

The civil rights community must respond to the disturbing rise in cases of involuntary servitude in the United States.

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"You can call me Dawn", the voice at the other end of the line said. "I am contacting you because there is a woman enslaved in the apartment across the hall from my mother."

Not your everyday phone call, even at the American Anti-Slavery Group. Founded in 1993 to monitor contemporary slavery worldwide, the organization I work for focuses primarily on chattel slavery in North Africa. We publicize the plight of enslaved African women and children, bought and sold like cattle in countries such as Sudan and Mauritania. Advocates for silenced victims in distant countries, we work to make their cases immediate to the international community.

But suddenly slavery itself was immediate. Dawn's mother lived just minutes from our offices in Boston.

Dawn explained that a couple from Saudi Arabia with a young son moved in across the hall from her mother. A Thai woman who speaks no English lived with them. "When the couple leave for work, she runs across the hall to my mother's, crying. We can't understand her, but she appears to be the boy's nanny - and she shows signs of physical abuse."

Dawn had gotten our number from Amnesty International (Amnesty, which does not include slavery in its mandate, forwards questions on slavery to us). Her mother feared being part of any official investigation, and refused to contact the police. Dawn was also concerned and would only provide the Saudis' address. "I am afraid to get any more involved. I just want to make sure that this woman gets help."

What to do? Never having handled such a case before, we decided to try to talk to the woman

herself. A translator from one of the local language schools kindly volunteered to help, but could not accompany us to the apartment building. She would stand by to talk to the woman via cell phone.

One hour before our noontime visit to the apartment building, Dawn called to report that the woman had fled to the building's parking attendant, begging for help. The police were now investigating, but meanwhile the woman had been returned to the apartment.

Later, I spoke with the police detective assigned to the case, who expressed concern but explained little could be done. The woman's "owner" had legal immigration papers for her, as well as a letter from her husband consenting to his wife's work.

"The woman's account of forced servitude is really shocking, but we have no legal basis for pressing charges," lamented the detective. "She has nowhere to go, so she went back."

New Economy, New Slavery

In 1866, just as the U.S. was completing passage of constitutional measures against slavery, Frederick Douglass presciently noted the tenacity of the nation's peculiar institution. "Slavery, like all other great systems of wrong, founded in the depths of human selfishness, and existing for ages, has not neglected its own conservation," Douglass observed. "Today, it is so strong that it could exist, not only without law, but even against law."

Yet even Douglass could never have foreseen just how strong slavery would grow. Today, in the year 2000, when slavery is deemed illegal in every country and in numerous international treaties, more people live in bondage worldwide than ever before. And, as new studies indicate, tens of thousands of these victims are enslaved on our shores, in our cities, even in our own backyards.

Using a simple but strict definition of slavery - forced labor for no pay under the threat of violence - sociologist Dr. Kevin Bales estimates that 27 million people live as slaves worldwide. In his groundbreaking new book *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*, Bales advances the thesis that much of contemporary slavery has become a quasi-industrialized institution: a brutal but efficient and profitable process of entrapment, exploitation, and abandonment. Slaves are lured or abducted from their homes, psychologically and physically

intimidated, forced to work in de-humanizing conditions, and then discarded when they are too ill to work.

Bales contrasts this "new slavery" with the paradigm of chattel slavery so familiar from American history. Slaves in the 1850s were a valuable commodity, worth on average \$60,000 in today's terms. Masters therefore tended to sustain slaves during infancy and old age, despite making relatively small profit margins off slave labor (roughly 5% annually).

Given today's massive population boom - in regions of staggering poverty - modern masters instead enjoy a surfeit of potential slave labor and enormous potential profits. With slaves traded for as little as \$30, masters employ slaves only when they are profitable, then discard them. In an age of record salaries and a booming economy, some human lives have never been less valuable.

Slave labor touches us in many ways. Charcoal from forced laborers in the Brazilian rainforest makes the steel in our cars. Oriental rugs found in our homes are woven by Pakistani child slaves. Sweet "beedi" cigarettes rolled by slave children in India are smoked by thousands of American teens every day.

