

Modern-Day Slavery in West Africa

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Imagine being torn away from your parents at the innocent, delicate age of twelve, and then being forced to work jobs that some never have to do in their lifetimes. Girls and boys all over Ghana are made to live this nightmare. In 2004, over sixty-three of these children were rescued from Ghana Town, Gambia—a 5000-person community of Ghanaian fishermen in Gambia. Boys were (and still are) made to be fisherman and farmers on agricultural land. Girls do housework during the day. At night, they work as prostitutes and live in constant fear of being raped by their male masters. Even worse is that when they leave home, they leave willingly with excitement because of false pretenses of a better future. “Sometimes parents are told that the child will work as a domestic for rich folk and will be able to send back remittances to ease the family’s grinding poverty. The promises soon vanish into thin air. Many parents never see or hear from their children again.”¹ In 2005, the Gambian government passed a law to combat child trafficking and slavery, but it was not effective, and so exploitation of children still goes strong.

The victims targeted for the Atlantic slave trade were men and women to be shipped to the Americas, whereas the Ghana-Gambia trade relies on impoverished children who will leave home willingly. The men and women worked on plantations. The children fish and work as prostitutes. Although this modern-day scenario of slavery in Gambia differs slightly from the Atlantic slave trade that arose in the 16th century, the two are still fundamentally the same because of the parallels between how buyers are able to take victims away, the bringing of the slaves into a foreign land, and the treatment of victims.

In both cases, the victims’ own people sold them in exchange for something better. In the 1500s and later, African sellers sold their own neighbors to the Europeans, who gave them firearms, rum, and horses

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in return. In Ghana, the uncles and aunts told the parents of victims that the kids were going to have a better life, education, and income with a host family overseas. That way, the children could send money back home. The children are left in possession of their relatives, who then meet the slave traders and sell their nieces or nephews for money. In an impoverished country like Ghana, it is not unusual for relatives to exchange their own blood for a profit.

Next, the slaves are transported into a foreign land to disorient and intimidate them. Atlantic slave traders brought the captives to the African coast and from there shipped them to the Americas. The small Ghanaian children are brought into Gambia. The advantage of a foreign land is that the victims do not speak the native language—making it hard for them to get help to escape; and even if they do, they are smuggled illegally with no documentation. The children do not speak either English or native Gambian languages, and if they run away and are caught by police, they will not have proof of working as a sex slave. The master's power only grows more oppressive.

The treatment of slaves was atrocious then, and is still horrendous now. Enslaved Africans from the 1600s on were abused, dehumanized, squeezed into tiny spaces and had no rights. In the 21st century, more than twelve girls were found living in one room; the children cannot go to school; they are exploited; they only eat once a day; they are forced to do jobs beyond their strength; and the children are subjected to physical and mental abuse by their employers. The greedy motivations of money and desire are the same, and people will be people, so when the masters want something out of their slaves, they torture it out of them. Even after 400 years, the treatment of slaves has not changed.

Although today's society separates itself from slavery, slavery (with its same essence in the same form) *does* exist and *is* thriving in many parts of the world, including West Africa. The Atlantic slave trade might have been formally eradicated in all countries (except Saudi Arabia and Angola) by the late 1800s, but it left a lasting impact on the world, which will affect communities for generations to come. ●

Notes

1. "Ghana – Gambia: Sex Slave Children Trafficked by Ghanaian Fisherman." February 26, 2004. IRIN. <http://www.irinnews.org> (accessed September 29, 2009).

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