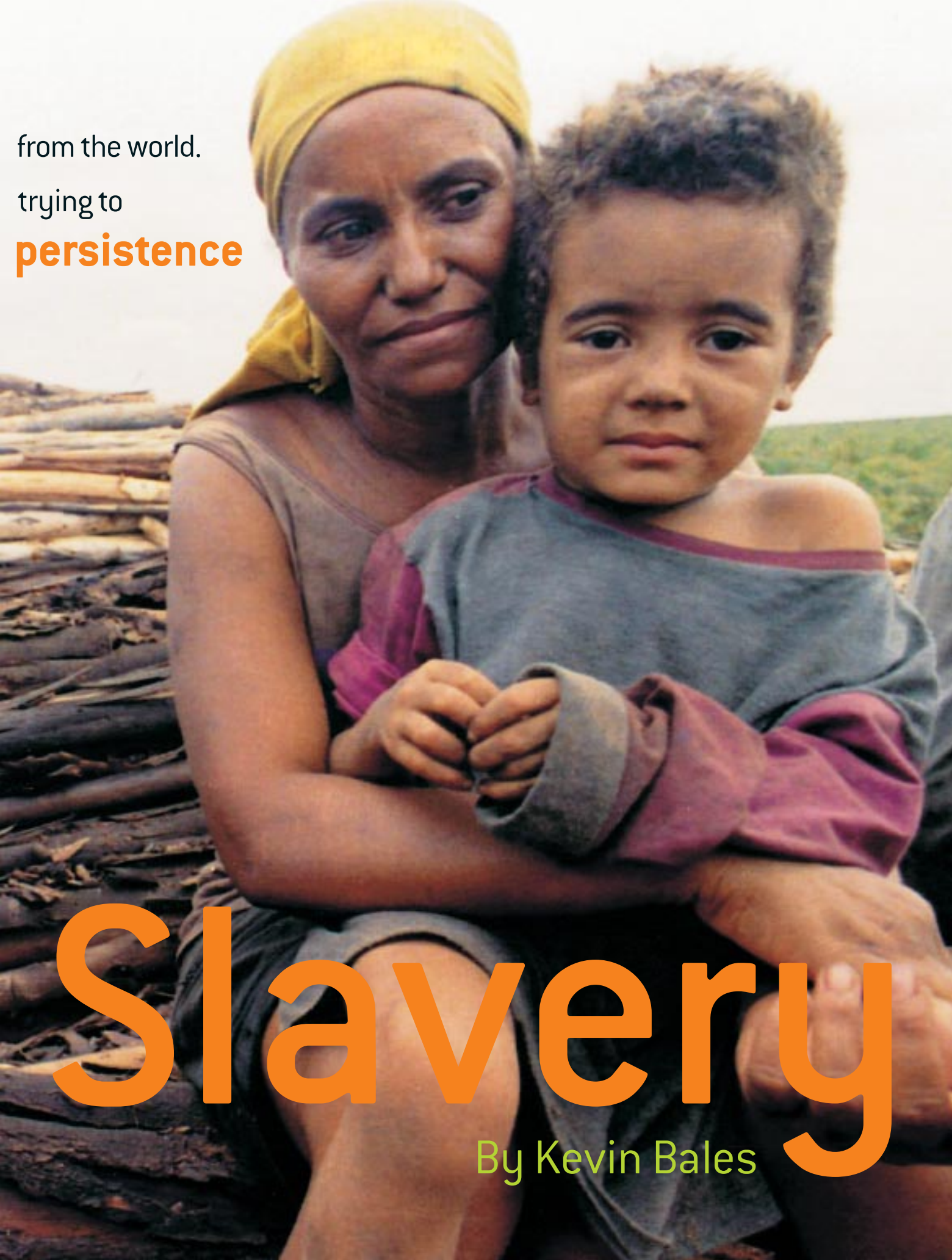


Contrary to conventional wisdom,  
**slavery** has not disappeared  
Social scientists are  
explain its

the social psychology of  
**Modern**

BRAZIL: Maria Rodrigues Ferreira Rocha, mother of Jefferson [seated] and Marta, works at a charcoal kiln in Grao Mogol. She says she has been a slave since age five.





