



Anti-Slavery International
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Bonded labour

What is bonded labour?

Bonded labour – or debt bondage – is probably the least known form of slavery today, and yet it is the most widely used method of enslaving people. A person becomes a bonded labourer when his or her labour is demanded as a means of repayment for a loan. The person is then tricked or trapped into working for very little or no pay, often for seven days a week. The value of their work is invariably greater than the original sum of money borrowed. Millions of people are held in bonded labour around the world.

Bonded labourers are routinely threatened with and subjected to physical and sexual violence. They are kept under various forms of surveillance, in some cases by armed guards. There are very few cases where chains are actually used (although it does occur) but these constraints on the bonded labourers are every bit as real and as restricting.

Where does bonded labour happen?

Bonded labour has existed for thousands of years. In South Asia it took root in the caste system and continues to flourish in feudal agricultural relationships. Bonded labour was also used as a method of colonial labour recruitment for plantations in Africa, the Caribbean and South East Asia.

Bonded labour today takes place in many countries around the world. It occurs in South Asia in Pakistan, Nepal and India and also in Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru.

Bonded labour can also happen in developed countries to victims of trafficking who are bound into forced labour or sexual exploitation after borrowing money from a trafficker to pay for transportation.

Where does bonded labour take place and how many people does it affect?

In **India** there are 2 million bonded labourers with the *dalits* (the scheduled castes and tribes generally known as the untouchables).

In **Pakistan**, there are 1.8 million share croppers in bonded labour and one million brick kiln workers in bonded labour.

In **Paraguay** 8,000 indigenous people are directly involved in forced labour or at risk in northern Chaco region the ILO estimates that 10 per cent of all indigenous people are in bonded labour as they only make up 1.7 per cent of population.

In **Bolivia**, 7,000 Guarani are in forced labour in Chaco region

In **Peru**, 33,000 people are subject to forced labour in the logging industry affecting 75 percent of all indigenous people.

Who does bonded labour affect?

Bonded labour disproportionately affects marginalised groups and groups that are discriminated against on the basis of their caste or ethnic origins. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights stated in 2000 that *“Victims of slavery and slavery-like practices frequently belong to minority groups, particular racial groups or categories of people who are especially vulnerable to a wide range of discriminatory acts, including women, children, indigenous people, people of ‘low’ caste status and migrant workers.”*

What are the causes of bonded labour?

Poverty, discrimination, social exclusion and insufficient implementation of legislation are the root causes of bonded labour across the world.

In South Asia, a caste system excludes particular groups from accessing education, health care and land, on the basis of their assigned status at birth leaves this group vulnerable to exploitation and families trapped in a cycle of poverty. Desperate poverty in India means that 81 per cent of those trapped in bonded labour took out a loan from a landlord as they did not have enough money to meet their basic needs, with over 70 percent of people bonded for an initial loan equivalent or less than \$16 (USD).

A manipulative form of bonded labour affects 33,000 people in the Peruvian Amazon who are forced to work in the logging industry. Timber companies use middlemen to approach indigenous communities and offer them advances in the form of money, basic goods or public services such as building schools or playing fields. In return the community is contracted to provide an amount of timber of a specified quality. Middlemen overcharge for goods they provide whilst undervaluing the timber provided or rejecting it for being of inferior quality. Final payment on delivered timber is repeatedly postponed thereby increasing the debt. The contracts that the communities sign states that they are not allowed to sell timber to anyone else or work for anyone else which traps them further into debt bondage.

The ILO estimates that one third of forced labour in logging in the Peruvian Amazon is on illegal camps on the land of indigenous communities. Basic goods are sold at inflated prices and bosses retain documents to control workers who are not paid until the end of the season. If debts are greater than earnings, they are forced to return the next season to pay off their outstanding debts.

What kind of work do bonded labourers have to do?

Bonded labourers are subjected to a variety of jobs and lose all control over the conditions and are prevented from seeking other employment. The types of job most commonly carried out by bonded labourers are in the following areas:

- Logging industry
- Work on ranches
- Domestic work
- Forced labour in agriculture, food processing and sexual exploitation as a result of trafficking

What are the consequences of bonded labour on families?

Bonded labour often involves whole families who all have to work to pay off the debt incurred by one member of the family. This creates a cycle of poverty that can continue for generations and leave multiple generations without access to education or a choice of jobs. In Bolivia for example, Guarani families work together on private ranches, so while men may get paid, the women and children who often carry out domestic work are paid nothing. The children are prevented from attending school and gaining an education which could help free them from a cycle of poverty.

Parents unable to provide materially for their children or send them to school and come to see education as having little value in the life that they know.

What international laws protect bonded labourers?

Whilst there are numerous national laws in affected countries the underlying international convention which defines bonded labour is the United Nations Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices similar to Slavery.

Article 1 states ' Each of the State Parties to the Convention shall take all practicable and necessary legislative and other measures to bring about progressively and as soon as possible the complete abolition or abandonment of the following institutions and practices where they still exist;

Debt bondage, that is to say the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of those services are not respectively limited and defined.

How can we end bonded labour around the world?

While some people think that enslaved people should be freed by buying their freedom for them, this can actually perpetuate the cycle of slavery. Enslavers can use the money to buy more people into slavery and released enslaved people can find themselves destitute without the necessary help to help prevent them from being re -enslaved.

Slavery functions as an institution which thrives on poor and marginalised people. Anti-Slavery International works with governments and partner organisations as well as the ordinary public to campaign for the implementation of laws which protect people against slavery and tackles the discriminative practices and poverty that are the causes and consequences of slavery. Anti-Slavery International urges supporter to campaign for the eradication of all forms of slavery around the world by:

- Urging governments of countries with slavery to develop and implement measures to end it;
- Lobbying governments and intergovernmental agencies to make slavery a priority issue
- Working with local organisations to raise public awareness of slavery
- Educating the public about the realities of slavery and campaigning for its end

All of these strands are equally important and an example of successful lobbying resulting in enslaved people gaining their freedom is in Brazil and Nepal, where over 100,000 slaves have been released since 2000.