

# The Wilberforce Legacy

(12/5/2008- By Kristin (Wright) Butler)

## Confronting Slavery in Today's World

The year was 1796. Parliament had convened in early February, and was now conferring on the issue of slavery in the West Indies, a trade in which Britain had long been engaged. William Wilberforce, by now a well respected and established Parliamentarian, had just introduced a motion to ban the practice of slavery. A rousing debate ensued, during which a fellow member of Parliament reminded his colleagues of a recent uprising in the West Indies, and urged them to “wait at least till the return of peace” before dealing with the issue of slavery.

Wilberforce’s response echoed through the halls of Parliament, his eloquence rivaled only by his indignation. “The question suspended?” The room quieted around him. “Is the desolation of wretched Africa suspended? Are all the complicated miseries of this atrocious trade—is the work of death suspended? No, sir, I will not delay this motion, and I call upon the House not to insult the forbearance of Heaven by delaying this tardy act of justice.”

### TODAY’S BATTLE

Wilberforce’s faithful example sheds light on a battle that demands our attention today: the worldwide spread of modern-day slavery. This year, while the world commemorates the two hundredth anniversary of the end of the British slave trade, an estimated 27 million people worldwide are still being held in bondage. To be held against one’s will, to work for little to no pay, to belong not to oneself but to another: this is what it means to be a slave. Although the term may take on different dimensions in different regions of the world, the underlying definitions remain the same.

Chattel slavery is the form of slavery most like that which existed during Wilberforce’s era and in the United States prior to the Civil War, in which women, men, and children are bought and sold for money or goods. Today it is prevalent in African nations such as Sudan and Mauritania. Like the slave trade of the West Indies in the late eighteenth century, chattel slavery is one of the invisible evils of our time. Obscure though they may be, the stories of these victims deserve to be told—in homes across the nation and in the halls of Capitol Hill.

### DAYBREAK IN KHARTOUM

A faint light had begun to appear on the horizon, invading the darkness of night. The stars could still be seen overhead, and the air hung in a cool mist over the city. Dawn was breaking across Khartoum’s rugged outline of gray buildings. The only movement visible inside one house was the silhouette of a figure bent over a pot, scrubbing.

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For Esther\*, every morning was the same. Before her master and his family arose, and well after they went to bed, she was working—looking after the children, completing routine tasks around the house, performing whatever duties her master demanded of her. For her endless work she received no compensation. She was a slave, and as such, she was merely the property of her master.

Esther had once been free, but her life had always been full of turmoil. She was only a baby when Muslim raiders from the north attacked her small village in southern Sudan, murdering her parents and numerous others. Somehow, in the midst of the blood and bodies, she had survived. Her aunt, hearing of the attack, rushed to the village and pulled her niece from the rubble. She raised little Esther as her own child—until the terrifying day that raiders from the north descended once again. This time, Esther, now an older child, was carried off as a slave.

She entered Sudan's swirling human trade, enduring the all of the degradation of being bought, sold, and traded as a commodity. Esther lived the life of a slave for the next ten years. While she eventually found her way to freedom, her experiences remain reality for thousands of chattel slaves in Sudan, Mauritania, and in numerous other countries around the world.

## **PEOPLE OF THE BRICKS**

The afternoon sun beats fiercely on the red ground in Pakistan's brick kilns. I know, because one October afternoon I found myself standing amid a cluster of makeshift one-room huts that shelter slaves outside of Lahore, Pakistan. The brick kilns are outdoor factories where bricks are produced by men, women, and children who have been locked into a different form of slavery, bonded labor, some for generations.

I remember feeling tired and a little faint as I stood in the heat of the sun that day, overshadowed by an enormous chimney emitting a constant torrent of black smoke into the air. I stared blankly around me, trying to absorb the reality of what I was seeing. *So this is slavery*, I thought. The faces of the men and women around me revealed an exhaustion that I, even in my most jet-lagged state, could not comprehend. From dawn until dusk they work, often making less than one dollar a day. It is barely enough to live on.

Children clothed in rags ran playfully around the members of our visiting team, looking up at us with questioning eyes. I had questions myself. I couldn't understand why all of these people were here, slaving under the sweltering sun, denied adequate compensation for their labor.

Upon my return, I learned more about the cruel and unjust system that has entrapped them here. Many of these modern-day slaves working in the brick kilns lying in and around the city of Lahore are Christian believers. Already impoverished due to their low status in a society that is 97 percent Muslim, many are compelled to apply for a cash advance from a wealthy landowner in order to survive. By accepting the money, they are selling themselves into bonded labor for a time to pay off their debt.

Tragically, in many cases the debt is never paid off. Wealthy landowners frequently take advantage of their impoverished, illiterate slaves by inflating interest rates while adding to the debt they already owe and refusing to free them. Bonded laborers are often guarded to prevent escape, and detained if they

attempt it. Some are sold from one landlord to another, and further victimized when the price they are sold for is greater than the debt they presently owe, thereby increasing their debt.