from the world.  
trying to  
**persistence**

# Slavery

By Kevin Bales

# For Meera,

the revolution began with a single rupee. When a social worker came across Meera's unmapped village in the hills of Uttar Pradesh in India three years ago, he found that the entire

population was in hereditary debt bondage. It could have been in the time of their grandfathers or great-grandfathers—few in the village could remember—but at some point in their past, the families had pledged themselves to unpaid labor in return for loans of money. The debt passed down through the generations. Children as young as five years old worked in quarry pits, making sand by crushing stones with hammers. Dust, flying rock chips and heavy loads had left many villagers with silicosis and injured eyes or backs.

Calling together some of the women, the social worker proposed a radical plan. If groups of 10 women agreed to set aside a single rupee a week from the tiny sums the moneylenders gave them to buy rice, he would provide seed money and keep the funds safe. Meera and nine others formed the first group. The rupees slowly mounted up. After three months, the group had enough to pay off the loan against which Meera was bonded. She began earning money for her work, which greatly increased the amount she could contribute to the group. In another two months, another woman was freed; the following month, a third came out of bondage.

At that point, the other members, seeing that freedom was possible, simply renounced their debts and declared themselves free. The moneylenders quickly moved against them, threatening them and driving them from the quarries. But the women were able to find jobs in other quarries. New groups followed their example. The social worker has taken me to the village twice, and on my second visit, all its inhabitants were free and all their children in school.

Less than 100 kilometers away, the land turns flat and fertile. Debt bondage is common there, too. When I met Baldev in 1997, he was plowing. His master called him “my *halvaha*,” meaning “my bonded plowman.” Two years later I met Baldev again and learned that because of a windfall from a relative, he had freed himself from debt. But he had not freed himself from bondage. He told me:



MACEDONIA: Tanja, age 24, sits in a refugee center in Skopje. She escaped from prostitution after ethnic Albanian guerrillas raided the bar where, she says, she was enslaved. She is waiting to return to her native Moldova.

CRAIG CHIVERS AP Photo (preceding pages); ALEXANDER NEMENOV AFP Photo





SUDAN: Akuac Malong (left), age 13, walks home to her village, Madhol, in southern Sudan. She says she was kidnapped and held for seven years as a domestic slave in northern Sudan.

After my wife received this money, we paid off our debt and were free to do whatever we wanted. But I was worried all the time—what if one of the children got sick? What if our crop failed? What if the government wanted some money? Since we no longer belonged to the landlord, we didn't get food every day as before. Finally, I went to the landlord and asked him to take me back. I didn't have to borrow any money, but he agreed to let me be his *halvaha* again. Now I don't worry so much; I know what to do.

Lacking any preparation for freedom, Baldev reenrolled in slavery. Without financial or emotional support, his accidental emancipation didn't last. Although he may not bequeath any debt to his children, his family is visibly worse off than unbonded villagers in the same region.

To many people, it comes as a surprise that debt bondage and other forms of slavery persist into the 21st century. Every country, after all, has made it illegal to own and exercise total control over another human being. And yet there are people like Baldev who remain enslaved—by my estimate, which is based on a compilation of reports from governments and non-governmental organizations, perhaps 27 million of them around the world. If slaveholders no longer own slaves in a legal sense,

how can they still exercise so much control that freed slaves sometimes deliver themselves back into bondage? This is just one of the puzzles that make slavery the greatest challenge faced by the social sciences today.

Despite being among the oldest and most persistent forms of human relationships, found in most societies at one time or another, slavery is little understood. Although historians have built up a sizable literature on antebellum American slavery, other types have barely been studied. It is as if our understanding of all arachnids were based on clues left by a single species of extinct spider. In our present state of ignorance, we have little hope of truly eradicating slavery, of making sure that Meera, rather than Baldev, becomes the model.

