

CHAPTER V: WIDELY RECOGNIZED RIGHTS

There are certain basic human rights for which there is near-unanimous consensus. Few would argue the virtues of enslaving another human being, sexually exploiting a young child, forcing young children into dangerous warfare, or discriminating against another person because of his or her ethnicity. The abolition of these and other widely accepted violations are ingrained in constitutions and legal codes of the vast majority of world states. Yet the violations persist.

The gravity of these violations requires their inclusion in Regional and Human Geography textbooks. This chapter provides a brief introduction to the pervasiveness and significance of these widely recognized human rights, as well as an assessment of the discussions of these rights in the texts.

Modern-day Slavery

For many students, the word slavery conjures up images of slave processions of yoked and shackled slaves taken from the interior to the coast of Africa, before being shipped off to the Americas. The vast majority of students, even those who know very little about the slave trade, generally hold the belief that slavery is part of our *history* rather than our present. Indeed, few students are aware of the tens of millions of women, children and men around the world who are trapped in lives of slavery *today* (Anti-Slavery International n.d.a.). Every nation in the world has outlawed this practice, and numerous international declarations prohibiting slavery have received unanimous ratification.¹ In reality, however, millions of people are trapped in lives of slavery today because these existing laws are not enforced.

Modern-day slavery can take many forms and is found throughout the world. Even traditional, ‘old-style’ chattel slavery has been confirmed by the US State Department. In Mauritania, for example, an estimated 90,000 black Africans live as full-time slaves to their Arab masters, and several times that number are only semi-free. As in traditional old-style slavery, these slaves have no right to property, marriage, or even their own children. Slavery also persists in the Sudan, where women and children are forcibly taken from their homes to become concubines and house-servants. The American embassy in Khartoum has even confirmed that Nuba and Dinka children from southern Sudan are being sold on into slavery in Libya (*Economist, The* 1996a). Such instances of chattel slavery are not, however, limited to the continent of Africa. One researcher estimates that there are 60,000 slaves in Brazil, many forced by wealthy landowners into rubber tapping, forest clearance, charcoal burning, and mining projects in the Brazilian Amazon—a region that is vast and thus difficult to police (*Economist, The* 1996a).

Government-directed forced labor also persists. In Myanmar, “the generals who run the country...in order to rebuild the crumbling infrastructure ...have set about turning the country into a vast labor camp” (*South China Morning Post* 1996). Under threat of violence, citizens are routinely rounded up and forced to labor on infrastructure projects and forest clearance or forced to carry weapons, ammunition, and military equipment for the Burmese Army (Wiedemann 1996). U.N. field observers have confirmed these reports, having witnessed “hundreds of persons [who] were killed by the military when they could not keep up with the work,” and have stated that “the laborers died most frequently as a result of constant beatings, unsanitary conditions, lack of food and medical treatment” (Blaustein 1993).

The most common form of slavery, however, is bonded labor, which traps 20 *million* men, women, and children in a never-ending cycle of servitude, particularly in impoverished nations “where the poor's only equity is their sweat” (*Economist, The* 1996a). Many of the millions who are now in bonded servitude have actually inherited the debts of parents, as debts can be passed from one generation to the next. Bonded laborers can even be sold to another landlord or sold into marriage (*Economist, The* 1996a). An Indian Supreme Court Judge, in a speech condemning the practice, stated that the 20 million individuals trapped in bonded labor in India

...are non-beings, exiles of civilization, living a life worse than that of animals, for the animals are at least free to roam about as they like... This system, under which one person can be bonded to provide labor for another for years and years until an alleged debt is supposed to be wiped out, which never seems to happen during the lifetime of the bonded laborer, is totally incompatible with the new egalitarian socio-economic order which we have promised to build...(Anti-Slavery International n.d.b).

