

fact sheet

today's fight for tomorrow's freedom

Bonded Labour

**Woman bonded labourer,
India**

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What is bonded labour?

Bonded labour - or debt bondage - is probably the least known form of slavery today, and yet it is the most widely used method of enslaving people.

A person becomes a bonded labourer when their labour is demanded as a means of repayment for a loan.

The person is then tricked or trapped into working for very little or no pay, often for seven days a week. The value of their work is invariably greater than the original sum of money borrowed.

"No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms."

Article 4, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948



"[Bonded labourers] 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 labour 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 labourer, is totally incompatible with the new egalitarian socio-economic order which we have promised to build..."

Justice PN Bhagwati, Indian Supreme Court judge, 1982

Is bonded labour new?

No, it has existed for hundreds of years. In South Asia it is rooted in the caste system and flourishes in agriculture, in cottage industries, and in factories.

Debt bondage was also used as a means of trapping indentured labourers into working on plantations in Africa, the Caribbean and South-East Asia, following the abolition of the slave trade.

Bonded labourers are forced to work to repay debts their employer says they owe, and they are not allowed to work for anyone else. Various forms of force are used to make sure they stay. In many cases they are kept under surveillance, sometimes under lock and key.

There are extreme examples of chained labourers kept under armed guard in Pakistan.

Poverty and threats of violence force many bonded labourers to stay with their masters, since they would not otherwise be able to eat or have a place to sleep.

"The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted sixty years ago, proclaimed that 'no-one shall be held in slavery and servitude...' It is difficult to believe that as this great and tragic century draws to a close, the problems of slavery and slave labour remain unresolved... All of us have a critical role to play in ensuring that the issues of enslaved labour and debt bondage are returned to the top of the human rights agenda."

Mary Robison, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1998

Leelu Bai

"I became bonded after I got married to my husband 20 years ago - his family had been bonded for three generations to the same landlord - they took loans for marriage, for illness, for education and so it went on... I used to work from 6.00am in the landlord's house - cleaning, fetching water... Then I would go to work on the farm... cutting, threshing and so on until 7.00pm or later. Sometimes I would have to go back to the landlord's house to clean and wash everything. Only after I had finished could I go home to feed my family. My landlord never let me work with another landlord, he would abuse us and threaten to beat us if we ever went to work for someone else. If we were ill, the landlord would come to our houses and tell us that we were very lazy and so on... As women, we had to work more than men because women had to work in the landlord's house as well as the farm. Even after working on the farm, we had sometimes to go back to the landlord's house to work..."

Former bonded labourer adivasi (indigenous) woman from Thane District, India

Why does bonded labour exist?

Poverty, and people prepared to exploit the desperation of others lie at the heart of bonded labour. Often without land or education, the need for cash just for daily survival forces people to sell their labour in exchange for a lump sum of money or a loan.

Despite the fact that bonded labour is illegal in most countries where it is found, governments are rarely willing to enforce the law, or to ensure that those who profit from it are punished.

Who are bonded labourers?

Entire families kept like cattle on farms in India, Pakistan and Nepal; migrant agricultural workers forced to remain on ranches in Brazil; and the organised export of women into domestic and sexual slavery in Europe.

Bonded labour is expanding due to poverty and the global demand for sources of cheap, expendable labour.

Article 1.

Each of the States Parties to this Convention shall take all practicable and necessary legislative and other measures to bring about progressively and as soon as possible the complete abolition or abandonment of the following institutions and practices, where they still exist...

Debt bondage, that is to say, the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of those services are not respectively limited and defined.

United Nations Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, 1956