## The New Slavery

RESEARCHERS DO KNOW that slavery is both evolving and increasing in raw numbers. Like spiders, it permeates our world, typically hidden in the dark spaces of the economy. Over the past few years, journalists and activists have documented numerous examples. Human trafficking—the involuntary smuggling of people between countries, often by organized crime—has become a huge concern, especially in Europe and Southeast Asia. Many people, lured by economic opportunities, pay smugglers to slip them across borders but then find themselves sold to sweatshops, brothels or domestic service to pay for their passage; others are kidnapped and smuggled against their will. In certain areas, notably Brazil and West Africa, laborers have been enticed into signing contracts and then taken to remote plantations and prevented from leaving. In parts of South Asia and North Africa, slavery is a millennia-old tradition that has never truly ended.

The plight of these people has drawn the attention of governments and organizations as diverse as the Vatican, the United Nations, the International Organization for Migration, and Amnesty International. Two years ago the U.S. government established a central coordinating office to deal with human trafficking. Academic researchers are beginning to conduct intensive studies. The anecdotal and journalistic approach is slowly transforming into the more rigorous inquiry of social science. For example, Urs Peter Ruf of the University of Bielefeld in Germany has documented the evolution of master-slave relations in

### THE AUTHOR

KEVIN BALES is a professor of sociology at the University of Surrey Roehampton in London. He is a trustee of Anti-Slavery International and a consultant to the United Nations Global Program on Trafficking of Human Beings, to the Economic Community of West African States, and to the U.S., British, Irish, Norwegian and Nepali governments. Bales began studying slavery in the early 1990s, when few Westerners realized it still existed. Unable to secure funding for his research, he took on a commercial research project and devoted the profits to travel. The outcome—his book *Disposable People*—was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. His work won the Premio Viareggio for services to humanity in 2000, and a television documentary based on it (shown on HBO and on Britain's Channel 4) won a Peabody Award in 2000.

Slavery researchers are the first to acknowledge that their statistics are extremely unreliable. By its very nature, the subject matter is hard to detect, let alone quantify. Researchers must extrapolate from known incidence—based on reports from police, social workers, investigative reporters and freed slaves—to the broader picture. That is standard operating procedure in science: every field, from sociology to astrophysics, must make working assumptions. Unfortunately, the numerical estimates are often quoted and requoted without mentioning how provisional they are.

For instance, the International Organization for Migration recently traced one of the most widely quoted human-smuggling statistics—an estimate of 250,000 to 350,000 illegal migrant entries into western Europe in 1993—to its source. It was based on 60,000 border apprehensions and guesses by police that four to six times as many got through. Another oft-cited figure—45,000 to 50,000 women and children trafficked to the U.S. every year—originated in a classified Central Intelligence Agency briefing in April 1999. The derivation of that number has never been made public.

Kevin Bales has taken two approaches to dealing with uncertainty. First, he has collated various estimates of the numbers of slaves in individual countries (table), reasoning that some sources, such as governments, might tend to underestimate the problem and that others, such as human-rights groups, overestimate it. The table omits countries and regions for which researchers lack data. Second, he has prepared a scale of the relative degree of the problem in different countries (color-coded map), which is presumably easier to judge than the absolute number of slaves.