Text Analysis

Only Pulsipher mentions modern slavery, in her discussion of the Yadana Project in Burma. After describing the natural gas project, and mentioning the foreign corporations involved in the venture, she explains

As good as this all sounds for Burma, a major problem remains. Burma is ruled by a military government that has committed numerous human rights violations. In acquiring land for the pipeline, the Burmese government is thought to have used forced labor and to have moved whole villages forcibly...(502).

The discussion also mentions the work of human rights groups to end this abuse.

None of the remaining texts mention the *ongoing* slavery of tens of millions of people throughout the world today. *Historical* instances of slavery and forced labor, however, were mentioned in several instances. Bradshaw, for instance, mentions quite a few historical instances of slavery, including one early *twentieth* century example when the discovery of slave labor in Liberia caused a minor wrinkle the success of the nation's rubber industry.² Most startling, however, is Bradshaw's claim that “The practice of slavery, considered against human rights, is now largely discontinued, but occurs on a small scale in some parts of the world” (49). Students may be surprised to know that the ‘small scale’ of slavery that exists today includes *tens of millions* of people.

Ethnic Discrimination: The Case of the Roma

Europe's largest minority is also perhaps its most discriminated against. The Roma—who are also known as the Gypsies, a term many Roma consider derogatory—number at least 10 million worldwide, three-quarters of whom live in Eastern Europe. And, as the fastest-growing people in Europe, their numbers are swelling (*Economist, The* 1990). Yet for more than 10 centuries, the Roma have been the targets of hatred, fear, enslavement, expulsion, and even annihilation. During World War II, at least 600,000 Roma were systematically murdered by the Nazis, although the latest research suggests the total number killed could exceed 1 million (Cargas 1994). Such “anti-Gypsy” racism persists today, and is found in countries throughout Europe, where Roma are largely uneducated and regarded as second-class citizens.

Although many Roma have lived for generations in one location, they are largely a roaming people who prefer to speak their own language and maintain their distinct cultural traditions. Their nomadic movements are a form of social organization, clearly planned according to sacred Christian holidays and the rhythms of the seasons. In a Roma tribe, an extended family of three generations forms a stable nucleus in which a child who is raised in the *'kumpania'* feels a part of a *permanent* entity, despite the impermanence of his or her surroundings. However, like many nomadic cultures throughout the world, Roma nomadic patterns overlap the settled land usage of other culture groups. This transient nature of the Roma culture leads to the almost unanimous perception of Roma as intruders or foreigners, creating a struggle over material power as well as a struggle over the legitimacy of their culture (Williams 1994).

This conflict far too often translates into violence. Beatings of Roma, at times by neo-Nazi skinheads but more often by 'normal' citizens of mainstream society, have become commonplace. For example, Human Rights Watch found a pattern of coordinated violence against Roma in Romania, including the 1997 attack on a tribe of partially settled Roma, in which fifty to one hundred armed ethnic Romanians chased Roma out of town and then vandalized their homes. Complicity of police authorities ensured that no charges were filed, despite clear evidence regarding who was involved (Human Rights Watch 1997). This attack followed an earlier attack on a neighboring Roma hamlet, in which an estimated 200 ethnic Romanians set fire to the hamlet, killing five people and burning 40 homes to the ground (Cultural Survival 1993; Morier 1995). Similar instances of violence have occurred in neighboring Eastern European countries and signal what many have called an epidemic of hate crimes.³ Unfortunately, Human Rights Watch found that many "frequent outbursts of mob violence [were] tolerated by law-enforcement authorities, or...encouraged or even organized by local officials" (Neier 1995).

Official governmental discrimination of the Roma has helped to perpetuate such violent acts. The U.S. State Department, in its annual report on human rights, harshly criticized the rampant anti-Roma discrimination prevalent in employment agencies, education, housing and access to public services "in every Central and Eastern European state with a substantial Roma population" (Radio Free Europe n.d.). In the Czech Republic, for example, it was discovered that government employment offices had been secretly denoting applications from Roma with an 'R' so as to warn potential employers. In 1999, one Czech town even went as far as constructing a 7-foot-high wall to separate a public-housing project inhabited predominately by Roma from the houses of ethnic Czechs across the street. The wall was eventually removed after then-President Vaclav Havel condemned its construction and suggested that the street which runs along the wall should be called "Intolerance Street" (Kim 1999). However, such instances represent a pervasive official anti-Roma sentiment which can be found in other parts of the Czech Republic as well as other European nations with significant Roma populations.

