People for Sale *by E. Benjamin Skinner*

*Why there are more slaves than at any time in history and what can be done about it*

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*This article is part of a package on the modern slave trade. To read personal narratives from the book* To Plead Our Own Cause *read "* *[I Was a Slave](http://www.utne.com/politics/i-was-a-slave.aspx)**" and for more personal narratives in an online exclusive feature,*  [*click here*](http://www.utne.com/politics/more-slave-stories.aspx) *.*

Most people imagine that slavery died in the 19th century. Since 1810, more than a dozen international conventions banning the slave trade have been signed. Yet today there are more slaves than at any time in human history.

And if you’re going to buy one in five hours, you’d better get a move on. First, hail a taxi to JFK International Airport and hop on a direct flight to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The flight takes three hours. After landing, take a tap-tap, a flatbed pickup retrofitted with benches and a canopy, three-quarters of the way up Route de Delmas, the capital’s main street. There, on a side street, you will find a group of men standing in front of Le Réseau (the Network) barbershop. As you approach, a man steps forward: “Are you looking to get a person?”

Meet Benavil Lebhom. He smiles easily. He has a trim mustache and wears a multicolored striped golf shirt, a gold chain, and Doc Martens knockoffs. Benavil is a *courtier*, or broker. He holds an official real estate license and calls himself an employment agent. Two-thirds of the employees he places are child slaves. The total number of Haitian children in bondage in their own country stands at 300,000. They are *restavèks*, the “stay-withs,” as they are euphemistically known in Creole. Forced, unpaid, they work in captivity from before dawn until night. Benavil and thousands of other formal and informal traffickers lure these children from desperately impoverished rural parents with promises of free schooling and a better life.

The negotiation to buy a child slave might sound a bit like this:

“How quickly do you think it would be possible to bring a child in? Somebody who could clean and cook?” you ask. “I don’t have a very big place; I have a small apartment. But I’m wondering how much that would cost? And how quickly?”

“Three days,” Benavil responds.

“And you could bring the child here?” you inquire. “Or are there children here already?”

“I don’t have any here in Port-au-Prince right now,” says Benavil, his eyes widening at the thought of a foreign client. “I would go out to the countryside.”

You ask about additional expenses. “Would I have to pay for transportation?”

“*Bon*,” says Benavil. “A hundred U.S.”

Smelling a rip-off, you press him, “And that’s just for transportation?”

“Transportation would be about 100 Haitian,” says Benavil, “because you’d have to get out there. Plus, [hotel and] food on the trip. Five hundred gourdes”—around $13.

“OK, 500 Haitian,” you say.

Now you ask the big question: “And what would your fee be?” Benavil’s eyes narrow as he determines how much he can take you for.

“A hundred. American.”

“That seems like a lot,” you say, with a smile so as not to kill the deal. “Could you bring down your fee to 50 U.S.?”

Benavil pauses. But only for effect. He knows he’s still got you for much more than a Haitian would pay. “*Oui*,” he says with a smile.

But the deal isn’t done. Benavil leans in close. “This is a rather delicate question. Is this someone you want as just a worker? Or also someone who will be a ‘partner’? You understand what I mean?”

You don’t blink at being asked if you want the child for sex. “Is it possible to have someone who could be both?”

“*Oui*!” Benavil responds enthusiastically.

If you’re interested in taking your purchase back to the United States, Benavil tells you that he can “arrange” the proper papers to make it look as though you’ve adopted the child.

He offers you a 13-year-old girl.

“That’s a little bit old,” you say.

“I know of another girl who’s 12. Then ones that are 10, 11,” he responds.

The negotiation is finished, and you tell Benavil not to make any moves without further word from you. You have successfully arranged to buy a human being for 50 bucks.

It would be nice if that conversation were fictional. It is not. I recorded it in October 2005 as part of four years of research into slavery on five continents. In the popular consciousness, “slavery” has come to be little more than just a metaphor for undue hardship. Investment bankers routinely refer to themselves as “high-paid wage slaves.” Human rights activists may call $1-an-hour sweatshop laborers slaves, regardless of the fact that they are paid and can often walk away from the job.

The reality of slavery is far different. Slavery exists today on an unprecedented scale. In Africa, tens of thousands are chattel slaves, seized in war or tucked away for generations. Across Europe, Asia, and the Americas, traffickers have forced as many as 2 million into prostitution or labor. In South Asia, which has the highest concentration of slaves on the planet, nearly 10 million languish in bondage, unable to leave their captors until they pay off “debts,” legal fictions that in many cases are generations old.

