

Slavery is happening in plain sight. We need to open our eyes

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It is often tempting to dismiss the notion of modern slavery as something that doesn't happen very much in Britain, confined to perhaps a few brothels where trafficked women have been coerced into the sex industry. Serious enough, of course, but primarily a matter for the police and the immigration authorities – or so we like to imagine.



Unlike other serious crimes, there is a sense of “otherness” towards the victims of the new slavery and, in some inchoate way, a reluctance to accept its reality and its significance, the very word “slavery” being so laden with remote associations with the 18th century trade across the Atlantic. It is, so we may like to think, a long-gone social evil.

Sure enough, these modern day slaves aren't clamped in irons and shoved into the holds of ships for weeks, lucky to emerge alive from their ordeal and then set to work on vast plantations. This is not a reenactment of *Roots*. Yet the nature of the modern slavery is, in essence, not so very different. The punishments and alienation are still there: people moved against their will across continents in appalling conditions, rape and beatings never far away, with no way of returning home, stranded in a foreign unfamiliar land where they do not speak the language or understand the laws, with no papers or passport, no money, no friends and no family.

Sometimes, in fact, they are not trafficked, but are captured, in effect, here in the UK, preyed upon by contemporary slave masters who specialise in “recruiting” new bodies at soup kitchens or on the streets – the homeless, the addicted, the credulous, the destitute and the desperate, willing to believe in the bogus offer of work and a wage. Abducted, some are never seen again; tragically some are hardly missed. Either way, wherever they come from, their lives are miserable, their plight too easily

overlooked by a society that has a complacent view that slavery is a sort of antique form of human exploitation, abolished by William Wilberforce and the Slave Trade Act of 1807.

Well, every time you take your car to be washed for a few pounds on some derelict former petrol station by a gang of men with buckets and hoses, then you may be, unwittingly, supporting the trade just as readily as anyone buying cotton or sugar cane centuries ago. In recent weeks, slaves have been discovered in nondescript terraced houses in Plymouth and Derby and, most notoriously, in rural Lincolnshire, with distressing and near-incredible stories of physical and mental abuse. This is not some issue about “low wages” or insecurity and poor conditions, as so often is the case, unfortunately, in working Britain. It is about people being locked in rooms or cupboards, kept in squalid captivity, one for 26 years, and with no access to the money they make for their captors and gangsters, who grow rich on the proceeds of their inhumanity and discard their forced labour when they have no further use for them.

The truth is that, as with much other crime, there is little that the authorities can do without the understanding and active support of the public. Unlike so many other causes, simply giving money is not always the best way of fighting modern slavery. What is also required is for the nation’s eyes and ears to be alert to the possibility of slavery, as so much of it take place blatantly, in plain sight – people obviously undernourished and working on building sites, farms, warehouses or factories can be spotted by fellow workers or reputable employers; nail bars where the girls are working in foul-smelling rooms for obviously over-long shifts; car-wash operations that simply feel exploitative and wrong. When we see suspicious people lurking in cars and vans trying to con the vulnerable with disabilities or mental health problems, drink or drug addictions who gather around hostels or charity food stalls late at night, why not take the registration numbers?

There are helplines and charities ready to assist, as well as the police. In non-emergencies, slavery can be reported on 101, Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111 or the Modern Slavery Helpline on 08000 121 700. Specialist charities such as Justice for Domestic Workers, the Salvation Army, Kalayaan, Unseen, or the NSPCC, can also offer advice. Individuals wishing to help and rescue people do not have to intervene personally and immediately and place themselves in danger. Anonymous reports can be made. There is fresh legislation designed to bring slave masters to justice.

In other words, slavery is not something that is so secret that it cannot be detected, something that always takes place all of the time, furtively and behind closed doors, something for someone else to sort out. It is there, out in the open, and the shame of it is that so many of us barely give what we see a second’s thought.

If we did, then a good deal of human misery could be ended.