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Slavery: From Public Crime to Private Wrong

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Slavery: From Public Crime to Private Wrong

Abstract

The fight against slavery was the first international human rights movement, and the elimination of legalized bondage represented a hallmark of Western civilization. But the persistence and revival of this ancient evil shows that in an era of globalization, a prohibited public crime has morphed into a massive private wrong.

Keywords

Human rights, Slavery, Human trafficking, Private human rights abuse, Subjugation

Slavery: From Public Crime to Private Wrong

by Alison Brysk

The fight against slavery was the first international human rights movement, and the elimination of legalized bondage represented a hallmark of Western civilization. But the persistence and revival of this ancient evil shows that in an era of globalization, a prohibited public crime has morphed into a massive private wrong.

“[Private wrongs](#)” are contemporary patterns of human rights abuse committed by non-governmental forms of authority: from firms to families. While the enslavement of tens of millions of Africans in the Americas was state-sanctioned and sometimes state-sponsored, modern slavery operates in the gaps of governance: in rural backwaters, failed states, and the freefall of illicit migration. Its victims, like most current forms of exploitation, are second-class citizens and “[disposable people](#)”—women, children, outcasts, and the marginalized poor.

The key to understanding and combating private wrongs is to recognize these affronts to human dignity as abuses of power as much as any act of government, unmasking their justification as states of nature, cultural traditions, or personal choice. Slavery is not an accident or an atavism; it is a predatory strategy of commodification of fellow human beings in a privatizing world.

In this “race to the bottom,” traditional inequities and stigmas are brands, signaling who can be exploited and how. Women *are* especially vulnerable to the sex trade—but women are equally vulnerable to exploitation in the “[maid trade](#),” and any other traditional role where domestic disempowerment meets globalized displacement. The problem with the Bush coalition’s undue focus on sex trafficking is that it avoids or distorts the nature and sources of disempowerment; sex is not degrading, subjugation is.

The solution to powerlessness is politics; in [Hannah Arendt](#)’s concept of coming together to act in the public sphere. This is more than just “prevention” in the narrow sense—it implies using the international human rights regime to move towards governance for the wretched of the earth. Elements of this system must include U.N. monitoring and coordination, pressure by strong powers, legal and development assistance to willing but weak governments, and sanctions on regimes that tolerate this horror. But above all, it means providing political channels and leverage to victim populations and at-risk groups.

Private wrongs are ameliorated when new groups are recognized as human, new leverage points of global connection are discovered, and new claims for governance are recognized as determinants of human dignity. Freeing the slaves requires recognizing an obscure Dalit debtor as a second-class citizen of a lagging democracy. Leveraging the slave-raiding Sudanese regime may range from imposing U.S. investment sanctions to pressuring the Chinese backers of Khartoum. And expanding governance for human rights means that criminalizing sex tourism is as important as prosecuting pimps, and that voluntary sex workers have as much right to protection as any other form of laborers. The eradication of public slavery required a revolution in Haiti, and a revolutionary civil war in the United States. In the 21st century, eliminating private slavery will necessitate a revolution in our recognition of rights—and our exercise of global governance.

Alison Brysk is Professor of Political Science and International Studies at the University of California, Irvine. Winner of the 2007-2008 Distinguished Mid-Career Research Award, she has authored or edited six books on international human rights. Professor Brysk has researched and lectured in a dozen countries, and in 2007 held the Fulbright Distinguished Visiting Chair in Global Governance at Canada's University of Waterloo/Centre for International Governance Innovation. Brysk is active in promoting human rights through campus, professional, international, and advocacy organizations and networks. Please visit her website: <http://www.alisonbrysk.org>.