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The Unfinished Work: Slavery Today

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The Unfinished Work: Slavery Today

Abstract

2.7 million. That's an estimate for the number of slaves in the world today. The true number is probably higher, even though the United States abolished slavery 150 years ago. Most of today's slaves go unseen and unaided, victims of an opaque system of exploitation that conspires to keep them oppressed. [*excerpt*]

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Unfinished Work: Slavery Today



Photo by Ira Gelb via Flickr.

April 15, 2015

by Kevin Lavery '16

2.7 million. That's an estimate for the number of slaves in the world today. The true number is probably higher, even though the United States abolished slavery 150 years ago. Most of today's slaves go unseen and unaided, victims of an opaque system of exploitation that conspires to keep them oppressed.

Last month, the Gettysburg College chapter of Free the Slaves hosted "The Unfinished Work," a conference that brought together students and activists from across the country to discuss what can be done to fight modern slavery. These modern-day abolitionists—spiritual successors of William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass—came together to talk about a perverted institution that certainly did not end with the Civil War. We all know that the legacy of slavery haunts the moral conscience of the United States, but we cannot afford to forget that slavery itself remains with us, albeit in a different set of forms.

The speakers at the conference came from a variety of backgrounds. There were scholars committed to studying slavery in order to better understand how to fight it, as well as activists striving to bring modern slavery to the forefront of the public consciousness. A Gettysburg College alumna who spoke is on the frontlines of the fight, working with victims of human trafficking to help them rebuild their shattered lives. Although they work in different fields, each of the event's speakers shared a deep and abiding commitment to bringing an end to modern slavery—a commitment that they were determined to pass on to the students gathered in the audience.

During his keynote address, James Brewer Stuart, the founder of the academic activist group Historians Against Slavery, argued that modern slavery should be contrasted with chattel slavery in order to understand the issues at play in slavery today. As Americans, our idea of slavery is so dominated by the legalized racial slavery of the nineteenth century that it is difficult for us to make sense of what modern slavery actually looks like. Modern slavery transcends borders, culture, race, age, and gender in far more complex and dynamic ways than it did centuries ago. Examining the history of slavery can help us to disentangle these separate threads in order to better tease out what we're fighting against today: child slavery, sex slavery, and other variants of modern exploitation. Set thus against the backdrop of chattel slavery and the history of oppression, modern slavery becomes harder to ignore and easier to analyze.

Stuart also commented that we as Americans cannot afford to treat modern slavery as an “international problem” for which we can simply blame countries in the developing world. Rather, we must acknowledge slavery as a “national problem.” The hard truth is that America's hands are stained with the blood of human beings enslaved domestically and abroad, a consequence of our hunger for commodities and our apathy toward their means of production.

Modern slavery is a problem worth getting angry about, but simply letting your rage sit idle until it evaporates is futile. Harness your anger—let it drive you to learn more about the issue of modern day slavery so that you can be better prepared to take tangible action. As was said during the conference, you don't have to be a professional antislavery activist to make a difference. But you do need to care about the issue—and follow through by taking a meaningful stance against an abhorrent institution.

Want to learn more? Here are a few of the resources that the presenters shared with the audience of “The Unfinished Work”:

[Free the Slaves](#)

[International Human Trafficking Institute](#)

[Historians Against Slavery](#)

National Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888

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