### **CHAMPIONING THEIR CAUSE**

The battle for abolition in Pakistan is one of implementation, as the crucial legislation banning slavery was passed in 1992. However, the laws granting freedom to slaves are continually being violated by brick kiln owners who stand to gain from free labor.

Bonded labor isn't only an issue in Pakistan. As the most widely practiced form of slavery, it is found in countries like India, Nepal, Brazil, and Peru, among others. Thankfully, the cause of these helpless victims is being championed by courageous individuals like Joseph Francis, the founder of the Lahore-based Center for Legal Aid, Assistance, and Settlement (CLAAS). Francis, together with his team of CLAAS attorneys, have succeeded in freeing hundreds of slaves so far through filing writs of *habeas corpus* with Pakistani courts. Although standing up for the rights of bonded laborers has almost cost Joseph Francis his life (he narrowly dodged a drive-by shooting after seeking to free a group of slaves), he and his coworkers are courageously moving forward with their work.

### **NO EASY WAY OUT**

Night was falling as our SUV wound its way through the crowded streets of Mumbai, India, into the heart of the city's red-light district. I leaned toward the window, staring out at rows of taxis as far as the eye could see. I watched as young women and girls of all ages, trapped in the clutches of India's thriving human trade, were picked up and driven to various parts of the city. My recent visit to Mumbai was a chilling firsthand look into another widespread form of bondage, that of sex slavery.

It is here in this depraved and dangerous district that K.K. Deveraj, a partner of [Jubilee Campaign](#), has set about to make an eternal impact. His work isn't based on easy answers or instant results; it's about real, lasting change in the lives of the people he encounters. Slowly and steadily Deveraj builds trust with the girls trapped in the squalor and degradation of the red-light district. He and his coworkers invest in the lives of these modern day slaves, caring for their children, providing for their needs, and listening to their stories.

Deveraj often waits until a girl is ready to leave the red-light district of her own accord, and then coordinates her escape. He and his coworkers have established a warm and loving home for rescued girls two hours outside of the clamor and corruption of the city. Here, they can begin new careers in jewelry making and sewing, enabling them to earn their own living. A remarkable 95 percent of the rescued girls in these homes have accepted Christ and are well on their way to a brighter, healthier future.

### **SHOCKED ENOUGH TO ACT**

Estimates of the number of prostitutes in Mumbai vary, but some sources claim the presence of an estimated 100,000 prostitutes in the city, with at least 90 percent of them serving as indentured slaves. Government efforts to quell prostitution pale in comparison with the magnitude of the problem. The U.S. State Department's [2006 Trafficking in Persons Report](#) states that the municipal government of Mumbai "arrested 13 suspected sex traffickers in 2005, but did not prosecute or convict any traffickers."

A 2003 academic study conducted in nine nations and first published by the scientific *Journal of Trauma Practice* reported that 89 percent of prostitutes wished to “escape” their situation. They are not alone. Millions of victims of slavery worldwide are longing for a new day of freedom to dawn in their lives. In Uganda, children face the tragic prospect of being kidnapped and forced to join the insurgent force as child soldiers. To harden them for battle, their cruel kidnappers sometimes force them to murder their own families. In Myanmar (Burma), victims of a similar form of slavery are also forced to work for a rogue regime—as human minesweepers. In countries around the world, slavery takes on many appalling forms. The question is, will we be shocked enough to act?

“So enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did the Trade’s wickedness appear,” Wilberforce told Parliament in a vivid description of slavery, “that my own mind was completely made up for abolition. Let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition.”

### **BE A WILBERFORCE**

Through the courageous efforts of modern “William Wilberforces” like Joseph Francis, K.K. Deveraj, and others like them, many of today’s slaves have a new reason to hope. Of course, you don’t have to be living in a foreign country to be on the frontlines of the battle for abolition. William Wilberforce himself lived in England, though his heart was never far from the injustices of the West Indies. Daily he confronted those injustices by capitalizing on the unique opportunities he was given—right where he was.

And so it is with you and me. It takes hours of hard work and months or even years of persistence to pass and implement legislation like the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (renewed late last year), which focuses on calling countries to account on the issue of slavery. This act is one key component of working to end modern-day slavery. No matter what part of the battle you choose to participate in—whether it’s assisting in the passage of legislation like the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, rescuing girls from the brothels of Mumbai, supporting well-trusted organizations that are combating slavery, or faithfully praying for the countless victims of slavery worldwide, your contribution plays a vital role in securing freedom for the oppressed.

Wilberforce’s courageous example challenges us to use the time and talents that God has given us to seek freedom and justice for those who are enslaved and abused. “Let us rejoice,” Wilberforce wrote in a letter to a fellow abolitionist, “and bless God that we live in a land in which we are able to exert our faculties in mitigating the sufferings, redressing the wrongs, and above all, promoting the best interests of our fellow-creatures.”

\*While her story is based on a true account, Esther is not her real name.

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