

# A Child Slave in California



*The Incredible True Story of a Modern-Day Slave and Her Fight for Freedom*

*By Kristin Lewis*

1 Shyima stood at the sink in the elegant kitchen of a fancy Southern California home. She was barely tall enough to reach the counter. Elbow-deep in soapy dishwater, she methodically washed the plates, scrubbing off bits of food and carefully rinsing them under the faucet. When she finished washing and drying, she stood on a chair to put the dishes away.

2        Seems like an ordinary chore for a 12-year-old girl, right?

3        But washing dishes was not just an ordinary chore for Shyima, something she did before watching TV or doing her homework. It was one of an endless series of chores she did all day long, every day of the year.

4        Shyima was a modern-day slave.

## ***Stealing a Life***

5 Nearly every culture on nearly every continent on Earth has had slaves. Slavery has existed since the beginning of recorded history. Indeed, the citizens of Mesopotamia, where the first cities were built, enslaved those they defeated in battle.

6        In the United States, more than 12 million Africans were forced into slavery from 1619 to 1865. Slaves helped build many of our early government buildings, including the White House and the U.S. Capitol. It took a bloody Civil War and a constitutional amendment, passed in 1865, to outlaw slavery in the U.S. for good.

7        Today, slavery is illegal everywhere. Yet more people are enslaved today than at any other time in history. Many are children and young teens—hauling bricks in India, harvesting cocoa beans in West Africa, or weaving carpets in Pakistan. They are in restaurants, factories, mines, homes, and on farms. Although their plights are different, what they have in common is this: They are held captive and forced to work.

8        “Slavery is about the loss of free will; it’s about coming under the violent control of another person who is going to exploit you,” says Kevin Bales, who runs an organization called Free the Slaves. According to Bales, there are as many as 27 million slaves in the world—about 50,000 of them in the U.S. “Slavery is like someone is mugging you and stealing your life,” he says.

## ***“Shaghala”***

9 For four years, Shyima, 12, had been living a nightmare. She was not allowed to go to school. She was not allowed to have friends or go to the movies or play sports or go to the

doctor when she was sick. Instead, she was forced to work as a maid in the home of Abdel Nasser Ibrahim, his wife, Amai Ahmed Motelib, and their five children in Irvine, California.

10 Shyima often worked 18 hours a day. Many nights, while the family slept, she stayed up ironing their outfits for the next day. Each morning, she woke the kids, got them ready for school, and cooked breakfast. In return, they called her *shaghala* (servant) and “stupid.”

11 During the day, Shyima cleaned the enormous house. She vacuumed, made the beds, dusted, and did laundry. Once, she tossed her own clothes into the washing machine. When Motelib found out, she slapped Shyima. “She told me my clothes were dirtier than theirs, that I wasn’t allowed to clean mine there,” Shyima remembers. After that, she washed her clothes in a bucket and dried them outside, by the trash cans.

12 Victims of slavery are controlled by the physical and emotional power of their captors. The Ibrahims threatened Shyima that if she told anyone about her situation, she would be beaten by the police. They forbade her from going anywhere alone. Sometimes they even locked her in her room.

13 How had this happened to her?

### ***Cut Off From Everyone***

14 Shyima was born in Alexandria, Egypt. She lived with her parents and 10 brothers and sisters, sharing a small one-bathroom home with three other families. They slept on blankets on the floor. They had no money for dentists or doctors or school. But though life was often hard, Shyima felt loved.

15 All that changed when Shyima turned 8. That’s when her mother decided it was time for Shyima to help out. Shyima was sold to the Ibrahims, who at the time lived in Cairo, Egypt’s capital. (In Egypt, selling children is illegal but widespread.)

16 The arrangement was simple: Shyima would live with and work for the Ibrahims. In exchange, they would pay her family \$45 a month.

17 The price that Shyima paid, however, was immeasurable. Being a slave meant that she would live in loneliness, cut off from everyone who cared for her. It meant that every day, she would be treated as if her life had no value.

18 Yet for poor families like Shyima’s, domestic servitude often seems like the best option for their children. As servants, children are at least guaranteed food to eat. Some “employers,” like the Ibrahims, even see themselves as benefactors who are doing a kind thing by taking on a less fortunate child. Shyima’s family firmly believed that she would have a better life with the Ibrahims.

19 They were wrong.

### ***Into the Darkness***

20 From the start, Shyima desperately missed her family and didn’t understand why she couldn’t go home. Then came the news that the Ibrahims were moving to America, and that she was going with them.