"The Gypsies are a litmus test not of democracy but of a civil society" (Fonesca 1995, 15). This statement by Vaclav Havel reinforces the importance of examining attitudes toward such discriminated minorities—even when the discrimination occurs in countries outside of one's own region. The fact that pejorative images of Roma have crossed the Atlantic further illustrates this importance. Indeed, in the United States

stereotypes of Romanies abound. They are seen as happy-go-lucky, singing, dancing, earring-wearing, tambourine-banging nomads who are fortune tellers, liars, thieves, kidnappers of children and even cannibals. No American has actually seen the

Hollywood image of those people, traveling by caravan, yet the image persists. [In 1992], The New York Times surveyed Americans regarding how they trusted certain ethnic groups. At the very bottom of the list were Gypsies, rated less trustworthy than the Whisians, a nonexistent group invented by the pollsters solely for the purpose of that survey (Cargas 1994).

Text Analysis

There are no mentions of the plight of the Roma in the textbooks assessed in this study. A few texts include brief references to *aspects* of the Roma culture—such as the distinct Romany language—yet the on-going discrimination experienced by Roma peoples is not discussed in any of the texts. Pulsipher does describe the “comprehensive change of life” required for assimilation into mainstream European culture, and states that “a member of a European minority that has been around thousands of years, such as the Basques in Spain or the Gypsies, will find it nearly impossible to blend into society” (184). However, apart from this mention, the Roma are absent from the texts.

Children at War: The Use of Child Soldiers

According to UNICEF, there are an estimated 300,000 soldiers under 18 years old fighting in over 30 countries throughout the world (*Economist, The* 1998). The problem is particularly widespread in West Africa, where the nations of Angola, Liberia, the Sudan, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Congo and Uganda have all used large corps of child-soldiers, many abducted and terrorized into obedience (*Pediatrics* 1999).⁴ However, this phenomenon is truly global in its extent. Child soldiers are found in many regions of the world, from Colombia and El Salvador in the west to Myanmar, Afghanistan and Bhutan in the east, and from Belfast in the north to the Great Lakes region of Africa in the south (Wessels 1997).

Military recruitment of children under the age of 15 is forbidden by international law, and most countries have endorsed an optional protocol that would prohibit any military recruitment of children below the age of 18 (Skinner 1999). Yet the practice remains, and statistics show an explosion of child soldiers in recent years, due in part to the prevalence of prolonged civil wars and the advent of modern weaponry, such as the AK-47 Kalashnikov assault rifle, that is relatively light and easy for children to handle (Maier 1998). The use of child soldiers is also on the rise as man-hungry militias have begun to realize that children can be more easily manipulated. Unlike adults, who need a good reason to take up arms, children are obedient, do not question orders, and can easily be convinced “to fight for almost nothing, with small promises of money and loot...They are easy prey for the factions” (Whitman and Fleischman 1994). And, “when the rebels want to spread terror, nothing is more effective than the execution of a village chief by a small boy” (*Economist, The* 1998).

Some child soldiers are in their late teens and are employed in non-combat duty as cooks and porters. However, many are as young as seven years old, and have been kidnapped from their communities and forced to become soldiers, human shields, spies, scouts, land mine “detectors”, porters, and sex slaves (Wessels 1997; *Pediatrics* 1999). Not surprisingly, these children are treated cruelly by their superiors, and report being locked up and beaten for minor offenses or forced to witness the execution of family or friends (Whitman and Fleischman 1994). In addition, numerous reports confirm the use of marijuana, amphetamines, crack cocaine or a

cocktail of local substances including gunpowder in order to make the young fighters more ferocious.