And according to a November report by the CIA, 50,000 people were trafficked into the U.S. in the last year. "Trafficking to the US is likely to increase," the report noted. "INS and Labor Department officials fear that the problem is not only bigger than they thought but also getting worse." The apartment across from Dawn's mother was no isolated case.

Land of the Free

In retrospect, the news is hardly shocking. Evidence of slavery in America has been steadily mounting. In 1978, for instance, FBI agents in Miami discovered Rose Iftony, a young girl from Sierra Leone, kept as a domestic slave kept inside the house of a Pakistani couple. One agent referred to Rose's bondage as "the first classic case of slavery [in the U.S.] this century that the FBI knows of."

In 1992, a slavery case in another Boston suburb made national news. A young Sri Lankan woman, Vasantha Gedara, was rescued by police from the home of a Kuwaiti couple in Quincy, Mass. Like thousands of other Asian women, Gedara had sought employment as a domestic worker in Kuwait. She agreed to travel to the US with the son of her employer for \$250 per month plus room and board. But what she discovered after landing at Logan airport was a life of domestic slavery.

Talal Alzanki, a 30-year-old graduate student at Boston University, and his wife forbid Gedara to leave the house, gave her no days off from housekeeping, forced her to sleep on the floor, fed her scraps, and threatened to kill her if she left apartment. "They tell me if I go out, policemen will shoot and kill me," she later told reporters. "I believe it."

Private nurses caring for the Alzanki's ill son became suspicious. After sneaking Gedara food for several weeks, they arranged for a police officer to rescue her from the apartment. In 1994, Alzanki was convicted of involuntary servitude, while Hollywood producers courted Gedara about doing a movie on her life.

Perpetrators of involuntary servitude come from around the world. A January, 2000 front-page story in the Washington Post described the plight of a Brazilian maid kept for years as a domestic slave by compatriots in a DC suburb. In August, a couple from Cameroon living in Detroit was indicted for enslaving a young girl they had imported as a nanny.

Yet for every successful rescue and rehabilitation, there are thousands of cases that either go undetected or are never prosecuted (as I learned firsthand). By the numbers, roughly 30,000 women and children are trafficked annually from Southeast Asia, 10,000 from Latin America, 4,000 from the Newly Independent States and Eastern Europe, and 1,000 from other regions.

Cases of contemporary involuntary servitude are by no means limited to the domestic sphere. In 1997, a group of hearing-impaired and mute Mexicans were enslaved, beaten, and forced to peddle trinkets in New York City. The FBI is now even investigating cases of women being sold as sex slaves via Internet-auctions.

In the peach-picking industry, some migrant domestic workers - immigrants and native Americans - languish in bondage to overseers, who keep ledgers of ever-growing worker debts

that must be repaid in labor. Despite prominent coverage of industry abuses by CNN and CBS News, problems persist. In 1998, authorities were able to liberate 28 indentured laborers in South Carolina when crew leaders accidentally revealed their second, illicit set of books to inspectors. According to Dianne Mull, Executive Director of the Virginia-based Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs, there are "too few protective laws under agriculture labor standards."

A group of Columbia graduate student recently demonstrated how easy it is to locate cases of involuntary servitude. While working on a global report for our organization, the students visited New York's Chinatown, where they located young women trapped in debt bondage waiting outside black market employment agencies. The women had been smuggled into the country illegally by "snakeheads," and were now forced to work in the snakeheads' massage parlors to pay off their \$50,000 debts.

In a growing global economy, the U.S. is increasingly a nexus for all sorts of international trade, including human traffic. The CIA report cites several reasons for America's new appeal: weak economies in countries of origin; low risk of prosecution and enormous profit potential for traffickers; and improved international transportation infrastructures. Organized crime syndicates from the Russian Mafiya to Chinese immigrant smuggling rings have discovered a lucrative racket and are cashing in.

