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### **The Status Quo's Incentives for Modern Slavery & Potential Solutions**

The problem of 'Modern Slavery' can be broadly defined as that of inescapable forced labor; its exact form can significantly vary, but overall it involves a person or people whose lives are strictly controlled by someone else, who forces them to perform labor for little or no pay and threatens to harm them if they try to cease working or leave their control. For people attempting to solve this problem it is important to consider what causes it in the first place, and for modern slavery a major cause is economic incentives. Prolific anti-slavery writer Kevin Bales describes "the chance of a profit and a person weak enough and vulnerable enough to enslave" as all that is needed to form an opportunity for slavery (6). It is relatively straightforward to see why the opportunity for profit would be an economic incentive for slavery; one way for businesses to increase profits is to reduce labor costs, and one way to do that is by forcing workers into low-wage or unpaid labor. But it is also important to note how a person's vulnerability can relate to economic incentives. Many people who enter slavery are already facing financial difficulty, something which traffickers take advantage of by presenting them with jobs that promise to pay enough to ease those difficulties; often victims will be suspicious of these offers but go through with them anyways due to needing the money, and by the time they realize they have been deceived they will be in a vulnerable enough position for their traffickers to force them to remain (Bales' book *The Slave Next Door* contains several examples, incl. at the beginning in pg3). One specific aspect that to Bales distinguishes 'modern slavery' from that of the past is its illegality causing it to remain hidden and making it difficult to notice and help victims; much of his work aims to increase people's awareness of modern slavery, giving them information that will help

them notice it and resources they can use to help someone who might be a victim of slavery. Bales' work relating to modern slavery is respectable, but in my opinion, it overlooks two relevant issues: Prisons and imperialism. Particularly, I think these issues are essential for understanding the relationships multinational corporations and the U.S. government have with perpetrating forced labor in the present day, and what changes relevant to them could be made to help combat modern slavery.

After reading *The Slave Next Door*, I sought out articles discussing modern slavery within the contexts of both issues I thought Bales had overlooked. In his book he mentions the existence of modern prison labor, but he does not generally consider it to be slavery. He says "It might seem reasonable that convicted criminals serving their sentences should work to pay their keep" (142); he then criticizes China's prison labor practices and the United States' importation of goods manufactured in such prisons, but this criticism is not extended towards the U.S.' own use of prison labor in the present day. Critics of the modern U.S. prison system have spoken out against their increasing use of prisoners for labor, which often includes manufacturing products for multinational companies, often for less than minimum wage or no wage at all (Browne). Attention is drawn to the U.S.' prison population having risen since the 1970s to the point where it is the country with the highest proportion of its citizens being in some way within the prison system (Smith), as well as to a significant amount of those incarcerated being already-vulnerable people, often from marginalized groups and many already suffering from poverty, addiction, or mental illness (Gilmore). While this is not often considered part of the same conversation as modern slavery, those advocating for prison reform attribute the issues of modern-day U.S. prison system to its roots in chattel slavery, and consider the current situation to be a modern form of slavery. Similarly to its treatment of prison labor, *The Slave Next Door* mentions the

existence of imperialism and inequality of power between countries as a factor that might make it difficult to end slavery, but does not seem to consider it a major ongoing factor. Meanwhile, other articles consider these power dynamics essential to the form slavery takes in places such as West Africa. 'Neocolonialism' refers to the period since decolonization in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where former colonial powers have shifted towards using their economic power to exert influence over former colonies (Koshy). The prevalence of slavery is in part attributed to the low negotiating power local people have compared to the corporations that buy from them (Athreya); if farmers or even their governments were to ask for a higher price they would risk buyers seeking other sellers, so they are instead incentivized to lower labor costs to match the prices (Koshy, Manzo). While Bales' text considers corporations to not be blameless in these situations, it presents them as just 'another link in the product chain' despite them having significantly more influence over the chain than many other links.

Given this additional context, I have two main research questions. The first question is: 'Which changes to governments and other power structures would help prevent modern slavery?' The issue this seeks to address is that despite slavery being illegal, many of the incentives that lead to it arise from government policies and economic incentives. It is worth exploring because despite the difficulty in changing how the government and economy work, if they are treated as unchanging then the current incentives for modern slavery will continue to exist; people might be rescued out of slavery and slaveholders might receive harsher punishments, but some would continue attempting to enslave people for a profit, those in vulnerable conditions would still be pressured to take risky job offers because they need the money to survive. The second question is: 'What can individual people do to help prevent slavery?' Besides advocating for broader changes to power structures, it is worth exploring what the average person can do to make a

positive impact. Since Bales' work already has proposals on what people can do to notice slavery around them and get help for potential victims, this would focus instead on what can be done to help people in vulnerable positions who are at risk of becoming enslaved.

Broadly speaking, my proposed solution to these problems would be different for domestic and international slavery. Within the United States, a solution would be the expansion of social safety nets. By making resources needed to live such as food, housing, healthcare freely available to anyone in need, fewer people would be pressured to take jobs in poor conditions or with untrustworthy employers, removing a major opportunity for traffickers to lure potential victims into slavery. This could be done through government-funded programs on the 'power structures' end, and by individual people by contributing to food banks, shelters, and other mutual aid organizations. Ideally, this would coincide with prison reform, as many of the vulnerable people at risk of enslavement are also those at risk of incarceration. Even if not everyone considers prison labor a part of 'modern slavery', it is a form of forced labor used for profit that the government approves of, and one that should not be ignored in the context of modern slavery. On an international level, an essential change to power structures would be to more harshly penalize companies that contribute to slave labor or willfully ignore its occurrence in their product chains. As for individual people, Athreya's argument proposes listening to local communities and organizations, to support their desires which sometimes go unnoticed in favor of more 'corporate-friendly' but less helpful solutions.

## Works Cited

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