For most child soldiers, initiation into their new lives involves being forced to participate in acts of extreme violence in which they are compelled to help beat or hack to death fellow child captives who have attempted to escape (Skinner 1999). These acts are strategically carried out in order to destroy taboos about killing, implicate children in criminal acts, and generally terrorize the children (Amnesty International 1997).

The general brutalization of child recruits is often a deliberate policy, even in exceptional cases involving ritual cannibalism. Sometimes, in order to humiliate a village under attack and destroy its social order, the youngest boy in the ranks of the attackers is ordered to execute the village chief. Another trick of rebels in Sierra Leone is to use abducted children to attack their own villages and families. Why? So that, feeling cast out from their communities, they will cling to the rebel group (*Economist, The* 1999a).

Faced with this endless cycle of brutality, a child soldier “risks losing all identity except that which his gun gives him” (*Economist, The* 1999a). Sadly, escape is often impossible, as those caught trying to escape are killed, tortured, or made to kill other children as punishment (Amnesty International 1997).

Text Analysis

None of the texts mention the problem of child soldiers. All eight texts do discuss the ongoing wars in Africa, yet all eight texts neglect to mention the soldiers who fight in those wars.

Child Sexual Exploitation

According to UNICEF, over one million children worldwide are involved in the sex trade, often in conditions indistinguishable from slavery (*AIDS Weekly* 1996). Each week, child prostitutes are visited by 10 to 12 million men worldwide (Chidley, Paras, and Showwei 1996), and while statistics on the extent of child prostitution are difficult to collect, a recent study by the International Commission of Jurists concluded that the sex trade for children under 16 is a five *billion* dollar industry (Lederer 1996). Forced child sexual exploitation is present in countries as geographically and culturally disparate as Russia and Benin. Up to 500,000 children are involved in the sex trade in Brazil alone (Rota 1997). In Asia, the center of the child sex industry, children's advocacy groups assert that there are over one million children enslaved in prostitution—including an estimated 60,000 in the Philippines, 400,000 in India, and 800,000 in Thailand (Sachs 1994).

Sadly, child sexual exploitation is growing, with approximately one million new children worldwide entering the sex trade every year (Chidley, Paras, and Showwei 1996). The heightened awareness of AIDS has increased the demand for sex with minors, as children are generally considered less likely to be infected.⁵ Also contributing to the rise in the sex trade is the growth of the Internet throughout the world. Sites on child sexual prostitution are rampant, with one of the most visited sites, *The World Sex Guide*, excitedly proclaiming that “if you're looking for an adventure, Cambodia's IT right now... a six-year-old is available for \$3” (*Economist, The* 1996b, 37). Unfortunately, similar scenarios abound throughout South and Southeast Asia.⁶ Children in the sex trade are exposed daily to violence, degradation, sexually

transmitted diseases such as AIDS, and deplorable living conditions, such as the practice in some Indian states of housing girls in cages while they wait for customers (Poster 1997).

Occasionally, a tragic incident makes headlines. The discovery of the charred remains of three 15-year-old girls, chained to their beds and unable to escape the fire that ravaged their brothel in Thailand, made international news and brought attention to the abuses of child sexual exploitation (Smolenski 1995). More often, however, the child sex trade does not make headlines, allowing the practice not only to persist but also to grow. Despite numerous widely-ratified, legally-binding documents which explicitly forbid the sexual exploitation of children and provide internationally agreed upon penalties for participation in this illegal activity, forced child sexual exploitation remains a reality of life for over a million children throughout the world.

Text Analysis

Only one text discusses the child sex trade. In the introduction to Southeast Asia, Pulsipher describes the sex trade, and states that this trade “raises dozens of questions relevant to all sectors of the economy... [such as] the geography of gender, human rights, disease, and work environments” (472). Moreover, later in the chapter, she again discusses the sex industry, and states that

girls and women have been sold by their families or kidnapped into prostitution. For example, demographers estimate that 20,000 to 30,000 Burmese girls taken against their will (some as young as 12) are working in Thai brothels; their wages are too low to make buying their own freedom possible. In the course of their work, they are routinely exposed to physical abuse and to sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV (483).

