

## Slumdogs and Slavery

Written by Jane Marie Smith and Gary Scott Smith  
Friday, 27 February 2009 09:49

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On the Monday morning following the Oscars, U.S. news Web sites splashed the announcement that the “little film that could,” *Slumdog Millionaire*, had garnered the Best Picture of 2008 award. Buried on many of the same Web sites was the news that 48 children had been rescued from prostitution and several pimps had been arrested during the previous week in an FBI sting operation. The juxtaposition and implied importance of the two news stories was striking.

*Slumdog Millionaire*, a film that has been widely heralded for providing a glimpse into poverty in India, also briefly shines a light on child slavery. Jamal and Salim, the brothers on whom the film focuses, are held captive in a Dickens-esque child gang by cruel slaveholders. After their escape, the boys manage to rescue their friend, Latika, just in time to save her virginity from being sacrificed to the highest bidder. Many of the Americans who have flocked to see *Slumdog* since it was nominated for so many awards are undoubtedly horrified by this storyline, but conveniently categorize it as purely fictional or a rare tragedy that only happens in faraway lands. The child-trafficker arrests this past week, however, prove that assumption wrong.

According to estimates from the State Department in its annual “Trafficking in Persons Report,” 600,000 to 800,000 people are illegally transported across international borders each year. Half of those victimized are children -- and most of them are female. Once trafficked, they face unspeakable conditions. Many become domestic servants -- modern-day slaves who work long hours, live brutally, and often suffer abuse. Others work equally long days in hazardous or backbreaking jobs. Many of the girls, some as young as seven or eight, are exploited sexually -- coerced into servicing a dozen or more customers each day.

These atrocities are not just limited to southeast Asia and eastern Europe. They are taking place in our backyards. According to the Department of Justice, the average age at which a girl enters into sex slavery in the United States is 12 to 14. Congressional testimony indicates that 100,000 to 300,000 American children are at risk at any given time of being coerced into the sex trade. Every major city -- and many small ones -- harbor women and children who have been forced to sell their bodies. The children who were recently rescued are just the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

Traffickers use violence, forced drug addiction, threats against families, and brainwashing to coerce their victims. “Recruiters” have targeted girls at high schools in southern California and threatened to expose their illegal-immigrant families if the girls refuse to cooperate. They

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victimize runaways, luring them into their control with kindness -- a kindness that quickly turns to exploitation. Women and girls from South and Central America and Asia are imported into the United States with the promise of legitimate jobs they can use to support their families at home; once they arrive, their "employers" confiscate their passports and other identity papers and force them into prostitution. With no language or cultural skills, no freedom, and no friends, they believe they are left with no options.

These tactics and numbers are not the stuff of urban legend or fiction; both the State Department's and the FBI's Web sites extensively document the horrors of trafficking. Such recent books as Gary Haugen's *Terrify No More*, Kevin Bales' *Understanding Global Slavery*, and David Batstone's *Not for Sale*

detail the causes, methods, and mores of human trafficking. UNICEF's Center for International Crime estimates that more than 30 million Asian women and children have been sexually exploited in the past 30 years. To put those numbers into perspective, 12 million Africans were sold into slavery in the 15th through 19th centuries.

As 21st Century Americans, many of us believe that slavery is ancient history. We wonder how our predecessors allowed such an atrocity during the first few centuries of our history. But we're guilty of the same *laissez-faire* attitude. We must become modern-day abolitionists. We can do so by educating ourselves about the horrors of slavery, by joining forces with others who are working to end this evil, by encouraging our lawmakers to make eradicating slavery a priority, and by reporting suspected slaves in our cities and towns to the State Department hotline for victims of trafficking: (888)373-7888.

Sadly, the media characterized the girls rescued in the FBI stings as prostitutes -- a pejorative label that denies them the victim status they deserve. These girls are only a handful of the thousands of victims currently working in the sex trade in this country and a tiny percentage of the millions enslaved worldwide. It's time to protect these innocents. In the midst of political turmoil and partisan bickering, this is one issue upon which the Left and the Right -- and peoples of all faiths or no faith -- can unite. Together we can end slavery.

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