

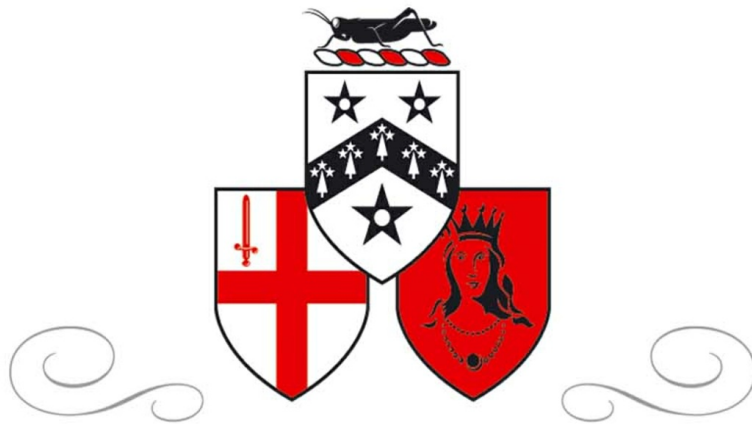


GRESHAM COLLEGE
Founded 1597

Modern Day Slavery Transcript

Date: Monday, 24 October 2011 - 6:00PM

Location: Barnard's Inn Hall



GRESHAM COLLEGE

Founded 1597

Sponsored by The City of London Corporation
and the Mercers' Company

24 October 2011

Modern Day Slavery

Nancy Kelley

In 2009, JRF began a major research programme on forced labour in the UK, with the intention of building a robust evidence base about the nature of forced labour, and identifying the policy and practice changes needed to eradicate it.

The first phase of the programme aims to improve the quality of evidence in this field, through research projects exploring the scope of forced labour in the UK and the experience of workers. The second phase is focused on identifying and encouraging good practice, both in supporting victims of forced labour, and eradicating it from UK businesses. So far we've published a report on forced labour in Northern Ireland, as well as papers exploring the definition of forced labour, and the relationship between immigration status and vulnerability. Over the coming months we will be publishing several new studies including reports on Chinese migrants and on forced labour in the food industry. All of our research can be accessed at jrf.org.uk.

This evening, I will be drawing on our research to date, both the published and yet to be published to work, to give an overview of forced labour in the UK, and to suggest some of the reasons that we are still fighting for the abolition of slavery so long after the battle should have been won.

But first, I'd like to begin with a story.

Ignatius Sancho was born in 1729, either in Africa, or on a slave ship (according to which version of the story you prefer, Ignatius' own, or his biographer's). He was born a slave, and worked as a house slave for many years here in London, before becoming a grocer, author and friend of some of the greatest public figures of the day. In 1774, at the height of the transatlantic slave trade, Ignatius became the first black man to vote in a UK election. When he died, he was the first black person to ever have an obituary in the national press.

Here is an extract from Ignatius' most blistering critique of the slave trade and British Empire. It's taken from a letter written in 1778 to Jack Wingrave, the son of Sancho's friend John Wingrave, the London bookbinder and bookseller:

'I am sorry to observe that the practice of your country (which as a resident I love - and for its freedom - and for the many blessings I enjoy in it - shall ever have my warmest wishes - prayers - and blessings); I say it is with reluctance, that I must observe your country's conduct has been uniformly wicked in the East - West Indies - and even on the coast of Guinea. - The grand object of English navigators - indeed of all christian navigators - is money - money - money - for which I do not pretend to blame them - Commerce was meant by the goodness of the Deity to diffuse the various goods of the earth into every part ... Commerce attended with strict honesty - and with Religion for its companion - would be a blessing to every shore it touched at.'

When we talk about the history of slavery and its abolition, we think of it as something that happened long ago, or something that at the very least is happening far away. For most of us, slavery is about other people, and other times.

But globally, right now, many millions of people are living their lives in contemporary forms of slavery: the child labourers working the cocoa farms of Cote d'Ivoire, the debt bonded members of the Dalit caste in India.

And slavery is also right here, in the farms and factories of the UK, in the sweatshops, brothels and private houses of this great world city.

How is this possible? Slavery, forced labour, trafficking: all of these things are illegal in international law, and in the domestic legislation of most of the countries where slavery exists. The idea that slavery is an immoral abuse of human dignity and human rights is not seriously contested anywhere. But if contemporary forms of slavery exist here and now, then despite this universal condemnation, we can assume that forms of slavery still exist everywhere.