None of the remaining texts discuss the widespread and increasing occurrence of forced child sexual exploitation.

Summation of Coverage

Human and Regional Geography textbooks overlook the suffering of millions of people whose basic human rights are being violated. Aside from the discussions of child sexual exploitation and forced labor in Pulsipher’s Southeast Asia chapter, the texts assessed in this study do not even include mere mentions of the on-going and widely-condemned practice of slavery, the persistent and degrading occurrence of child sexual exploitation, the rising occurrence and tremendous impacts of forced child soldiery, nor the pervasive and institutionalized discrimination against Europe’s largest minority, the Roma.

Notes

¹ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the world's most prominent declaration on human rights, guarantees in Article 4 that "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms" (United Nations 1948).

² The text reads

Liberia became a major producer of rubber following the establishment of plantations by the Firestone Rubber Company in 1926. Although there was a scandal in 1936 when it was discovered that slavery and forced labor was still rife in that country, rubber output continues and is a major export (92).

³ Similar acts of violence toward Roma have been reported in other European countries. In Bulgaria, for instance, a crowd of 100 to 200 people attacked and beat five Roma in front of the mayor's office after some cattle from a neighboring village were found to have been stolen. One particularly disturbing account evinces the often deep-seated contempt for the Roma, even among young children:

The most serious incident took place on July 20 in Sliven. Nedka Tsoneva, a forty-one-year-old Roma woman and her twelve-year-old son were assaulted by four teenage boys. The son watched as the boys beat the woman to the ground and repeatedly kicked her. Ms. Tsoneva fell into a coma during the attack and died the following day. The boys reportedly cursed 'the Gypsies' as they beat Ms. Tsoneva, and the oldest is alleged to have told investigators that he killed the woman 'because he hated Gypsies' (Human Rights Watch 1997, 246-247).

⁴ The ongoing war in Northern Uganda, for example, has led to a startling rise in the use of child soldiers; Amnesty International estimates that around 90% of the Lord's Resistance Army are children as young as 11-years-old, many of whom were "abducted and forced through the most brutal methods imaginable to become child soldiers and virtual slaves in northern Uganda" (Amnesty International 1997). The precise number of children who have been abducted and forced to become soldiers for the Lord's Resistance Army is unknown but the estimated three to five thousand children who have escaped from rebel captivity between 1996 to 1998 alone suggests the numbers must be quite significant. Experts estimate that at least an equal number of children are still in captivity and an unknown number are dead (Skinner 1999).

The situation in Sierra Leone is also particularly distressing. Up to 50% of the rebel army and 20% of the government forces are estimated to be child soldiers (Goodwin 1999). Unfortunately, the conditions for child soldiers in this country are judged by most human rights experts to be among the worst (*Economist, The* 1998). In Liberia, UNICEF places the percentage of child soldiers at about a quarter of the armed forces (Maier 1998). The use of child labor in Liberia has become so pervasive, in fact, that leaders from both sides make no attempt to deny their recruitment and use of child soldiers (Whitman and Fleischman 1994). Similar reports have been confirmed regarding other African nations such as Sudan (Gerhart 1995) and Mozambique (Maier 1998), as well as other regions of the world.

⁵ Playing on this pervasive illusion, pimps often hawk the services of children as young as 8 to 13 years old by emphasizing that they are 'clean' (*WIN News* 1993). Unfortunately, children are actually more likely to sustain injury during sex, and are therefore more susceptible to infection than adults (Chidley Paras, and Showwei 1996). According to the director of the Children's Rights Protection Center in Thailand, the HIV infection rate among Thai child prostitutes is now approaching 50 percent (Sachs 1994).

⁶ Details collected by human rights workers are often shocking. In the Phillipines, sex with a 6-year-old virgin can be bought for only \$6, while in India, an hour of sex with a 12-year-old sells for 50 cents (Poster 1997).