

# The Trinidad Guardian

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## Leela Ramdeen

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[leela\\_ramdeen@hotmail.com](mailto:leela_ramdeen@hotmail.com)

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### Modern-day slavery

Tomorrow the world marks the UN International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition. We remember the thousands of slaves who suffered dehumanising treatment.

History often boasts of the magnanimous efforts of certain individuals to abolish slavery. However, slaves never accepted this evil. Many revolted and struggled for freedom, dignity and for justice.

Although the names of most of these brave individuals do not adorn the pages of history, it is important for us to acknowledge that the indomitable human spirit will always rise up against such atrocities. It is that same spirit that continues to rail against modern-day slavery. The yoke of slavery has no place in the 21st century.

Slavery is prohibited by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1956 UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery. But humankind's inhumanity to one another knows no bounds. Today slavery remains a reality—despite the fact that it is banned in most of the countries where it is practised.

Around the world millions of men, women and children are forced to lead lives as slaves. Although this exploitation is often not called slavery, the conditions are the same. People are sold/treated like objects, forced to work for little or no pay and are at the mercy of their "employers." Contemporary slavery takes various forms and affects people of all ages, sex and race.

We need to examine the negative effects of globalisation and free trade if we are to devise strategies to address modern-day slavery. Poverty and inequality make people more vulnerably to slavery.

I have been to places in India, Africa, Turkey etc and have seen sweat shops. I have watched young children sitting in minute spaces with their legs hanging through holes in the flooring as their little fingers weave carpets for the wealthy to purchase at astronomical prices.

The next time you put on your designer wear, spare a thought for the poor who labour in sweat shops for a pittance to produce clothing for some multinational companies whose profits continue to rise annually.

Last month the European Court of Human Rights condemned the French Government for failing to

introduce legislation that would classify slavery and servitude as criminal offences under its penal code after it ruled that a woman was held in domestic servitude by two families in France for more than four years.

Siwa-Akofa Siliadin was trafficked to Paris from Togo in 1994 when she was 15 -years-old by a woman who said she would give her an education and provide her with a residency permit. Instead, the woman forced

Siliadin to work as a domestic and confiscated her passport. For four years, Siliadin had to work up to 15 hours a day, seven days a week, was rarely allowed out of the house, was refused time off and was not paid.

Two of her "employers" were sentenced to 12 months in prison; seven of which were suspended. And, in 2000, they were acquitted on appeal. Three years later, an employment tribunal awarded Siliadin her salary arrears and a French appeals court awarded her 15,245 Euro in damages.

However it found that her treatment was not incompatible with human dignity, as defined under French criminal law—a conclusion the European Court has overturned. The court declared that states have a duty to make slavery and servitude a

criminal offence and to punish any act that keeps a person in slavery conditions.

Bonded labour in South Asia is considered the problem in modern slavery affecting the greatest number of people. The UN believes 20 million people are enslaved worldwide, the majority of whom are in South Asia.

Human beings seem to be prepared to go to any lengths to drive down labour costs in order to make greater profits. Such exploitation is a form of slavery. Fair trade should underpin free trade. Unfair trade rules as well as the institutions governing international trade continue to harm poor communities.

Men, women and children are trafficked between countries and men are forced to work as slaves on agricultural estates in certain

countries. The global media paints a rosy picture of life in certain countries. Perceptions of affluence often encourage the poor as well as professionals to migrate from poorer parts of the world to so-called first world countries.

Fear of terrorism is leading governments to react to the increase in migration by making their immigration policies more and more restrictive. This in turn makes migrants more vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking.

A US Government report published in 2004, estimates that 600,000-800,000 people worldwide are trafficked across borders each year. This figure does not include those who are trafficked internally.

Travel brochures that promote "sun, sea, and sex" feed the transnational sex trafficking industry—entertainment girls, hospitality girls, prostitutes, massage girls. In some countries parents "sell" their children to those who enslave them in the sex industry. Some girls and women from slums and rural areas are kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery. The sale of young boys for homosexual acts is also big business in some countries.

Child labour in our world today is rampant. Standards set by the UN and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 182 are flouted with impunity. Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states:

"State parties recognise the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development."

The main aim of Convention 182 of the ILO (1999) is to eliminate the worst forms of child labour. The main provisions of the convention are to clarify which situations should be classified as the worst forms of child labour, and to specify what governments must do to prohibit and eliminate them.

Today there are about 300,000 child soldiers involved in over 30 areas of conflict worldwide, some even younger than ten years old. Research shows that child soldiers fight on the front line, and also work in support roles; girls are often obliged to be sex slaves or "soldiers' wives."

Children involved in conflict are severely affected by their experiences and can suffer from long-term trauma. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, entered into force on February 12, 2002, encourages governments to raise the age of voluntary recruitment into the armed forces and explicitly states that no person under the age of 18 should be sent into battle.

Governments and civil society organisations must step up action to struggle for justice for those caught in such abominable, inhumane traps. People are not commodities. Slavery is an intolerable violation of human rights and human dignity. This crime against humanity will continue until all people of goodwill rise up and say: "No more!"

**Leela Ramdeen is Chair of the Catholic Commission for Social**

## Justice

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Designed by: [Randall Rajkumar-Maharaj](#) · Updated daily by:  
[Sheahan Farrell](#)