

# 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY SLAVERY

**Millions of people around the world are living as modern-day slaves—including in the U.S.**

BY ALESSANDRA POTENZA

**I**f you think slavery is a thing of the past, think again. Millions of people around the world today—including tens of thousands in the U.S.—are living under modern forms of slavery, human rights groups say. Min Min\* was one of them.

From a poor family in Myanmar, Min Min was 17 when he accepted a job working on a fishing boat in neighboring Thailand. The eldest son in his family, he needed the money to support his parents and two younger sisters.

Min Min trusted the man he calls “the broker” who had arranged the job and traveled with him from Myanmar. But once Min Min boarded the fishing boat and it left the dock his nightmare began.

“I own you,” the boat’s captain told him.

Min Min was forced to work up to 20 hours a day, seven days a week, with no pay and little food. He didn’t have proper clothes, boots, or safety equipment. He watched as other workers were beaten if they slowed down and thrown overboard if they got injured.

One day, when the boat docked at a village after months of being at sea, Min Min tried to escape. He was caught and tortured with fishhooks. Next time he tried, his captors warned him, they would torture him to death.

“I thought of fleeing . . . from this terrible condition,” Min Min says. “I put my faith in God and prayed.”

\*Min Min requested that his last name be withheld to protect him from retaliation.

**Child labor:** A 14-year-old works in a granite mine in Burkina Faso, in West Africa.

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**Fishing boats** in Southeast Asia use slave labor.



**In Uzbekistan,** forced laborers—many of them young people—pick cotton.

His plight is shared by millions of people in the world today. More than 27 million live in “modern slavery,” according to the U.S. Department of State. That includes 60,000 in the U.S., according to the Global Slavery Index, which tracks the phenomenon around the globe.

### A Different Kind of Slavery

These modern slaves aren’t captured, stocked like cattle on slave ships,

and sold in chains at public auctions. They are men, women, and children lured into trafficking by the promise of a job and a better life—and then forced to work with little or no pay, or coerced to sell their bodies.

“The injustice, the outrage, of human trafficking . . . must be called by its true name—modern slavery,” President Obama said in 2012. “I do not use that word, ‘slavery,’ lightly. It evokes obvious-

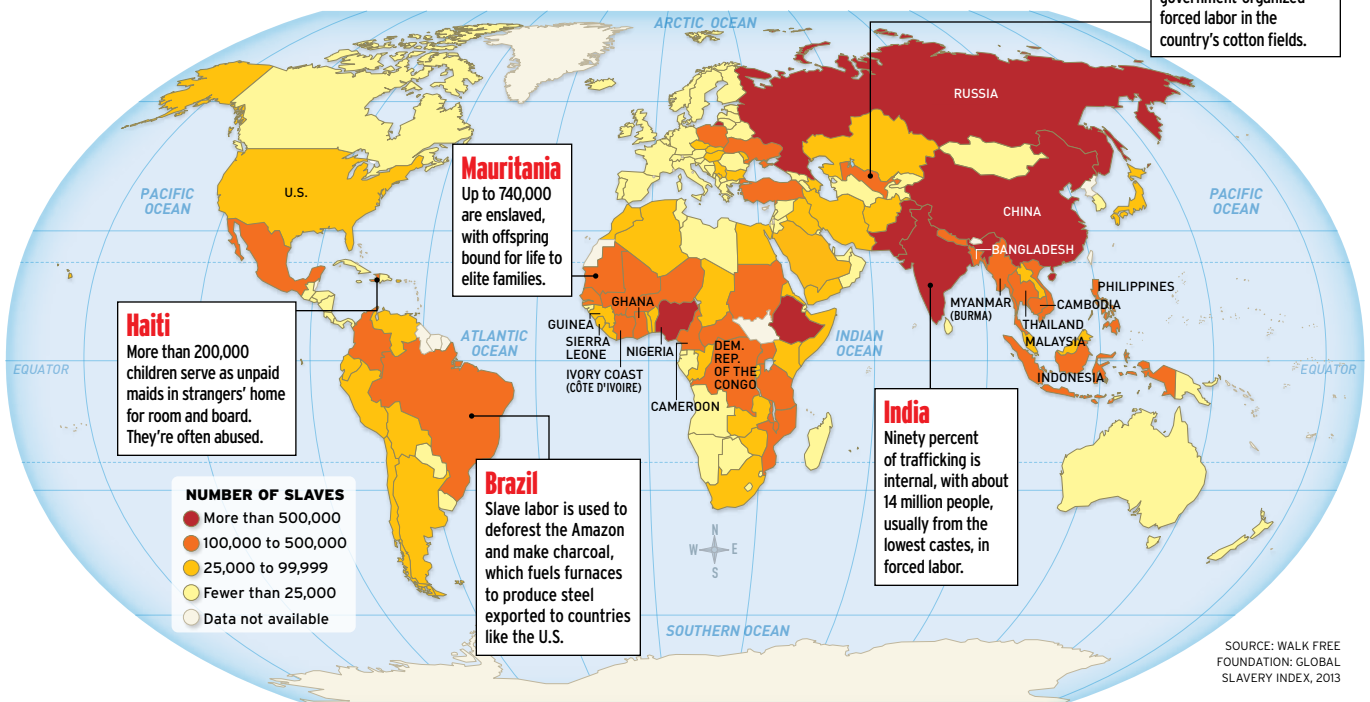
ly one of the most painful chapters in our nation’s history. But around the world, there’s no denying the awful reality.”