This evening, I will share some findings from our research on forced labour in the UK. Wherever possible, I will be using the words of workers themselves. While I speak, I'd like you to bear in mind the possibility that Ignatius Sancho was right in 1778, and is still right today: the drivers for the existence of slavery are the nature of international commerce and 'money, money, money'.

So what is forced labour?

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) sets out six indicators of forced labour; the visible signs of a hidden exploitation:

Threats of actual physical or sexual violence

Restriction of movement and confinement to the workplace or to a limited area

Debt bondage

Withholding of wages, including excessive pay deductions

Retention of passports and identity documents

Threat of denunciation to the authorities.

This stands in stark contrast to the notion of 'decent work', defined as productive and secure, providing adequate income, offering social protection, respecting labour rights and unions, offering dialogue and participation for workers.

The best way to think about forced labour is to imagine a continuum between these two poles, running from decent work through poor quality work to illegal working practices and ending with extreme exploitation amounting to forced labour.

People move in and out of forced labour as time passes: moving along the continuum between forced labour and decent work. Acquiring new skills, particularly English language skills, can lift workers out of forced labour and into better quality work. For some this improvement in working conditions is permanent, while others remain vulnerable to slipping back into forced labour.

You can see this very clearly in our research on the experience of forced labour among Chinese migrant workers, including in the story of Xiao Zhou, who came to the UK and worked in a succession of jobs, each with slightly better pay and conditions only to then become unemployed because of his immigration status, and left vulnerable to extreme exploitation all over again:

'When I was living in London, one room was shared by five to six people, we slept on mattresses. Later, when I worked in Manchester, the employer provided us with accommodation and one room was shared by two people (but) I became jobless recently, because they are arresting 'illegal' workers more frequently'

(forthcoming study on Chinese migrant workers)

This blurred boundary between forced labour and less severe exploitative labour practices means that identifying forced labour is challenging, and securing convictions for forced labour even more so. In particular, for juries and indeed for members of the public, accepting the existence of forced labour in the UK, and then understanding the profound impact of psychological rather than physical coercion can be very difficult.

Whatever the challenges of identifying forced labour, it is clear from JRF's research, as well as from the work of groups such as Anti-Slavery International and the TUC that forced labour exists here in the UK, however much we might wish to turn our faces from that fact.

Vladis, a Latvian farm worker, was employed in a chicken factory from May to December 2008 and was registered under the Workers Registration scheme. In January he moved to a new job on a farm. He was aware he had to re-register and he gave all his paperwork to a co-worker who spoke Russian and English and who assured him that his registration would be taken care of. He never received a contract or payslips but he was paid £70 a week and told that the remaining salary was being put in a bank account for him...In October 2009 Vladis was in an accident involving chemicals. His employer dropped him off at the hospital and had no further contact with him. He lost his sight and had to remain in hospital for a lengthy period of time. It emerged that he had not been re-registered when he changed jobs and therefore was not entitled to support...He had no money, as the supposed bank account did not exist, and no source of income'

Allamby et al (2011) Forced Labour in Northern Ireland: exploring vulnerability, JRF, York

Using the indicators of forced labour as our starting point and drawing on the JRF research studies it is possible to paint a picture (however partial) of the nature of forced labour in the UK, and the lives and experiences of workers.

The idea of coercion, or a lack of freedom, is central to the definition of forced labour. The ILO indicators in their shortest form identify 'threats of physical or sexual violence' as important evidence of this.

To date, JRF research has uncovered relatively few incidents where workers have experienced violence or the threat of violence, although this is likely to be a consequence of the sectors our research has focused on. Hidden work, such as domestic servitude, and work in illegal businesses such as cannabis farms may well be more closely associated with physical abuse and coercion. Evidence of this can be found in our study of Chinese migrants, where women who experienced sexual exploitation, and men and women selling illegal DVDs were victimised.

Ah Jing was smuggled to the UK by snakeheads (Chinese criminal gangs from Fujian province). When she arrived in the UK, she was coerced into sex work through debt bondage. After being raped by one of the gang she became pregnant, and, no longer of use, was dumped on the street and told that if she said anything to the authorities, her unborn baby would be hurt *(forthcoming study on Chinese migrant workers)*.