—George Musser, staff editor and writer



COUNTRY OR REGION	TRAFFICKING		ESTIMATED NUMBER OF SLAVES
	IN	OUT	
Afghanistan.....	◆◆	●●	20,000–50,000
Albania.....	◆	●●	5,000–10,000
Algeria.....	◆◆	●	1,000–2,000
Argentina.....	◆◆	●●	1,000–1,000
Armenia.....	◆	●●	2,000–4,000
Australia.....	◆◆◆	●	4,000–6,000
Austria.....	◆◆	●●	1,000–2,000
Azerbaijan.....	◆	●●	1,000–2,000
Bahrain.....	◆◆	●●	1,000–2,000
Bangladesh.....	◆	●●●●	10,000–10,000
Barbados.....	◆	●	0–100
Belarus.....	◆	●●●	2,000–3,000
Belgium.....	◆◆	●	5,000–7,000
Benin.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	20,000–40,000
Bosnia-Herzegovina.....	◆◆	●●	3,000–4,000
Brazil.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	300,000–500,000
Bulgaria.....	◆◆	●●●●	2,000–4,000
Burkina Faso.....	◆◆◆	●●●	2,000–4,000
Burma.....	◆	●●●●	50,000–100,000
Cambodia.....	◆◆	●●●	3,000–6,000
Cameroon.....	◆◆◆	●●●	6,000–12,000
Canada.....	◆◆	●	10,000–20,000
China.....	◆◆◆◆	●●	250,000–500,000
Colombia.....	◆◆	●●●	5,000–10,000
Congo (Kinshasa).....	◆◆◆	●●●	1,000–1,500
Costa Rica.....	◆	●●	0–100
Croatia.....	◆◆	●●●	1,000–2,000
Czech Republic.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	2,000–5,000
Denmark.....	◆	●	1,000–2,000
Dominica.....	◆	●	0–100
Dominican Republic.....	◆◆	●●	5,000–6,000
Egypt.....	◆◆	●●	1,000–2,000
Equatorial Guinea.....	◆◆◆	●●●●	1,000–2,000
Estonia.....	◆◆	●●	1,000–2,000
France.....	◆◆◆	●	10,000–20,000
Gabon.....	◆◆	●●●	5,000–10,000
Gambia.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	3,000–6,000
Georgia.....	◆◆	●●●●	1,000–2,000
Germany.....	◆◆◆	●	5,000–9,000

# OF SLAVERY



Ghana.....	◆◆◆	●●●	10,000–20,000	Mexico.....	◆◆◆	●●●	3,000–6,000	Sri Lanka.....	◆◆	●●●●	5,000–10,000
Greece.....	◆◆	●●	5,000–9,000	Moldova.....	◆◆◆	●●●	1,000–1,500	Sudan.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	20,000–50,000
Guinea-Bissau.....	◆◆	●●	1,000–2,000	Morocco.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	1,000–2,000	Sweden.....	◆	●●	2,000–3,000
Haiti.....	◆◆	●●●●	75,000–150,000	Nepal.....	◆◆	●●●●	250,000–300,000	Switzerland.....	◆	●	1,000–1,500
Hong Kong.....	◆◆◆	●●	1,000–2,000	Netherlands....	◆◆◆	●	3,000–5,000	Tajikistan.....	◆◆	●●	2,000–4,000
Hungary.....	◆◆◆	●●●	1,000–2,000	Niger.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	3,000–5,000	Tanzania.....	◆◆	●●	2,000–4,000
India.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●●	18,000,000–22,000,000	Nigeria.....	◆◆	●●●●	20,000–40,000	Thailand.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	30,000–60,000
Indonesia.....	◆◆	●●●	4,000–8,000	Oman.....	◆◆◆	●●	1,000–2,000	Togo.....	◆◆	●●	6,000–8,000
Israel.....	◆◆◆◆	●	4,000–6,000	Pakistan.....	◆◆◆	●●●●	2,500,000–3,500,000	Trinidad.....	◆	●	0–100
Italy.....	◆◆◆◆	●●	30,000–40,000	Panama.....	◆	●	0–100	Turkey.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	20,000–30,000
Ivory Coast.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	30,000–80,000	Peru.....	◆◆	●●	3,000–5,000	Turkmenistan....	◆◆◆	●●●	1,000–2,000
Jamaica.....	◆◆	●●	0–500	Philippines.....	◆◆	●●●●	3,000–10,000	Uganda.....	◆◆	●●●	5,000–8,000
Japan.....	◆◆◆◆	●●	5,000–10,000	Poland.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	2,000–4,000	Ukraine.....	◆◆	●●●●	3,000–5,000
Kazakhstan.....	◆	●●	1,000–2,000	Portugal.....	◆◆◆	●●	5,000–6,000	U.A.E.....	◆◆◆◆	●●	1,000–2,000
Kenya.....	◆	●●	3,000–5,000	Puerto Rico.....	◆	●	0–100	U.K.....	◆	●	4,000–5,000
South Korea.....	◆◆	●●	10,000–15,000	Qatar.....	◆◆◆	●●	1,000–2,000	U.S.....	◆	●	100,000–150,000
Kuwait.....	◆◆	●	1,000–2,000	Romania.....	◆◆◆	●●●●	5,000–6,000	Uzbekistan.....	◆◆	●●	1,000–2,000
Kyrgyzstan.....	◆	●	1,000–1,500	Russia.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	8,000–10,000	Vietnam.....	◆◆	●●●	5,000–7,000
Laos.....	◆	●●●	5,000–10,000	São Tomé.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	1,000–2,000	Yemen.....	◆◆◆	●●	1,000–2,000
Lebanon.....	◆◆	●●	1,000–1,500	Saudi Arabia....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	2,000–5,000	Yugoslavia.....	◆◆◆	●●●●	8,000–10,000
Liberia.....	◆◆	●●	3,000–6,000	Senegal.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	6,000–12,000				
Luxembourg.....	◆◆	●●	2,000–3,000	Sierra Leone....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	3,000–6,000				
Macedonia.....	◆◆	●●●	1,000–1,500	Singapore.....	◆◆◆	●●	1,000–1,500				
Malaysia.....	◆◆◆	●●●	3,000–6,000	Slovakia.....	◆◆◆	●●	2,000–3,000				
Mali.....	◆◆◆◆	●●●●	10,000–20,000	South Africa....	◆◆◆	●●●	5,000–6,000				
Mauritania.....	◆◆	●●	250,000–300,000	Spain.....	◆◆	●●	10,000–15,000				