Slavery is as old as civilization itself. It existed in the earliest societies in Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, and China. In the Roman Empire, prisoners of war and people who couldn’t pay their debts were sold into slavery and forced to work in homes, mines, factories, and on farms. Slaves did everything from

## Where the Slaves Are

Human trafficking is happening in all corners of the globe

**Uzbekistan**  
Hundreds of thousands of people are victims of government-organized forced labor in the country’s cotton fields.



SOURCE: WALK FREE FOUNDATION: GLOBAL SLAVERY INDEX, 2013

building aqueducts to fighting as gladiators in the Colosseum. At the height of Rome's power, they made up 30 percent of the population.

In colonial America, slavery was legalized as early as 1641 in Massachusetts. Until the Revolutionary War, it coexisted with indentured servitude, whereby migrants from Europe gave up their freedom for three to seven years in return for passage to the New World or as part of a labor contract after they arrived. At the beginning of the 19th century, the expansion of cotton plantations in the South increased the demand for labor, boosting the slave trade from Africa. By the time the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery, was passed under President Abraham Lincoln in 1865 toward the end of the Civil War, there were about 4 million slaves in the U.S., making up 13 percent of the population.

Today, slavery lives on, in many different forms.

"You strip away whatever rationalization there is for enslavement," says Kevin Bales, co-founder of Free the Slaves, "whether it's 2000 B.C. or yesterday, slavery is pretty much the same thing."

What has changed, says Bales, is that most modern-day slaves are falsely promised a way out of poverty. Because of the booming population in developing countries, the number of people desperate to improve their lives is increasing. That boosts the supply of potential victims and makes them cheaper on the slavery black market, as the law of supply and demand would dictate.

While an average slave in the American South in 1850 cost the equivalent of \$40,000 in today's money, trafficking a person costs about \$90 today.

Human trafficking is fueled, in part, by an increasing demand for cheap labor, which helps sustain the growth of flourishing economies like China and India and to produce inexpensive goods for developed nations like the U.S. (see box, facing page).

**In Mauritania today people are born into slavery.**

About 76 percent of the world's slaves are in 10 countries, including India, China, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Russia. In these countries, poverty, corruption, crime, and discrimination against certain ethnic groups create the perfect storm for traffickers to thrive.

In the Persian Gulf, in countries like Qatar, laws give employers almost complete control over foreign workers, and exploitation—in households as well as in the booming construction industry—is widespread.

In Central and Western Africa, millions are forced to work for little or no pay under unsafe conditions on cocoa plantations and in diamond, gold, and tin mines. Many of them are children as young as 5 with no access to education.

But it's in places like Mauritania—where slavery has been entrenched for centuries in the local culture—that old-fashioned slavery afflicts the highest percentage of the population.

# SURVIVORS

These women were enslaved in the U.S.



## Ima Matul

From Indonesia, Matul was trafficked into the U.S. to work as a nanny at age 17. For 3 years, she was beaten and forced to work up to 18 hours a day with no pay. "Freedom means everything," Matul says.

## Rachel Thomas

From California, Thomas was sex trafficked for 10 months when she was a junior in college. "If someone had told me in high school that this could happen, I think I wouldn't have fallen for it," Thomas says.

## Holly Austin Smith

From New Jersey, Austin Smith was sex trafficked at age 14 by a man she met at a mall. Now 36, she advocates for other victims and educates law enforcement on human trafficking.

In this West African country of 3.7 million people, up to 20 percent of the population is enslaved. The black members of the lowest castes are typically given as gifts and bound for life to the families of the lighter-skinned elites of Arab descent—locally called the Moors—for whom they work as servants or as camel herders for no pay. And their children are the owner's property.

