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## Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 70: 30 Articles on 30 Articles - Article 4

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### Article 4: Freedom from Slavery

Men bought and sold like commodities, held for years against their will on fishing boats off Thailand. Yazidi women sold into sex slavery, raped daily and passed from owner to owner. Human beings offered as birthday gifts to children.

Article 4 is clear: no one has the right to make us a slave and we cannot make anyone our slave. But if you thought slavery disappeared with the end of the Transatlantic slave trade in the 1800s, it may be a shock to learn of the abuse of fisherfolk who supply seafood to some of the world's top supermarkets, the fate of women under so-called Islamic State or of migrant women in brothels in Europe and elsewhere; or current reality in Mauritania, the last country in the world to officially ban slavery.

Enormous progress has been made in the 70 years since adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and indeed in the 150 years since entire economies were based on ownership of our fellow human beings, and religious leaders found divine inspiration for the oppressive system. Yet, slavery-like practices and trafficking in human beings continue to remain a reality of our time.

In the words of British investigative journalist Ross Kemp, "There are more slaves today than there were at the height of the slave trade."

Nadia Murad, a Yazidi woman awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 (jointly with Congolese gynaecologist Denis Mukwege) for publicizing rape as a weapon of war, called her autobiography 'The Last Girl' because "I want to be the last girl in the world with a story like mine." She was captured by ISIS in Iraq at the age of 21 and sold into sexual slavery, targeted because her family belonged to the minority Yazidi religion.

Fully wiping out slavery – some two centuries after Denmark and France led efforts to outlaw it – is still a struggle. As recently as 2016, an estimated 40.3 million people were living in modern slavery, and 70 percent of them were women and girls. Persecution and migration have propelled many desperate people, unwittingly, into the hands of human traffickers. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), in the past five years 89 million people experienced some contemporary form of slavery for periods ranging from a few days to five years.

"For us, slavery was really a natural state. When one is born into a certain environment, it is considered the right one – just and fair."

**- Abdel Nasser Ould Ethmane, Mauritanian who received a slave for his 7th birthday**

**and later became an anti-slavery campaigner.**

The trafficking of people is truly global in nature, with victims of some 160 different citizenships detected in or repatriated from some 140 different countries, according to a report produced by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which described this data as “only the tip of the iceberg.” However, while many victims from sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia in particular end up on different continents, the majority of people who are trafficked remain in their home countries or regions.

The West African country of Mauritania – where certain people of sub-Saharan African origin have often been enslaved as domestic workers by groups with different racial and ethnic origins – became the last country in the world to abolish slavery in 1981. However, it was not until 2007 that criminal laws were passed to enforce the ban. Campaigners say the country has jailed more anti-slavery activists than slave owners.

Elsewhere, cold hard cash is generally the reason slavery flourishes. Investigations by journalists, non-governmental organizations and the UN in 2014 and 2015 found that much of Thailand’s \$7-billion fishing industry was based on kidnapping, violence and imprisonment. Poor men from southeast Asia were lured with promises of good jobs, but found instead 20-hour-shifts fuelled by methamphetamines, regular beatings, torture and execution-style killings. Many were freed thanks to the investigations.

According to the ILO, the 60-75 million people working in the garment industry around the world – some 75 percent of whom are women and girls -- are particularly prone to exploitation and abuse. Research into the industry in various countries has revealed widespread deception over wages and working conditions, restrictions on workers’ movement, intimidation and threats, withholding of wages, and abusive working and living conditions.

An estimated 92 percent of those engaged in forced labour in the accommodation and food services sector are women and girls, and the ILO estimates that 24 percent of all domestic workers – of whom the great majority are also women – are subjected to forced labour.

“Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.”

**- President Abraham Lincoln, who freed slaves in the United States.**

Domestic workers are one of the groups most vulnerable to what is perhaps the least known form of modern-day slavery, known as ‘debt bondage’, where a person is forced to work to pay off a debt – which grows steadily, and which they can never actually discharge. It still flourishes in the brick kilns, mills, mines and factories of South Asia, as well as in other parts of the globe. It is also rampant in the agricultural sector, where a number of cases involving migrant workers have recently come to light in various European countries where it is also frequently used by traffickers to ensnare women and girls into prostitution. Many argue that the ‘kafala’ system operating in a number of Gulf States – where employers have complete control over their domestic workers – is also a form of slavery. Social media in Saudi Arabia, for example, has featured posts by people offering domestic workers “for sale.”

Armed with Article 4 of the UDHR (and the legally binding International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which flows from it), abolitionists continue the fight. Contemporary forms of slavery – whether bonded labour, involuntary servitude, or sexual slavery – are crimes and should no longer be tolerated anywhere in any form, and UN Secretary-General António Guterres has urged everyone to “come together around the key issues of prevention, protection and prosecution to build a future where this crime cannot exist.”

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