modern Mauritania. Louise Brown of the University of Birmingham in England has studied women forced into prostitution in Asia. David Kyle of the University of California at Davis and Rey Koslowski of Rutgers University have explored human smuggling. I have posited a theory of global slavery and tested it through case studies in five countries.

A common question is why these practices should be called slavery rather than just another form of superexploitation. The answer is simple. Throughout history, slavery has meant a loss of free will and choice backed up by violence, sometimes exercised by the slaveholder, sometimes by elements of the state. That is exactly what other researchers and I have observed. Granted, workers at the bottom of the economic ladder have few options to begin with, but at some point on the continuum of exploitation, even those options are lost. These workers are unable to walk away.

Human suffering comes in various guises, yet slavery has a distinctive horror that is evident to those of us who have seen it in the flesh. Even when it does not involve beating or other physical torture, it brings about a psychological degradation that often renders victims unable to function in the outside world. "I've worked in prisons and with cases of domestic violence," says Sydney Lytton, an American psychiatrist who has counseled freed slaves. "This is worse."

Although each of the manifestations of slavery has unique

health care or to take care of slaves who are past their prime.

Several trends could account for this shift. The world's population has tripled since World War II, producing a glut of potential slaves. Meanwhile the economic transformation of the developing world has, whatever its benefits, included the loss of community and social safety nets, matched by the erection of vast shantytowns. But the vulnerability of large numbers of people does not make them slaves; for that, you need violence. The key factor in the persistence of slavery is the weak rule of law in many regions. Widespread corruption of government and police allows violence to be used with impunity even when slavery is nominally illegal.

### Free Your Mind Instead

A SECOND COMMONALITY among different forms of slavery is the psychological manipulation they all involve. The widely held conception of a slave is someone in chains who would escape if given half a chance or who simply does not know better. But Meera's and Baldev's stories, among numerous others, suggest that this view is naive. In my experience, slaves often know that their enslavement is illegal. Force, violence and psychological coercion have convinced them to accept it. When slaves begin to accept their role and identify with their master, constant physical bondage becomes unnecessary. They come to perceive their situation not as a deliberate action

Throughout **HISTORY**, slavery has meant a loss of free will and choice backed up by **VIOLENCE**, sometimes exercised by the slaveholder, sometimes by elements of the state.

local characteristics, one of the aims of social scientists is to understand their universal features, so that therapies developed in one place can be applied elsewhere. Foremost among these commonalities is the basic economic equation. In 1850 an agricultural slave cost \$1,500 in Alabama (around \$30,000 in today's dollars). The equivalent laborer can be had for around \$100 today. That payment might be made as part of a "loan" or as a "fee" to a trafficker. A young woman in Southeast Asia or eastern Europe might be sold several times, through a series of brokers and pimps, before she ends up in a brothel.

