

## The UK's modern slavery shame

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In the UK, we are coming to the end of a year stuffed full with events commemorating the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade [1]. Only a few of these events have acknowledged the hollowness of these commemorations when slavery continues to thrive and affects more people today than during the historic transatlantic trade. As usual, it is women who bear the brunt of this inhuman trade. Although the hidden nature of modern slavery makes the statistics unreliable, there is no doubt that more women than men are trafficked.

Women are disproportionately affected by poverty and are over-represented among those trafficked into the UK for sexual exploitation, for domestic work and for labour in the care sector. A 2004 US State Department report [2] records that 70 percent of the approximately 800,000 people trafficked across international borders each year are women. The majority of these victims are forced into the commercial sex trade. Non-sexual forced labour is made up of 44 percent men and boys, and 56 percent women and girls (International Organisation of Labour [3], 2005).

### 21<sup>st</sup> century slavery

While researching my book *Enslaved: The New British Slavery* [4], I had no pre-conceived ideas about the gender balance in the five stories I would choose to tell. I ended up with two women, two girls and a man, a proportion which is roughly representative of those enslaved here. Farhia Nur, a devout Somali woman, was caught up in the civil war, raped and forcibly married to her rapist. She escaped to Britain, lost her application for asylum, went underground, had no money and was forced into prostitution; Natasha, a Russian girl was trafficked to Britain at the age of 17, raped and assaulted by her pimps, and prostituted; Amber, an Asian woman was forced into a marriage, imprisoned, starved and sexually assaulted by her husband and in-laws; Naomi, an illiterate street child from Sierra Leone was brought to London at the age of 15 to work as a domestic slave, ran away, was picked up by a man who prostituted her, ran away again and discovered that she was pregnant. Finally, Liu Bao Ren, a Chinese man was smuggled in by the snakeheads [5] (Chinese trafficking gangs), whose brother died in the Dover 58 tragedy [6] - in which 58 Chinese illegal immigrants died in a lorry entering the UK - and worked long hours for little or no pay in the construction industry under terrible health and safety conditions.

This article is the second in a series on **openDemocracy** marking the "16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence [3]" from 25 November - 10 December, an annual mobilisation aimed at heightening global awareness of violence against women

Also in **openDemocracy** on the 16 Days theme, part of our overall 50.50 coverage, a multi-voiced blog [3] where women around the world contribute

They all had one thing in common: their immigration status was uncertain. An individual is powerless while her/his passport is in the hands of somebody else whether it is an 'employer', a

'spouse', an 'agent', a 'trafficker', or indeed the government as in the case of failed asylum seekers. The defining feature of modern slavery is entrapment - physical, psychological and financial - often sustained through violence. While no human being legally owns another human being today, men, women and children continue to be bought and sold. Current immigration legislation [7] plays a central role in keeping people trapped in slavery.

Apart from the stories in the book, there are thousands of others who are enslaved in the production of our food, in the running of our homes, the care of our elderly and disabled and scandalously, in keeping our sex industry alive. The government argues that more draconian immigration controls will stop the people smugglers and traffickers. In fact, this strategy has failed. Perhaps it suits the government to tighten controls: it creates a larger pool of easily exploited 'illegal' workers whose presence drives wages down. The more I investigated this issue, the more I became convinced that only the abolition of immigration controls [8] will lift a large chunk of people out of slavery in Britain. Each time controls are part-liberalised in a piecemeal fashion (and that's not often) they create further nooks and crannies in which injustice and slavery flourish.

### **An open solution**

The debate around immigration is so hysterical that to raise the issue of open borders is to invite ridicule. It is a widely held belief that Britain will be inundated. However, this is not borne out by the trends. In general, migration follows jobs. If the UK economy is attracting migrants, it is because its economy is booming. We already have open borders with Europe [9], with a total population of half a billion people, and we have not been swamped. Despite headlines in the popular press about the numbers of Polish people who have arrived, most of them have been soaked up by a labour hungry market. Even when there is a humanitarian crisis, most people flee to the next town or just across the closest border. Despite the horrendous living conditions created by the US and UK invasion of Iraq [9], only 8000 Iraqis have sought asylum in Britain (only 20 per cent of whom have been allowed to stay) as compared to 1 million in Syria and 800,000 in Jordan.

Most mainstream debate on UK immigration concentrates on the needs of the British economy, whether the migrants coming in to the country match the needs of the economy and whether the walls that have been put up to keep out 'undesirables' are solid enough. Broader questions which impact on immigration have not really been raised: British multi-nationals, for example, displace communities in developing countries in the process of building dams or mining for minerals and generate refugees and economic migrants, some of whom may turn up on our doorstep. As far as I am aware, no one has attempted to draw up a balance sheet which measures the number of jobs generated and taxes paid by these companies to the treasury against the immigrants who arrive on British shores. Ditto with the defence industry which is worth billions of pounds and where sales of arms are often made to countries in conflict [10]. We see the direct consequences of that policy in the number of refugees claiming asylum.

We need the equivalent of a Stern review on climate change [11] to explore these broader questions and to examine the benefits and drawbacks of immigration because the movement of peoples is an irresistible fact of globalisation. It is estimated that Britain will need 500,000 new workers entering the economy every year in order to sustain the current pensions system. We need to add into the equation the number of migrants who contribute to pensions and then do not stick around to receive the benefits, the subsidies made by the third world in terms of providing qualified migrants to the first world and the fact that remittances by migrants [12] is double British aid (an estimated £8 billion to £3.8 billion in international aid) - to drag this highly poisoned debate a little closer to the centre ground.

While open borders may not completely eradicate slavery, it remains a crucial weapon in the fight against slavery in Britain. When [Lithuania joined the EU](#) [13], for example, the number of women being trafficked into the sex trade increased. However, unlike other slaves, Lithuanian women are now in no danger of deportation and have the right to full protection of the state once they are rescued or run away. We also need to [criminalise the buying of sexual services](#) [14] to make a dent in the number of women trafficked to Britain as happened in Sweden and tighten employment laws so that employers who exploit workers are penalised.

As the fourth richest country in the world which prides itself on its respect for human rights, we can no longer ignore the human rights of an underclass that keeps the machinery of civilised Britain well-oiled.

[The new British slavery](#) [16]

from **openDemocracy** on Fri, 2008-05-09 13:30

Jon Bright (London, OK): openDemocracy has recently launched blog coverage of the annual "16 Days against Gender Violence" movement, which marks a period of activism between the tongue-twisting International Day Against Violence Against Women on the 25th

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**Links:**

[1] <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/slavery/index.htm>

[2] <http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2004/>

[3] <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/declaris/>

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[4] <http://www.portbellobooks.com/books/enslaved.html>

[5] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/china/story/0,7369,1143151,00.html>

[6] [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4158/is\\_20000621/ai\\_n14304873](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_20000621/ai_n14304873)

[7] <http://www.england-legislation.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/20020041.htm>

[8] <http://www.noii.org.uk/>

[9] <http://www.workpermit.com/news/2007-11-21/uk/home-office-eastern-european-union-immigration-statistics-third-quarter.htm>

[10] <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/politics/story/0,,1504698,00.html>

[11] [http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Independent\\_Reviews/stern\\_review\\_economics\\_climate\\_change/sternreview\\_index.cfm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Independent_Reviews/stern_review_economics_climate_change/sternreview_index.cfm)

[12] <http://www.remittances.eu/>

[13] <http://www.eu2005.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1113058721089>

[14] <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract.jsessionid=325AEDC16BC532014C310C8F8F7B5963.tomcat1?fromPage=online&aid=8>

[15] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/2007/11/27/the-new-british-slavery>

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