As Americans have become increasingly aware of slavery, the response has been encouraging but far from adequate. Law enforcement officials are devoting increasing resources, Congress is considering expanding existing statutes, and non-profits are springing up to aid victims and formulate policy. Yet no popular anti-slavery movement has taken root. While individual citizens have been instrumental in identifying cases of involuntary servitude, civil society as a whole has not mobilized to confront this fundamental civil rights violation.

The Clothes off Our Backs

Check the designer label on your shirt. On August 3, 1995, California labor officials asked the public to do just that. The occasion: a press conference held to announce the liberation of a slave workshop in the Los Angeles suburb of El Monte. 72 Thai workers had been trapped inside, working 16-hour days sewing garment garments with labels like Macy's, Filene's and Hecht's

"Perhaps some of the clothes we are now wearing might have been made at this location," announced California State Labor Commissioner Victoria Bradshaw. "I never would have believed a situation like this could exist in the United States."

Dozens of illegal Thai immigrants, most of them bused straight from airport, were locked up and guarded by night, and forced to sew garments for \$1.60 an hour by day. Factory owners demanded repayment for transportation costs, and threatened anyone who tried to escape this debt bondage. Children were even held as hostages, and two workers who tried to escape were beaten and sent back to Thailand.

The garment factory had operated for nearly three years without attracting much notice. "If you passed by here, you wouldn't have thought they had a business going on inside," remarked one neighbor. Another admitted thinking little of the house's spiked fences and barred windows: "I thought that the barbed wire was a precaution against crime in the area." Who would have thought that the real crime was instead inside?

In a pre-dawn raid, immigration officials stormed the compound. Six Thai nationals were subsequently charged with peonage, or involuntary servitude involving repayment of debts. Bolstered by prominent national press coverage, victims quickly received assistance from local aid groups and even Labor Secretary Robert Reich, who announced a suit for back wages against manufacturers and retail chains. Victims eventually won \$4 million out-of-court settlement.

El Monte proved a watershed. As one high-ranking Justice Department official notes, "We became aware of involuntary servitude relatively recently. The El Monte case was the first prominent case that we brought."

Lack of Diplomacy

As any steamed New Yorker can relate, diplomats never pay parking tickets. Under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, foreign diplomats cannot be prosecuted by a host country. While the State Department expects envoys to abide by local laws, including wage and hour

provisions, there is a growing concern among labor activists that diplomatic immunity has become a convenient cover for slavery.

I first heard of slaves in embassies from Moctar Teyeb, the Outreach Director of our organization and himself an escaped Mauritanian slave. As reported in a January cover story for the New Yorker, Teyeb has a relative who arrived in the US as a slave for a Mauritanian diplomat. According to Teyeb, African slaves can be found in Mauritanian missions throughout the US.

But what I initially thought was a unique outpost of Mauritania's 800-year-old system of black chattel slavery turns out to be part of a much larger phenomenon. According to officials at Human Rights Watch, which is currently investigating the treatment of migrant domestic workers with employment-based visas, wage and hour abuse inside the diplomatic corps are rampant. One study of 43 potential cases uncovered 42 violations, of which 14 could be deemed involuntary servitude. Though not a random sampling, the results are sufficient cause for concern.

Researchers cite the recent plight of Shamela Begum as a textbook case. Begum, the wife of a vegetable vendor in Bangladesh, watched friends work abroad and return with money to build new homes. Though illiterate, she signed on as a domestic worker in Bahrain, only to find herself working for her employer's brother in New York: Mohammed Saleh, the second secretary at the Bahraini Mission to the U.N.

In Bahrain, U.S. Embassy officials had issued a visa after viewing a minimum wage contract with free room and board. But, in December of 1998, when Begum arrived at Saleh's East Side Manhattan apartment near the UN, her passport was confiscated. She was fed little, beaten occasionally, and could only leave the apartment accompanied by the Salehs. "I just cried," she later told reporters. "They wouldn't let me see another human being."