"I was born in slavery," says Said Ould Ali, a rail-thin 15-year-old in Nouakchott, Mauritania's capital. "I grew up in the Moor family in which my mother was born, and my grandmother."

## Trafficking in the U.S.

But modern slavery isn't limited to developing countries or even countries with corrupt governments. Trafficking also occurs in the United States, to people from all sorts of backgrounds.

Ima Matul was 17 when she came to the U.S. from Indonesia to work as a nanny, with a promised salary of \$150 a month instead of the \$5 she was making back home for the same job. In Los Angeles, she moved in with an Indonesian family

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: COURTESY OF IMA MATUL; COURTESY OF RACHEL THOMAS, M. ED/60WERS/EDUCATIONGROUP.COM; PHOTO BY JOE MAHONEY/COURTESY OF HOLLY AUSTIN SMITH

# Slavery & You

Many products you use daily are made with slave labor.

## ELECTRONICS

Coltan, tungsten, and tin, which are found in all high-tech electronics, are mined in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, where **as many as 90 percent of miners are in some form of slavery.**



## CLOTHES

Almost 50 percent of the clothes sold in the U.S. are made in China and Bangladesh, the top importers of cotton from **Uzbekistan**. During harvest time in Uzbekistan, up to 1.5 million people are forced by the government to work as pickers, **many of them children as young as 7.**



## MAKE-UP

Palm oil, which is made by slave and child labor in **Indonesia, Malaysia, and Sierra Leone**, is found in **70 percent of our cosmetics.**



## CHOCOLATE

West Africa supplies 70 percent of the world's cocoa market, including to giants like Hershey's, Mars, and Nestlé. Hundreds of thousands of children are forced to work in cocoa farms 80 to 100 hours a week, **with no pay and no access to education.** **Countries include: Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, Sierra Leone**



## FISH

The U.S. imports most of its shrimp—and other types of fish—from Southeast Asia, where slavery is widespread in the fishing industry. Enslaved people on fishing boats are forced to work up to **20 hours a day, seven days a week, without pay.** **Countries include: Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar, Bangladesh**



an organization to spread awareness among students. “Young people are the prime targets.”

Today, every country on earth has recognized slavery as criminal—just like piracy and genocide. But the movement to end modern slavery is fairly new. In 2000, for the first time, the international community—including the U.S.—came together and signed a protocol to fight human trafficking, defining what it is.

“It was very confusing until then,” Simone Monasebian, director of the New York Office on Drugs and Crime at the United Nations, which tackles human trafficking around the world. “And if you don’t know what the problem is, it’s very hard to combat it.”

Fourteen years later, huge strides have been made, but some policy makers complain that not enough money and political will are devoted to free the 27 million people who are enslaved today.

Others say the tide is beginning to turn: In the past couple of years, governments, international groups, and humanitarian organizations have increased funding to fight human trafficking. The U.S. is investing about \$21 million to fight modern slavery and President Obama has pledged that the U.S. government won’t purchase goods that involve slave labor at any point in their production.

“American tax dollars must never, ever be used to support the trafficking of human beings,” Obama said in 2012.

Min Min, who was enslaved on the fishing boat in Thailand, wants every country to do its share. His nightmare lasted for nine years. One day when the boat docked at an Indonesian village, he escaped. He ran for three days through the forest, without food, clothes, and shoes, stopping only to sleep on tree branches for fear of snakes and poisonous insects.

Finally, Min Min made it home to Myanmar and saw his parents again.

“I was very happy and felt the light of dawn,” he says. “I felt no more tension and felt free.” ●

With reporting by Adam Nossiter of *The New York Times*.

who forced her to work 18 hours a day, seven days a week, with no pay. She was verbally abused and beaten so hard that she once had to go to the E.R.

After three years, she was able to escape with the help of a nanny who worked next door. Matul is now 33 and still lives in Los Angeles.

But immigrants aren’t the only victims of trafficking. Rachel Thomas grew up in a middle class family in Pasadena, California. She was 20 and a junior in college in Atlanta, Georgia, when she met a well-spoken man who talked her into doing some modeling. He got her legitimate gigs in music videos and magazines, then convinced her to sign a contract that made him her agent. That soon led to a dancing job in a strip club and,

eventually, prostitution. For 10 months, Thomas was beaten—usually punched in the head so bruises wouldn’t be visible—and kept from escaping with threats to her family. Finally, another victim brought the case to the police and the man was arrested.

“All it took was five weeks for me to go from a happy, successful college student to a victim of human trafficking,” says Thomas, who’s now 29 and heads

**Spreading awareness:** A recent anti-trafficking campaign in New Jersey