Few in the developed world have a grasp of the enormity of modern-day slavery. Fewer still are doing anything to combat it. President George W. Bush has been urged by several of his key advisers to vigorously enforce the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, a U.S. law that sought to prosecute domestic human traffickers and cajole foreign governments into doing the same. The Bush administration trumpeted the effort in addresses to the United Nations General Assembly in 2003 and 2004. But even the quiet and diligent work of some within the U.S. State Department, which credibly claims to have secured more than 100 anti-trafficking laws and more than 10,000 trafficking convictions worldwide, has resulted in no measurable decline in the number of slaves worldwide.

Between 2000 and 2006, the U.S. Justice Department increased human trafficking prosecutions from 3 to 32, and convictions from 10 to 98. By the end of 2006, 27 states had passed anti-trafficking laws. Yet, during the same period, the United States liberated only about 2 percent of its own modern-day slaves. As many as 17,500 new slaves continue to enter bondage in the United States every year.

The West’s efforts have been hamstrung from the outset by a warped understanding of slavery. In the United States, the Bush administration has focused almost exclusively on the sex trade. The official State Department line is that voluntary prostitution does not exist, and that commercial sex is the main driver of slavery today. In Europe, though Germany and the Netherlands have decriminalized most prostitution, Bulgaria and other nations have moved in the opposite direction, bowing to U.S. pressure and cracking down on the flesh trade. Across the Americas, Europe, and Asia, though, unregulated escort services are exploding with the help of the Internet. Even when enlightened governments have offered clearheaded solutions, such as granting victims temporary residence, they have little impact.

Many feel that sex slavery is particularly revolting—and it is. I saw it firsthand. In a Bucharest brothel, I was offered a mentally handicapped suicidal girl in exchange for a used car. But for every woman or child enslaved in commercial sex, there are some 15 men, women, and children enslaved in other fields, such as domestic work or agricultural labor.

Recent studies show that locking up pimps and traffickers has had a negligible effect on the aggregate rates of bondage. And though eradicating prostitution may be a just cause, Western policies based on the idea that all prostitutes are slaves and all slaves are prostitutes belittles the suffering of all victims. It’s an approach that threatens to put most governments on the wrong side of history.

Save for the fact that he is male, Gonoo Lal Kol typifies the average slave of our modern age. (At his request, I have changed his name.) Like a majority of the world’s slaves, Gonoo is in debt bondage in South Asia. In his case, in an Indian quarry. Like most slaves, Gonoo is illiterate and unaware of the Indian laws that ban his bondage and provide for sanctions against his master. His story, told to me near his four-foot-high stone and grass hutch, represents the other side of the “Indian Miracle.”

Gonoo lives in Lohagara Dhal, a forgotten corner of Uttar Pradesh, a north Indian state that contains 8 percent of the world’s poor. I met him one evening in December 2005 as he walked with two dozen other laborers in tattered and filthy clothes. Behind them was the quarry. In that pit, Gonoo, a member of the historically outcast Kol tribe, worked with his family 14 hours a day. His tools were a hammer and a pike. His hands were covered in calluses, his fingertips worn away.

Gonoo’s master is a tall, stout, surly contractor named Ramesh Garg. Garg is one of the wealthiest men in Shankargarh, the nearest sizable town, run by nearly 600 quarry contractors. He makes his money by enslaving entire families forced to work for no pay beyond alcohol, grain, and subsistence expenses. For Garg, their only use is to turn rock into silica sand, for glass, or gravel, for roads or ballast. Slavery scholar Kevin Bales estimates that a slave in the 19th-century American South had to work 20 years to recoup his or her purchase price. Gonoo and the other slaves earn a profit for Garg in two years.

Every single man, woman, and child in Lohagara Dhal is a slave. But, in theory at least, Garg neither bought nor owns them. They are working off debts, which, for many, started at less than $10. But interest accrues at over 100 percent annually here. Most of the debts span at least two generations, though they have no legal standing under modern Indian law. They are a fiction that Garg constructs through fraud and maintains through violence. The seed of Gonoo’s slavery, for instance, was a loan of 62 cents. In 1958 his grandfather borrowed that amount from the owner of a farm where he worked. Three generations and three slave masters later, Gonoo’s family remains in bondage.