For most workers in the studies, threats and coercion were of a more subtle variety. The most powerful threat for some workers, and an indicator of forced labour in its own right, was the threat of denunciation to the authorities.

The vast majority of workers identified in the research were living and working in the UK legally. However, for workers with irregular immigration status, the fear of being deported was enough to make them tolerate extreme exploitation and there is some evidence that employers use the existence of civil penalties for businesses as an excuse to exploit workers still further:

'In fact, this crackdown has become the employer's good weapon. When the crackdown intensifies, the employers would say 'look, we are employing you even at bad, dangerous times. So we can't pay you as much'. If they used to pay you £200 they would be paying you £150 now. They would say 'I have to take the risks for (employing) you' They carry on exploiting, economically and mentally'

(forthcoming study on UK food industry)

In many cases, a worker's immigration status is tied to a specific job: this is true of migrant domestic workers, of A2 nationals under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme, of A8 nationals who came to the UK under the Workers Registration Scheme (this ended in April 2011) and of fishermen on transit visas associated with specific boats. In all of these cases, leaving the exploitative workplace means potentially losing the right to remain in the UK, or staying in the UK and working illegally, exposed to further exploitation and deportation.

Some employers used workers' confusion about their immigration status, and threatened people who were legally resident in the UK with denunciation to the authorities as a way of controlling them. Retaining identity documents, another of the indicators of forced labour, was also common, with some employers confiscating passports at point of employment, or holding onto registration documents, and then using this as a way of coercing their workers to stay.

It is worth noting in this context that forced labour, whilst concentrated in migrant communities, is not confined to them. Arrests in Bedfordshire's Operation Netwing are the most recent in a series of cases where it has been alleged that homeless and highly vulnerable UK nationals have been drawn into forced labour. Immigration status may make people more vulnerable to forced labour, but it is by no means the only thing capable of leaving people exposed to this level of exploitation.

Overall the picture of employment for these workers is one of degradation and psychological abuse, where threats, humiliation, bullying, sexual harassment and racism are commonplace.

'Supervisors were treating us very badly. They shouted at us, sworn at us. They did not call us by our names, we were called by numbers. They treated us like slaves, like slaves. It was very difficult to get used to this, we were treated like livestock.'

(forthcoming study on UK food industry)

The threat of dismissal, like the threat of denunciation, also exerts powerful control over impoverished workers. Across all of our projects, we saw evidence that workers were routinely told they were expendable and that if they failed to work fast enough, got pregnant, fell ill, or needed time off to care for their family they would be dismissed.

'You were not allowed to be sick...I got asthma in factory and I needed to go to doctor but the boss said that if you are sick so long just get 'back home'

(forthcoming study on Chinese migrant workers)

We also saw evidence that where more confident workers complained about their treatment, stood by their colleagues or tried to join unions they were threatened with dismissal, or dismissed:

'Jose, one of Gregorio's Filipino co-workers in the restaurant, was diagnosed with cancer. Initially, the owner accommodated Jose's treatment and need for time off but after a while he refused to pay any more statutory sick pay, even though Jose had not used his full entitlement. Gregorio tried to persuade the employer to pay the sick pay, but without success. The employer said Jose was already sick when he came to Northern Ireland and was therefore in breach of his contract. Shortly after this, Gregorio's employer said he was 'not focused' on his work and was not needed any more. Gregorio had worked at the restaurant for two and half years at this stage'

Allamby et al

Unsurprisingly, the lives of the workers in our studies were characterised by extreme poverty. Underpayment and excessive deductions from wages were common and employer practices ranged from setting hourly rates well below the National Minimum Wage, to piecework in the agriculture industry, where the already low wages fluctuated according to the prices of the produce:

'There is no specific wages - it depends on how much you pick. You can get £7-8 per hour for bigger'

mushrooms, but £3 for smaller ones. Then you have to spend time cleaning, for which you don't get paid'

(forthcoming study on the food industry)

'We get about 80 pence an hour...but we have to stay on the streets until 6 or 7 o'clock at night...you can get £10 to £12. Today I only make £3'

Allamby et al

Researchers found some examples of people being dismissed to avoid paying them at all: *'My manager one day called me and said he was dismissing me. At that point the money had not been paid into my bank!'*