One should not read too much into these specific dollar amounts, because what the slaveholder purchases is somewhat different in each case. The basic point is that forced labor represents a much smaller percentage of business expenses than it used to. It took 20 years of labor for an antebellum American slave to repay his or her purchase price and maintenance costs; today it takes two years for a bonded laborer in South Asia to do the same. This fall in price has altered not only the profitability of slavery but also the relationship between slave and master. The expensive slave of the past was a protected investment; today's slave is a cheap and disposable input to low-level production. The slaveholder has little incentive to provide

taken to harm them in particular but as part of the normal, if regrettable, scheme of things.

One young woman I met in northeastern Thailand, Siri, has a typical story. A woman approached her parents, offered to find their 14-year-old daughter a job, and advanced them 50,000 baht (at the time, about \$2,000) against her future income. The broker transferred Siri to a low-end brothel for twice that sum. When she tried to escape, her debt was doubled again. She was told to repay it, as well as a monthly rent of 30,000 baht, from her earnings of 100 baht per customer.

Siri had little idea what it meant to be a prostitute. Her initiation took the form of assault and rape. Shattered, the teenager had to find a way to carry on with life. In the world in which she lived, there were only those with total power and those with no power. Reward and punishment came from a single source, the pimp. Young women in Siri's position often find building a relationship with the pimp to be a good survival strategy. Although pimps are thugs, they do not rely solely on violence. They are adept at fostering insecurity and dependence.

Cultural norms have prepared these young women for control and compliance. A girl will be told how her parents will suffer if she does not cooperate and work hard, how the debt is on





**BENIN:** Constant Ayitcheou, age 13, says he was trafficked at eight years old by a friend of his father. Promised education and money, he was instead taken to become a domestic servant in Nigeria. “PAFAJESD” is the French acronym of the aid organization that helped to free him.

her shoulders and must be repaid. Thai sex roles are clearly defined, and women are expected to be retiring, nonassertive and obedient—as the women are repeatedly reminded. The pimps also cite religion. The young women are encouraged to believe that they must have committed terrible sins in a past life to deserve their enslavement and abuse. They are urged to accept this karmic debt, to come to terms with it and to reconcile themselves to their fate.

To live in slavery, the young women often redefine their bondage as a duty or a job or a form of penance. To accept their role and the pimp’s, they must try to diminish their view of themselves as victims who have been wronged. They must begin to see their enslavement from the point of view of the slaveholder. At the time of my visit, the women in Siri’s brothel were at various stages in this process of submission. Some were even allowed

to visit their families during holidays, for they always came back.

A similar psychology operates in a different form of slavery, one that involves domestic servants that African and Asian diplomats and business executives have brought with them to Europe and North America. As an employee of the Committee against Modern Slavery, Cristina Talens worked for several years to free and rehabilitate domestic slaves who had been brought to Paris. She told me that liberating the body was much easier than freeing the mind:

In spite of the violence, and the living and working conditions, people in slavery have their own mental integrity and their own mechanisms for surviving. Some may actually like different aspects of their life, perhaps the security or their understanding of the order of things. When you disrupt this order, suddenly everything is confused. Some of the women who were freed have attempted suicide. It is easy to assume that this happened because of the abuse they had lived through. But for some of these women, slavery had been the major psychological building block in their lives. When that was destroyed, the meaning of their life was like a bit of paper crushed up and thrown away. They were told: “No, this is not the way it is supposed to be. Start all over again.” It was as though their life had no meaning.

## Plausible Deniability

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE SLAVE is mirrored by that of the slaveholder. Slavery is not a simple matter of one person holding another by force; it is an insidious mutual dependence that is remarkably difficult for slaveholder as well as slave to break out of. Branding the slaveholder as pure evil may in some way comfort us, but maintaining that definition becomes difficult when one meets actual slave masters.

Almost all the slaveholders I have met and interviewed in Pakistan, India, Brazil and Mauritania were family men who thought of themselves simply as businessmen. Pillars of the local community, they were well rewarded financially, well integrated socially, and well connected legally and politically. Their slaveholding was not seen as a social handicap except, possibly, by “outsiders” who, they felt, misunderstood the local customs of business and labor.