Recently, many bold, underfunded groups have taken up the challenge of tearing out the roots of slavery. Some gained fame through dramatic slave rescues. Most learned that freeing slaves is impossible unless the slaves themselves choose to be free. Among the Kol of Uttar Pradesh, for instance, an organization called Pragati Gramodyog Sansthan (PGS)—the Progressive Institute for Village Enterprises—has helped hundreds of families break the grip of the quarry contractors. Working methodically since 1985, PGS organizers slowly built up confidence among slaves. With PGS’s help, the Kol formed microcredit unions and won leases to quarries so that they could keep the proceeds of their labor. Some bought property, a cow or a goat, for the first time in their lives, and their incomes, which had been nil, multiplied quickly. PGS set up primary schools and dug wells. Villages that for generations had known nothing but slavery began to become free.

PGS’s success demonstrates that emancipation is merely the first step in abolition. Within the developed world, some national law enforcement agencies such as those in the Czech Republic and Sweden have finally begun to pursue the most culpable of human trafficking—slave-trading pimps and unscrupulous labor contractors—but more must be done to educate local police, even in the richest nations. Too often, street-level law enforcement personnel do not understand that it’s just as likely for a prostitute to be a trafficking victim as it is for a nanny working without proper papers to be a slave. And, after slaves have been discovered by law enforcement, few nations provide them with the kind of rehabilitation, retraining, and protection they need. The asylum now granted to former slaves in the United States and the Netherlands is a start, but more must be done.

The United Nations, whose founding principles call for fighting bondage in all its forms, has done almost nothing to combat modern slavery. In January, Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, called for the international body to provide better quantification of human trafficking. Number crunching would be valuable in combating that one particular manifestation of the slave trade, but there is little to suggest that the United Nations, which consistently fails to hold its own member states accountable for widespread slavery, will be an effective tool in defeating the broader phenomenon.

Any lasting solutions to human trafficking must involve prevention programs in at-risk source countries. Absent an effective international body like the United Nations, such an effort will require pressure from the United States. So far, the United States has been willing to criticize some nations’ records, but it has resisted doing so where it matters most, particularly in India. India abolished debt bondage in 1976, but with poor enforcement of the law, millions remain in bondage. In 2006 and 2007, the U.S. State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons pressed Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to repudiate India’s intransigence personally. In each instance, she did not.

The psychological, social, and economic bonds of slavery run deep, and for governments to be truly effective in eradicating slavery, they must partner with groups that can offer slaves a way to pull themselves up from bondage. One way to do that is to replicate the work of grassroots organizations such as the India-based MSEMVS (Society for Human Development and Women’s Empowerment). In 1996 the group launched free transitional schools where children who had been enslaved learned skills and acquired enough literacy to move on to formal schooling. The group also targeted mothers, providing them with training and start-up materials for microenterprises. In Thailand, a nation infamous for sex slavery, the Labour Rights Promotion Network works to keep desperately poor Burmese immigrants from the clutches of traffickers by, among other things, setting up schools and health programs. Even in the remote highlands of southern Haiti, activists with Limyè Lavi (Light of Life) reach otherwise wholly isolated rural communities to warn them of the dangers of traffickers like Benavil Lebhom and to help them organize informal schools to keep children near home. In recent years, the United States has shown an increasing willingness to help fund these kinds of organizations, one encouraging sign that the message may be getting through.

For four years, I encountered dozens of enslaved people, several of whom traffickers like Benavil actually offered to sell to me. I did not pay for a human life anywhere. And, with one exception, I always withheld action to save any one person, in the hope that my research would later help to save many more. At times, that still feels like an excuse for cowardice. But the hard work of real emancipation can’t be the burden of a select few. For thousands of slaves, grassroots groups like PGS and MSEMVS can help bring freedom. Until governments define slavery in appropriately concise terms, prosecute the crime aggressively in all its forms, and encourage groups that empower slaves to free themselves, however, millions more will remain in bondage. And our collective promise of abolition will continue to mean nothing at all.

*E. Benjamin Skinner has reported on a wide range of topics from Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East for* Newsweek International*,* Travel + Leisure*, and other publications. Adapted from* A Crime So Monstrous: Face-to-Face with Modern-Day Slavery*. Copyright © 2008 by E. Benjamin Skinner. Reprinted by permission of Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc. This essay previously appeared in* Foreign Policy*(March-April 2008). Subscriptions: $24.95/yr. (6 issues) from Box 474, Mt. Morris, IL 61054;*[*foreignpolicy.com*](http://foreignpolicy.com/)*.*

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