Debt bondage, another indicator of forced labour, was also very common amongst the workers in our studies. In some cases this was a direct form of debt bondage, where workers had paid a sum for passage to the UK, sometimes supplemented by agency 'fees' for finding work, and had to work to offset these. These fees can be extortionate, particularly where the worker in question is smuggled into the UK as an irregular migrant (fees charged by travel facilitators in the Chinese workers study ranged from RMB 100,000 to RMB 300,000 or £9,500 and £28,700)

Amongst the Chinese workers, families paid off the facilitators, so the debt was owed to them: this is not considered debt bondage. However, the strong cultural imperatives mean that this debt is as binding, if not more so, than a debt owed to a third party, and the workers in this study were determined to not only pay off debts to their families, but to send extra money home.

'After I paid the debts I was relaxed. I wanted my family to have a better life as my parents had suffered from a hard life. They had suffered a lot mentally. I can only earn money here to compensate them. I still send money back'

(forthcoming study on Chinese migrant workers)

Many employers took significant 'deductions' from their employee's wages, for transport, accommodation and administration. In some cases, these deductions left the worker with no pay at all:

'For all the work during the busy time I have received about £119 only. Almost two weeks without a day off, 11.5 hours per day...Then when it was quieter I have not received anything. I only got a payslip with all the deductions. I was even earning enough to pay for accommodation!'

I was in debt'

(forthcoming study on UK food industry)

We also found evidence of people being kept in poverty through underemployment, where agencies required workers to sit by the telephone and be permanently available. In these cases, not only were the agents and gangmasters creating a hyper-flexible workforce, they were also making a direct profit from the fees they charged for accommodation, or finding 'jobs'.

One of the most important factors that rendered people vulnerable to falling into forced labour was the isolation that comes with a lack of language skills. Without at least some English, workers had no way of understanding their rights, or even the information in their own payslip (in the cases where employers provided them), and were sometimes dependent on their exploiters to translate for them.

With little money, less time and poor English, workers had no real opportunity to establish relationships in the wider community, so nobody to help them understand their situation or support them to escape it. For some, contact with the wider host community was actively negative, and characterised by racism and prejudice. This was particularly true for the Roma in our Northern Ireland study:

'They pass by and hit the windows...they are knocking continuously at the back of the house, they are shouting at us to get out of the house and we don't know what to expect.... There's nowhere else we can go'

Allembly et al

Our studies didn't find examples of workers being confined to their workplace or imprisoned, but did find some evidence that employers exploited the fears of their workers and the physical isolation of the workplace to create similar levels of restriction. The clearest example of this is found in Paola's story. Paola's came to the Republic of Ireland from Brazil, and found work in a meat packing factory. She was moved from the first factory to a second one in Northern Ireland, without understanding she was in a different country. Her employer told his workers that Newry was very dangerous, that they weren't safe if people saw them walking to work and that they shouldn't be seen in groups. As a consequence, for the 15 months she worked in his factory, Paola barely left the house.

Finally, the working conditions and living conditions of most of the workers in our research were appalling.

Many workers in the studies were on their feet for as much as 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, without breaks or holidays:

'Hours vary, but I was doing an average of 75 hours per week. I would start at 7am then work at least until 6pm, 8pm or 9pm. There were no set times for breaks – you would get lunch when you could, with someone covering until you got straight back to work'

Allembly et al

The work people were asked to do was often backbreaking, but also unsafe: *'a person hit his head and needed stitches. He wanted to go to the doctor, but the manager told him to get back to work'* (Allembly). Workers in the studies lived in overcrowded and poor quality accommodation: *'We rented a house ourselves. Upstairs there were more than ten people, four to six people per room. Some slept on bunk beds, some lying on rows on mattresses. It cost us £19 each'* (forthcoming study on Chinese migrant workers)

So why is this happening?

I began this evening by quoting Ignatius Sancho's analysis of the drivers of slavery in the 18th century: the idea that it was the nature of international commerce, and the desire to make money divorced from finer moral sentiments that was causing slavery to exist and to flourish.

In 2007, the ILO estimated that \$8.1BN in illegal profit was being generated by the use of forced labour each year. More recently, in their 2009 report the Costs of Coercion they estimated the cost to the workers (through fees, deductions and underpayment of wages) at \$21BN each year. So there it is: money, money, money.

