling and opt-in to the EU Directive on Human Trafficking. Furthermore, it seems that Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservative government is in danger of conflating immigration issues with the human rights issues involved in modern day slavery. Recent proposed changes to migration visas would eliminate the domestic

worker route to the UK entirely, or create a visa tied to the employer, which would be non-renewable after 6-12 months. This system of 'bonded labour' has been widely touted by both British and international officials as facilitating forced labour and trafficking, harming some of the world's most vulnerable workers. It would be a step backwards for Cameron's government, and while the Conservatives are looking to be tough on immigration for policy reasons, the visa proposals would be unlikely to have any marked effect on net migration figures at all. The United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA)'s statistics show that 94 percent of migrant domestic workers leave within six months of entering the country, and would therefore not be counted as net migrants.

Fortunately, a host of MPs and NGOs have been instrumental in keeping up pressure on the government to escalate its efforts. While ending the enslavement of millions of human beings around the globe seems nothing short of a Sisyphean task, there are a number of measures the United Kingdom can utilise to do its part. Perhaps the simplest would be to not only increase awareness through the media, but also to heighten an education offensive – using an army of eyes and ears in communities across the country. Courses and conferences designed to help police officers, border agency staff, airline officials, hotel workers and ordinary people spot signs of human trafficking are on the rise and have proved effective in foiling illegal activity.

The government should continue to work closely with NGOs to improve its efforts to identify and protect victims, as well as ameliorate the response and support offered to victims that are referred through its National Referral Mechanism (NRM). The majority of victims referred in the first 21 months following the implementation of the NRM were female, with approximately one fourth of referees under the age of eighteen.


This indicates the need to advance the ability of those involved in the NRM process to deal sensitively with women who have possibly been tortured, beaten and raped, as well as an increased ability to deal with enslaved children. The referral process itself is a good start, though the UKHTC and the UKBA should work to expand the presently narrow scope of referees. As the US State Department's TIP Report states: 'An Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group noted in a June 2010 report that many victims are not referred through the NRM, as victims either do not view any benefits of referral, are afraid of retribution by their traffickers, or are fearful of the consequences of being brought to the attention of authorities because of their immigration status.'

In 2010, the UK government provided approximately 1.5 million dollars to civil society organisations to provide shelter and outreach support for adult women trafficking victims. This is commendable, though efforts should be increased to create more shelters in more boroughs around the country. Also, the criteria for admission to these safe houses should be loosened. As it stands, victims must be over eighteen years of age, involved in prostitution or domestic slavery in the United Kingdom within three months of referral, willing to cooperate in the prosecution of their traffickers, and must have been trafficked into the United Kingdom from abroad. This leaves

out, for example, the one fourth of victims under the age of eighteen and women fearful of the repercussions of bringing a case against their captors. More efforts need to be made in regards to child victims specifically – as the TIP Report explains, a number of rescued children placed in the care of local authorities continue to go missing (estimates as high as 55 percent), increasing the chances of their being re-trafficked.

The TIP Report makes several other viable recommendations to improve the UK's anti-human trafficking strategy; for instance, the standardisation of anti-trafficking responses across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales; appointing a victim coordinator in each region to ensure victims identified through the NRM are provided with specialised services; looking at harsher sentences for those convicted of a trafficking offense; and ensuring that confirmed trafficking victims are not penalised for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. In preparation for the 2012 London Summer Olympics, the government should work with local communities on anti-trafficking campaigns to raise awareness, as major sporting events often see a rise in prostitution activity in general. With the expected influx of visitors to London, it might be more difficult to spot trafficking victims at points-of-entry.

On the eve of the Coalition's parliamentary recess, the Home Office released its long-awaited 2011 Human Trafficking Strategy. In the July 19 document, Home Secretary Theresa May affirmed: 'Our new strategy for tackling human trafficking has four key aims: international action to stop trafficking happening in the first place; a stronger border at home to stop victims being brought into the United Kingdom; tougher law enforcement action to tackle the criminal gangs that orchestrate the crime; and improved identification and care for the victims of trafficking.'

Ultimately though, the United Kingdom's strategy needs to be just one part of a multi-faceted global movement to end human trafficking. By ramping up efforts to deal with this unacceptable practice at home, Cameron's Coalition would be in a position to put pressure on other governments with far more pervasive violations of human freedom. Twenty-seven million people in slavery should eat at our consciences as a truly international problem that can only be solved through a multitude of tools: education, the changing of systemic views on women, the implementation and enforcement of laws, and the courage and conviction of countless men and women in the vein of William Wilberforce's. A daunting task indeed, but where better for the UK to escalate its fight than here at home? 

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