21 Complicating the situation was the fact that Shyima's parents had borrowed money from  
the Ibrahims for medical expenses. The only way to repay the debt, said the Ibrahims, was  
to let Shyima go to America.

22 It was against the law to bring Shyima into the United States as a maid, but that did not  
stop the Ibrahims. Each year, thousands of children are smuggled into the U.S. to work.  
They come mainly from China, Mexico, and West Africa.

23 Human trafficking, as it is called, is the fastest growing criminal industry in the world.  
More than 800,000 people are trafficked worldwide every year—as many as 17,500 in the  
U.S. No one knows the exact number because once here, they disappear like Shyima did,  
hidden behind locked doors, invisible to the outside world.

24 Shyima arrived in California on August 3, 2000. The Ibrahims' opulent house had  
a beautiful fountain with two angels spouting water. The bathrooms were marble, the  
furnishings expensive.

25 Shyima would not, however, sleep in one of the grandly appointed bedrooms. Her room  
was the garage—a tiny windowless room with no heating or air-conditioning. Soon after  
she arrived, the only light bulb burned out. The Ibrahims never bothered to replace it. And  
so Shyima lived in darkness.

### ***Admit the Truth***

26 The Ibrahims tried to keep Shyima a secret, but eventually their neighbors became  
suspicious. Finally, in 2002, an anonymous caller reported that something sinister was  
going on in the Ibrahim house—a young girl seemed to be living in the garage.

27 That call changed Shyima's life.

28 One April morning, a police detective knocked on the Ibrahims' door. He wanted to  
know if any children other than the Ibrahims' were living in the house.

29 Nasser Ibrahim said no. Then he contradicted himself. "Yes," he said, "a distant relative."

30 The detective wanted to know why that distant relative wasn't going to school.  
Ibrahim explained that he hadn't enrolled her "yet." A few moments later, he went to get  
Shyima. He threatened that if she said anything to the police, she would never see her  
parents again.

31 The detective wasn't fooled. He questioned one of the Ibrahims' children, 12-year-old  
Heba, about Shyima. "She's, uh, my uh . . ." Heba stammered. "She's like my cousin, but—  
she's my dad's daughter's friend. Oops! The other way. Okay, I'm confused."

32 The detective immediately took Shyima into protective custody.

### ***A New Life***

33 As Shyima was driven away from the Ibrahims forever, she was petrified. She spoke no  
English. She had no idea what would happen to her in this mysterious land that she knew  
little about. Frightened, she lied to the police interpreter, saying exactly what the Ibrahims  
had told her to say.

34 As the investigation continued, the shocking details of Shyima's life tumbled out. The Ibrahims claimed Shyima was part of their family, describing the time they all went to Disneyland. In fact, Shyima hadn't been allowed on any of the rides. They had brought her along to carry their bags.

35 Slowly, Shyima came to understand that what had been done to her was wrong. At one point, officials arranged for her to call her family back in Egypt. She told her parents what had happened and that she wanted to come home. "They kept telling me that [the Ibrahims] are good people," Shyima remembers. "That it's my fault. That because of what I did, my mom was going to have a heart attack."

36 After that conversation, Shyima made a decision: She wanted to stay in the U.S. and start a new life.

37 And that is exactly what she did.

38 Shyima learned English and started going to school. For the first time, she had friends, opportunities, a life. She was soon adopted by Chuck and Jenny Hall. (They have since taken her to Disneyland many times.) Remarkably, Shyima not only graduated from high school at age 18—despite having never been to school before she was rescued—but also went on to college. Today, she dreams of becoming a police officer or an immigration agent, working to help victims of human trafficking.

39 As for the Ibrahims? They pleaded guilty to involuntary servitude and forced labor. The judge ordered them to pay Shyima \$76,000, the amount she would have earned at minimum wage. They went to prison and were later deported.

### ***"Who I Want to Be"***

40 On December 15, 2011, Shyima stood in a packed room in Montebello, California. She was dressed in a stylish black top and pants. In her hand was a tiny American flag. Her nails were perfectly manicured, her hair and makeup flawless. There was little trace of the frightened young girl who was rescued from the dark nine years earlier.

41 "I solemnly swear," she began in perfect English, her hand raised to take the oath. "To support and defend," she continued, her eyes glistening, "the Constitution and the laws of the United States."

42 Shyima Hall, 22, had just become an American citizen.

43 "I can be who I want to be now," Shyima told reporters after the ceremony, smiling broadly. "And that is the most important part for me . . . that I can be who I want to be."