

United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund on
Contemporary Forms of Slavery

Expert Panel on “Revealing the Child Faces of Modern Slavery”

Palais des Nations, Geneva
2 December 2016
International Day for the Abolition of Slavery



On 2 December 2016, the [United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery](#) (the “Slavery Fund”) convened an [Expert Panel](#) on “**Revealing the Child Faces of Modern Slavery**” to shed light on the child victims of contemporary forms of slavery. The panel featured the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, including its causes and consequences, the International Labour Organization, and experts from civil society organizations around the world working with child victims of contemporary forms of slavery with the support of the Slavery Fund.

The event was attended by representatives from over 50 Member States, civil society, UN entities and the general public. Australia and Germany contributed financially for its organization. A public debate followed the panellists’ presentations.

The Chairperson of the Fund, Ms. Nevena Vučković Šahović, [opened](#) the event with the sobering reminder that contemporary forms slavery remains a painful reality that affects at least 21 million people worldwide, with over one-quarter of those being children. She described the role of the Slavery Fund in assisting victims of modern slavery, including children, through the award of annual grants to organizations at the ground-level providing humanitarian, medical, psychological, legal and social support to victims. In 2016, the Fund provided grants totaling US \$580,000 to 42 organizations in 34 countries, who in turn assisted 29,000 victims, more than one-third of whom are children. In the next five years, the Fund will prioritize specialized assistance to victims, especially women and children, in situations of conflict and humanitarian crises.

“The number of children who fall victim to modern slavery in its different forms is ever-increasing. While being removed from a life of freedom and dignity, children are deprived of the fundamentals of childhood, a right that they are both morally and legally entitled to. States have the obligation to uphold these rights and to implement the necessary steps to eradicate all forms of modern slavery, for once and for all.”

– Nevena Vučković Šahović
UN Voluntary Trust Fund on
Contemporary Forms of Slavery

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr. Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein emphasized in his [statement](#) that much of modern slavery is hidden from sight, as “victims, including children, are frequently enslaved precisely because they have been rendered vulnerable and invisible – by years, perhaps generations, of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and failures by States to protect them.”

The High Commissioner referred to different contexts in which children today are exploited around the world: little girls forcibly married, sexually abused, exposed to domestic servitude; children enslaved by extremist groups in conflict zones; boys and girls forced to work in hazardous conditions, often without pay; children abducted and forced to become combatants. He expressed concern for the particular vulnerability of migrant children, especially unaccompanied migrant children, many of whom “have been held captive in inhuman and degrading conditions during their journeys, and subjected to forced labour, violence, sexual violence and sexual slavery, as well as extortion.”

“Modern slavery is a global affront to humanity, and it demands stronger global action. Combating slavery not only means its direct prohibition in law but also fighting its root causes, increasing access to justice for victims through effective enforcement of legal provisions, and better provisions for rehabilitation.”

– Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

The High Commissioner paid tribute to the work of professionals around the world, including those supported by the Slavery Fund, who daily assist child victims of contemporary forms of slavery. These professionals “have witnessed the effects of exploitation, violence and captivity on children’s development – and they have experience in helping children regain dignity, rights and trust.”

Mr. James Kofi Annan (Challenging Heights, Ghana) shared his [personal story](#) as a former victim of child slavery, which led him to found an organization that has rescued, rehabilitated and reintegrated over 1,500 child victims of slavery on Lake Volta. Sold into slavery at the age of six, Mr. Annan recounted being forced into working as a child fisherman, experiencing hunger, neglect and verbal and physical abuse on a daily basis. After seven years, he managed to escape, but found himself in the same situation of illiteracy combined with poverty, which had led his own parents to give him up for labour. He had a burning desire to go to school, and he put himself through school while working alongside, eventually graduating from high school and university.

“We have shown that change is possible, that trafficking is not inevitable, that slavery does not have to be a life sentence, and that children can be happy and fulfilled, not beaten and forced to work.”

– James Kofi Annan

Mr. Annan spoke about his organization’s work to rescue child victims of slavery and to give them the life-changing opportunities that he lacked. Mr. Annan made a call to action: “Everyone in this room has a part to play, just like I have started my small part. But we need a global concerted effort – actions – that would ensure that at the grassroots level they will receive the necessary attention and support”.

In her [statement](#), the **UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Ms. Urmila Bhoola** shared her experience in meeting with child victims of contemporary slavery around the world, and “the devastation, pain, humiliation and absolute destruction of the human spirit caused by the continued existence of the institutions and practices of slavery.” She noted that, although instances of child slavery differ from country to country, all share the denial of the most basic and fundamental human rights of those affected by it.