On one short walk around Manhattan with Saleh's wife, Begum heard a sidewalk vendor speaking her native Bengali. When the couple later left town, she slipped out and traced her way back to the vendor, and poured out her story. Andolan, a South Asian workers' rights group, promptly alerted the police, who seized Begum but could not press charges against Saleh.

With legal assistance from the Asian-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Begum sued the Salehs. As her lawyer, Chaumtoli Huq, remarked: "Hiring an employee to clean your house and watch your children is not related to consular functions and should not be immune from federal and state law." The Clinton Administration, however, sided with the defense, fearing retaliation against American diplomats abroad. Still, publicity from prominent New York Times coverage of the case compelled the Salehs to settle out of court for an undisclosed sum.

Cases like Begum's have become daily news for Joy Zarembka, of the DC-based Campaign for Migrant Domestic Worker's Rights. Operating out of the Institute for Policy Studies, the campaign focuses on cases of involuntary servitude under work-visa conditions. The campaign's initially lobbied the IMF and World Bank to adopt employment guidelines for diplomats.

Then the calls started. Reports of slavery cases began streaming in, and Zarembka found herself "becoming more of a victim support service than a straightforward advocacy campaign." With a coalition of two dozen DC area service organizations, the campaign provides vital assistance to victims who are often illiterate and speak no English. Of late, Zarembka's office has been receiving five cases a day, including one involving an Ivy League professor and another featuring a 200-unit luxury high-rise filled with Indonesian women serving Middle Eastern diplomats and students.

Profiting from Prostitution

One of the most prevalent forms of slavery involves trafficking women into the country for sexual purposes. And for the traffickers, business is booming. According to the INS, over 250 brothels in 26 different cities likely involve trafficking victims. The CIA report estimates that some crime syndicates have made as much as \$8 million in recent years pimping trafficked women.

Whether coerced or abducted into prostitution, women and girls are profitable twice-over. Initially, they are charged inflated prices for empty promises – alleged jobs, false documentation, housing, food, transportation, and even protection – for which traffickers demand repayment. Once transported (either to the advertised destination or far from it) victims are then forced into prostitution and other sex-related industries. Robbed first through their purses, women are then robbed through their bodies.

Sex trafficking draws masters and victims from all of the world to the United States. In one recent case, Russian-American Alexander Mishulovich, was found guilty of luring Latvian women to Chicago under the pretense that they would be employed as (clothed) dancers in high-end clubs. Upon arrival, women were instead forced to dance topless or even completely nude. Rather than receiving the promised \$60,000 salary, victims were beaten and maltreated, and stripped of their passports and visas.

The 1995 case of *US v. Wattanasiri* focused on a German national living in Thailand, Ludwig Janak, who recruited Thai women to the US, where they were forced into prostitution by Thai traffickers and a Korean madam. This trans-national trade was particularly shocking: the women were detained in an underground brothel with barred windows and 24-hour surveillance until they paid off their \$35,000 smuggling debt. Many were forced to have sex with 400-500 men in order to redeem themselves.

Sex trafficking is not limited to adults – or females. In May, a Colorado jury convicted a math teacher, Michael Charles Smith, for importing Mexican boys to Denver for sex. Indeed, the cases are many, the abuse horrific – and the profit, for the few and the fierce, can be tremendous.

In response, some activists, like Ann Jordan of the DC-based International Human Rights Law Group, are creating their own global network. Jordan has helped draft a UN protocol on anti-trafficking legislation and notes that the guidelines are not only applicable in trafficking hotspots like Cambodia or Bosnia. "I have been using the protocol to lobby for legislation here in the US."

The Perfect Crime

In a way, slavery is the perfect crime. Masters take advantage of poor, uneducated victims who are typically part of the underclass - and who find themselves in a strange new land where they cannot communicate. The victim's inability to speak out ensures virtual impunity.