How is it that such nice men do such bad things? A government official in Baldev’s district who held bonded workers was frank about his slaveholding:

Of course I have bonded laborers: I’m a landlord. I keep them and their families, and they work for me. When they aren’t in the fields, I have them doing the household work washing clothes, cooking, cleaning, making repairs, everything. After all, they are from the Kohl caste; that’s what they do, work for Vaisyas like me. I give them food and a little land to work. They’ve also borrowed money, so I have to make sure that they stay on my land till it is paid back. They will work on my farm till it is all paid back. I don’t care how old they get; you can’t just give money away!

After all, there is nothing wrong in keeping bonded labor. They benefit from the system, and so do I. Even if agriculture is completely mechanized, I'll still keep my bonded laborers. You see, the way we do it, I am like a father to these workers. It is a father-son relationship; I protect them and guide them. Of course, sometimes I have to discipline them as well, just as a father would.

Other slaveholders also have told me that their slaves are like their children, that they need close control and care. They make the argument of tradition: because the practice has been going on for so long, it must be the natural order of things. For others, it is a simple question of priorities: they say that enslaving people is unfortunate but that their own family's well-

*explorations/2002/031102gabon for a case study of a program in Gabon.*] The experience of these programs suggests that a combination of economic support, counseling and education can lead to stable, sustainable freedom. This kind of work is still in its early stages, though. No systematic evaluations of these programs have been carried out. No social scientist has explored a master-slave relationship in depth.

Slave economics are another puzzle. How can would-be liberators crack the dark economy and trace the slave-made products to our homes? Why are such large numbers of people being trafficked across continents, how many of these people really are enslaved, and why are these flows apparently increasing? What is the impact of this workforce on national economies? What are the links among the traffic in people, drugs and guns?

## SLAVERY is not a simple matter of one person holding another by force; it is an insidious MUTUAL DEPENDENCE that is remarkably difficult to break out of.

fare depends on it. Often slaveholders have interposed many layers of management between themselves and the slaves. They purposely deny themselves the knowledge of what they are doing and thus the responsibility for it.

### Forty Acres and a Mule

ALL THIS POINTS to the need for a highly developed system of rehabilitation for freed slaves and slaveholders alike. Physical freedom is not enough. When slaves were emancipated in the U.S. in 1865, the government enacted no such rehabilitation. General William Tecumseh Sherman's promise to give each former slave "forty acres and a mule" never materialized. The result was four million people dumped into a shattered economy without resources and with few legal protections. It can be argued that America is still suffering from this liberation without rehabilitation.

Human-rights worker Vivek Pandit of the Vidhayak Sansad organization in India has been liberating bonded laborers for more than 20 years. He is adamant that real liberation takes place in the mind, that physical freedom isn't enough—as was the case with Baldev. Conversely, mental freedom can bring about physical freedom—as it did for Meera.

Pandit's organization has devised a program of education that prepares former bonded laborers for a life of freedom. They are taught basic science to promote their curiosity and attention to detail; role-playing to stimulate problem solving; and games to develop strategic thinking and teamwork. This training comes after a challenging public dialogue in which the laborer recounts and renounces his or her bondage. The renunciation is recorded and read out in the village. "When the ex-slave has fixed his thumbprint to this public document," Pandit says, "they can't go back."

Several models of liberation and rehabilitation are currently being field-tested. [*Editors' note: Visit [www.sciam.com/](http://www.sciam.com/)*

Studying bondage can be socially and politically controversial. Researchers in the field face numerous ethical dilemmas, and clarity and objectivity are all the more difficult to achieve when individuals and governments seek to conceal what they are doing. If there is good news, it is the growing recognition of the problem. The plight of enslaved child workers has drawn significantly increased funding, and new partnerships between antislavery organizations and industries that use slave-made commodities provide an innovative model for abolition. But if our figures are correct, only a small fraction of slaves are reached and freed every year. Our ignorance of their hidden world is vast. SA

### MORE TO EXPLORE

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Antislavery Web sites:

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[www.antislavery.org](http://www.antislavery.org)