Ms. Bhoola recalled that the 1926 Slavery Convention and the 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery are legal standards that “remain relevant touchstones to ensure state accountability for abolishing and eliminating all contemporary forms of slavery.” She indicated that gains have been made, such as a global decrease in number of children engaged in worst forms of child labour, stronger national and international legal frameworks for addressing slavery, and increased efforts to endure business accountability in supply chains. However, the fact that millions

“We must do more to remove children from slavery, address the root causes that push them into slavery, ensure their effective rehabilitation, reintegration and psychosocial well-being and involve them as equal partners in creating a sustainable and inclusive society premised on development and social justice.”

– Urmila Bhoola,
UN Special Rapporteur on
Contemporary forms of slavery

of people remain in slavery means that we must do much more. Ms. Bhoola referred to Goal 8 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda as “a unique opportunity to co-ordinate and intensify global efforts to address the multiple situations in which the persistence of contemporary forms of slavery impedes our progress.” Achieving Target #8.7, she added, “will lead to sustainable and inclusive development underpinned by human rights and social justice.”

Ms. Loretta Bondi (BeFree Social Cooperative, Italy) [illustrated](#) trends currently being observed in the trafficking of women in Italy and Europe, and provided insights on trafficking as a gender issue: “The women and girls we assist leave their countries because of gender-related factors, such as the feminization of poverty, sexual and domestic violence, forced marriages, social instability, unequal access to opportunities and services. These factors have remained constant during the years.” Ms. Bondi stressed the need to challenge the narrative that relates the number of trafficking victims arriving in Europe as recurrent emergencies, rather than as structural factors: “Emergencies justify swift and possibly draconian measures, such as mass expulsions. Structural problems require medium and long-term strategies and investments in the resourcefulness of survivors.”

Mr. Ashif Shaikh (Jan Sahas, India) [described](#) his organization’s work on caste-based discrimination, which contributes to the continued enslavement of 1.2 million people as manual scavengers in India. Jan Sahas has reportedly “liberated” 4,296 children from the practice since 2000, and works for their dignified rehabilitation. He described the organization’s approach in advising the government, collaborating with governmental programs and schemes for rehabilitation and resettlement, and empowering women’s and children’s groups through training and technical support at the community level.

“To steer women and girls into social protection programs is a process that requires months of painstaking individual assistance, including providing shelter, as well as social, psychological, cultural mediation, and legal and job orientation support.”

– Loretta Bondi

Mr. Shaikh’s statement emphasized the government’s role in eliminating contemporary forms of slavery through legislation and assistance schemes, and underlined the importance of collaboration between actors, including government, civil society, and the community members themselves.

Dr. Katy Robjant (Vivo International, Democratic Republic of Congo), a clinical psychologist specialized in the treatment of trauma-related disorders, provided her [insights](#) from working with former child soldiers, victims of trafficking exploited for multiple purposes, and those exploited in forced and bonded labour. Dr. Robjant noted that early trauma experiences are catastrophic in children, whose healthy psychological development depends on the availability of appropriate attachment figures.

Dr. Robjant made recommendations on what survivors of modern slavery need for effective rehabilitation: “Every survivor is unique and has different needs. The psychological needs of victims need to be properly assessed by mental health professionals who are trained and

“Every survivor is unique, and it is the idiosyncratic experiences that occur within slavery that are important, as well as the person’s prior history and the response they receive once they have escaped.”

– Katy Robjant

experienced in working with those in abusive relationships and trauma, and who are able to take individual, systemic, and cultural factors into consideration. Secondly, survivors of modern slavery, in whatever form, are entitled to evidence-based care, rather than programs which are delivered without reference to current research into the impact of such experiences or effective rehabilitation techniques. Survivors can offer key insights and should be consulted about the feasibility and face validity of therapeutic programs, and more than that, be recruited

onto research teams investigating the impact of such therapies. Finally, therapy in isolation will never be as effective as holistic packages of care which address the multiple factors which contribute to further enslavement, be that for psychological, economical, or political legal reasons. Former child soldiers, those forced to work as prostitutes or in domestic servitude, are heavily stigmatized within their communities, and this which can significantly increase their chances of being re-enslaved and forced back into modern slavery.”

Ms. Mary Read (International Labour Organization) reminded the audience that and that a shocking 5.5 million children are in contemporary forms of slavery. She drew the link between slavery and child labour, explaining: “Child labour refers to work that is physically, mentally, socially, or morally dangerous and harmful to children and that interferes with their schooling. Of the 168 million children engaged in child labour, more than half of them are in what is known as the worst forms of child labour, which includes all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery; the use, procuring or offering of children for prostitution or production of pornographic materials; the use and procuring of children for illicit activities; as well as work that by its nature and performance likely to harm the health, safety and morals of children.”

Sustainable Development Goal 8.7:

Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms

For further information on how to contribute or apply to the Slavery Fund, please visit our [website](#) or contact us at slaveryfund@ohchr.org.