Consequently, combating contemporary slavery can seem overwhelming. As the CIA report

notes: "Uncovering, investigating, and prosecuting" cases while protecting, assisting, and repatriating trafficking victims is a complicated and resource-intensive task." Of course, the mere fact that the CIA has issued a report on trafficking indicates significant progress. As Kevin Bales notes, "Now even the CIA has a figure for the problem."

One government official cites the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women as a turning point, at least on the issue of trafficking in women. "In Beijing, the world saw anti-trafficking measures championed by strong women leaders like Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright. This sent a message." More cynically, the official suggests that the rise in Eastern European victims may have played a part as well. "Suddenly you had large numbers of white women being caught up in what had once been perceived as a primarily Asian phenomenon." Moreover, the new traffickers - Russian gangsters, for instance - were also white.

On the domestic front, the Labor and Justice Departments unveiled a new initiative against employment abuse in April of 1998 by forming the National Worker Exploitation Task Force. A coalition of various government offices, the Task Force recently opened a toll-free hotline (1-888-428-7581) for reporting cases of labor abuse, including involuntary servitude. After a prominent feature on domestic slavery in a February issue of Parade magazine, the hotline received 500 calls in a four-month span, though operators admit that calls have slowed since June to only several calls per week.

Calls to the hotline are quickly passed on to attorneys working in the Civil Rights division of the Department of Justice (DOJ). Yet while DOJ officials state that they have prosecuted dozens of cases in the last few years, the CIA report notes: "State and local law enforcement officials appear to have only scratched the surface of the problem."

DOJ officials stress that they have significant manpower available, with 40 attorneys in Civil Rights division bolstered by US District Attorney offices in 94 locations across the country. Still, the CIA report cites several operational deficiencies in the DOJ's response structure: "Even within the DOJ, information is not always shared among the concerned offices" Many FBI agents say it is difficult, if not impossible, to formally write-up the cases. "Furthermore, there is no one central repository of all the trafficking in women and children cases within the United States."

Even when they can investigate, federal prosecutors face several daunting challenges. Officials note that the crime typically occurs "behind closed doors," as language and cultural barriers

isolate the victims. To infiltrate ethnic crime groups, some officials say more ethnic Chinese and Spanish-speaking agents are needed. They cite the sweatshop in El Monte, where a Thai-speaking agent helped break the case.

El Monte also suggested new ways in which government and civic groups could work together against slavery. According to Jennifer Stanger, Media and Advocacy Director of the LA-based Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking (CAST): "El Monte became a model of how government and community groups could cooperate for successful prosecution and human treatment of victims."

In the ensuing publicity, more and more cases kept coming to the local US Attorney's office, which continued to rely on community groups. To meet the growing demand for a victim support project, CAST was formed. Housed in LA's Little Tokyo Social Service Center - with "two desks, two phones, and access to a coffee machine" - CAST is a community care network that provides culturally- and linguistically-appropriate care to victims through a coalition of ethnic service providers. With Thai "clients," for instance, CAST turns to the Thai Community Development Center, Thai doctors and mental health counselors, and Thai-speaking legal services.

CAST maintains a primarily Asian focus, and currently assists 15 survivors, ranging in age from two to 61. As a sign of how limited non-governmental resources are, CAST remains the only mandated direct service provider to victims of slavery in the US.

Problems Stopping Traffic

At the center of new anti-slavery efforts is revising the legal definition of coercion vital to proving involuntary servitude. In the 1988 landmark case of U.S. v. Kozminski, the Supreme Court ruled that only the use of force or legal coercion can give rise to involuntary servitude. Consequently, prosecutors are often reluctant to pursue cases that might not meet these strict standards.

But as experts note, masters rely on psychological coercion. Vulnerable victims in foreign communities are dependent on traffickers, who rarely need to use force. Justice officials state that they are eager to expand what they call "the Kozminski standard" to include "non-violent" coercion (others use the term "psychological"). "We would like to bring cases involving fraud,

deceit, isolation, threats to family members, and more."

Congressional leaders have recently begun to address these concerns. In the last few months, the House and Senate both passed new anti-trafficking legislation, which is now in conference. Not only does Senate Bill 3244 earmark \$94.5 million over two years for an inter-agency taskforce on global trafficking, but it would punish those who use psychological force to hold a person against his or her will.

Yet while the legislation's expanded definition of coercion should aid prosecutors, activists are dismayed that key provisions for victims were stripped in committee sessions. Ann Jordan sees increased tools for prosecutors but notes that "the bill no longer focuses on protecting victims, which was the concern of the original drafters. Victims who fear for their own well-being will find little protection or incentive to cooperate."

Jordan notes that the bill allows the government to talk to witnesses without having to grant visas. In addition, victims have no federal right to a civil claim, cannot sue for assets, and can be deported and even charged for crimes committed while trafficked (like carrying false documents). "How can someone who knows nothing about a foreign government agree to cooperate if they think their family is at risk? Anyone who has a real fear of retaliation should receive a visa to stay here."

CAST's Jennifer Stanger also voices concerns about the revised legislation. "Without victim protections, you won't see people coming forward. Unless the conference committee turns this around, this is by no means the best bill we could see."

Not-So-Hotline

Activists also express concern that DOJ initiatives are themselves less than ideal. One notes that the exploitation hotline "is not the best resource." Only available from 9 to 5 EST, hotline staffers speak just English, Spanish, and Mandarin (though operators can connect to ATT interpreters at any time). Outside working hours, there is a message in three languages.

It is also not clear whether the Department knows exactly how to handle reports of servitude. "The government asked me whom to refer people to, but I had no better idea," remarks Ann Jordan. "Because of limited funding, there are only a few organizations, mostly in major cities. There's hardly anybody there to address hotline calls except prosecutors who want to prosecute."

On Sunday, typically the best time to call for domestic slaves, one can only leave a message. "What are you supposed to say if you are a victim?" asks Joy Zarembka. " 'Call my abuser and ask for me!?' " Other activists note that the Task Force, which handles the hotline, was created by Attorney General Janet Reno with no funding behind it.

Beyond the limited resources of the Task Force, activists often feel that working with government is often a "one-way street." As Ann Jordan laments: "NGOs should not have to spend their time developing relationships with government. Government should be developing its own protocols that NGOs work within."

Pam Shiffman, co-Executive Director of the women's rights group Equality Now, describes a frustrating gap between civil organizations and law enforcement. "Officials at the FBI and Department of Justice have been responsive to cases," Shiffman notes. "But they cannot tell us what specific action they are taking in response. As a result, it's hard to know whether to press them to do more."

While encouraged by government's stated commitment to the issue, Joy Zarembka mentions that cases are not always coordinated well. She cites the case of an Ivory Coast woman who had previously been antagonized by police, and been told by her master that police were dangerous. The woman was terrified of anyone in uniform, even parking attendants. "Due to miscommunication between Justice, the local police, and us, the police went in and botched the situation," Zarembka recalls. Only after dragging the hysterical victim down to the station, where no one spoke French, did police call campaign staffers. "If there's not coordination," Zarembka observes, "you risk putting the victim through even more trauma."

CAST's Jennifer Stanger argues that the lack of coordination with service providers can end up hurting the prosecution's case. "Law enforcement is so focused on prosecution, but they need to take a step back and look at how they can work with community agencies to assist victims who serve as witnesses." She cites the recent Little Rock trial of former NBC-affiliate-owner David Jewell Jones who was accused of importing two Chinese women as sexual slaves. After

the two women perjured themselves on the stand, the case ended in a mistrial.

"These women were sexually abused, transported against their will," complains Stanger. "But they had no advocates to work with them, and no community groups to help them prepare for court. They got up and perjured themselves, not on purpose, but because there was nobody working with the victims to prepare them for trial. Now the women will likely be deported."

A Call to Action

One fundamental course of action is needed to respond to the disturbing rise in domestic slavery: America must once again declare slavery a vital civil rights issue. That means that the great institutions of its democracy - from the press, to civil rights organizations, to faith-based groups - should do their part to bring abolition to the forefront of the national political agenda.

The American civil rights movement is remarkable for its creativity and persistence. Over the decades, the movement developed an innovative set of tools to fight social injustice, acting as a powerful antibiotic to the festering of hate and institutionalized inequality. Nonviolent civil disobedience, creative legal argumentation, and strategic coalition building, for instance, all proved invaluable in the fight against Jim Crow.

Human bondage is arguably the worst civil rights violation occurring today in the U.S. - and we must respond with similarly creative measures. We need prominent, well-funded civil organizations to take the lead in confronting this violation. Organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union, the Anti-Defamation League, the National Organization for Women, and constituency-based groups like the NAACP, the Organization of Chinese Americans, National Council of La Raza, and many others, must make this issue a priority. Social service providers must recognize a new "clientele" population, and to target services and information appropriately. And the press must engage far more extensively in vigorous investigative coverage.

Just as Amnesty International (AI) campaigns to free prisoners of conscience, we now need to stand up for "prisoners of commerce." That is what victims of contemporary slavery are. Though not intellectuals (like the human rights community) who live by and suffer for their ideas, victims of slavery experience confinement and degradation no less abhorrent.

As Frederick Douglass predicted, the ancient institution of slavery cannot be destroyed by simple legal abolition. Though chattel slavery has thankfully been ended in our country, a more cunning form of human bondage has risen in its wake. And precisely because this new slavery exploits the gap between law and social reality, it is all the more incumbent upon civil society to take action.

As Kevin Bales notes, "If Americans were being trafficked out and enslaved in other countries, there would be a war. There would be bombing." His inversion of the situation stands as a stark challenge. Outrage loses its moral force if selectively applied.

I will be the first to admit to having failed in confronting domestic slavery. When Dawn called last year, our response was simply inadequate. Local service groups could have assisted the enslaved Thai woman, and we could have checked to make sure she was legally employed. Now we know better, and we are working on new initiatives to assist service providers and increase public awareness.

Ultimately, it is ordinary citizens who can do the most to uncover cases of slavery. People like Dawn, the nurses in Quincy, and the street vendor in New York City are just three examples of alert civilians. As Joy Zarembka remarks, "Our greatest asset is a vigilant public." She should know. For several years she lived in a middle-class Maryland suburb two doors down from a case of involuntary servitude.

"The woman was always working and never left the house," notes Zarembka. "Had I thought about the situation and been more pro-active, I could have done something. Investigate further anything you suspect, as safely as possible. If not for the good Samaritan, how would we find out about these cases?"

Our Historic Responsibility

Much of the American civil rights movement arose in response to challenges posed by the country's terrible legacy of white-on-black chattel slavery. Even today, many wounds remain open, and many wrongs go unredressed. We are still struggling with our nation's great moral

stain.

Because slavery remains an American touchstone, some in the civil rights community may fear that action on contemporary slavery threatens to relativize powerful historical memories and claims. Amidst a growing discussion over responses to the continuing legacy of African American slavery, some may view growing attention to this "new slavery" as a harmful distraction. Several prominent activists have quietly expressed the concern that discussions of modern day human bondage - even in the United States - might actually set back the country's delicate process of making amends.

To the contrary. Liberty is useless unless it is exercised. The ultimate expression of freedom is to help liberate others. Fighting slavery today is how America demonstrates that it can triumph over a legacy of slavery and enslavement. A vain attempt to keep a lock on historic claims of suffering would fail and would allow others to suffer the evils we shed our blood to end. America must be a proud abolitionist nation.

As this young anti-slavery activist was shocked to learn, slavery is once again an American civil rights problem, a violation of the most fundamental right Americans can have: freedom.

I believe that as slavery in America becomes known, civil rights activists - old and new - will be drawn to the root impulse of the American civil rights movement: abolitionism. Our own civil society – not to mention the world's – may depend upon it.