Profiting from forced labour in this way is a relatively new market. Forced labour as a criminal offence has its roots in exploitation by the state, rather than by individual businesses. Over recent years, the ILO and others have noticed a significant shift away from this norm and towards first, increased prevalence of forced labour amongst private businesses in the developing world, and more recently a shift into the supply chains of mainstream businesses in the developed world.

One way of understanding this is to see it as part of the wider impact of globalisation: transforming the market for forced labour, just as it is transforming the global labour market as a whole.

Since WW2, as the flow of information, goods and people has accelerated and trade barriers have reduced, massive global businesses have emerged, with increasingly complex supply chains.

In some sectors, such as the food industry, this enables transnational corporations to contract out production, and then exert significant downward pressure through their supply chains.

In practice, this can mean that producers are under great pressure to reduce costs and this, in turn, increases the likelihood that they will resort to unscrupulous gangmasters and agents to find cheap staff to pick and pack their produce: it creates a 'demand' for forced labour. Over recent years the supply chain practices of the major supermarkets have been subject to sustained criticism for precisely these reasons: we have become accustomed to a steady stream of media stories about the supermarkets pressuring UK farmers to reduce costs to the point of their businesses becoming unsustainable.

Another impact of these complex, vertically disaggregated business models is that even those companies who want to ensure there is no forced labour in their supply chain may struggle to achieve this in practice. Between the person picking mushrooms and the international supermarket 'category manager' are several discrete organisations, and no real line of direct communication.

At the same time, globalisation has had a long run effect of 'hollowing out' the UK labour market, leaving an hourglass shaped income distribution characterised by high pay, high skill, high quality jobs at one end, and a large number of low, pay, low skill and low quality jobs at the other. Across former industrial regions of the UK, skilled manual work along with jobs that paid a 'family wage' have all but disappeared, leading to a steady rise in in-work poverty and a race to the bottom in pay and conditions at the bottom of the labour market.

These poor quality jobs are concentrated in particular sectors, and it is in the least regulated (or most difficult to regulate) of these sectors that forced labour is prevalent.

Based on the evidence to date, it is clear that forced labour in the UK is concentrated in sectors such as construction, caring, domestic work, hospitality, cleaning and agriculture. All of these sectors employ large numbers of people on low pay and short term or agency contracts, and most are examples of '3 D' jobs: dirty, difficult and dangerous.

The relationship between these types of jobs and migrant labour is complex and politically contested, not least because of a long running public debate about whether migration depresses wages or displaces domestic labour supply. While the evidence is mixed about the impact of migration on pay, there is no evidence that migration displaces UK workers from the labour market (known as the 'lump of labour fallacy').

This said, we found evidence in our studies that where workers were being pressed into forced labour, they

were often working alongside UK nationals who were working under far more favourable conditions:

'I saw in the factory that local people were working alongside us and their pace of work and efficiency...are all different from us. They worked as if they enjoyed it...They worked and played at the same time...We were not like that at all. We never had a minute of rest. We were rushing all the time. If we imitate the English workers and had a cup of tea during work, we'd get told off... The English workers made 100 items per hour, I made 500 in the same time!'

(forthcoming study on UK food industry)

It is also important to note that there is particular evidence of forced labour in the ethnic catering sector, as illustrated in our study of Chinese migrant workers. Although these businesses are not subject to the same pressures as producers in global supply chains, there is an expectation of long and unsocial hours as well as low pay, and owners recruit new migrants (often irregular migrants) under conditions that for some are exploitative, and for a minority constitute forced labour.

In addition to having a large number of low pay, low skill jobs concentrated in particular sectors, the UK's commitment to maintaining a 'flexible' labour market is relatively unusual when viewed alongside other European countries.

In fact, the UK has, in relative terms, the highest levels of agency work in Europe, concentrated in sectors where subcontracting is the norm, such as agriculture, food processing, hospitality and care work. You probably recognise that list of sectors. It bears a striking resemblance to the list of sectors where we know forced labour is prevalent.

In our studies we found substantial evidence that agencies or intermediaries were operating a range of business models, all dependent on forced labour to a greater or lesser degree. At one end of the spectrum, the snakeheads, gangs which operate in a range of global criminal businesses, are charging huge sums of money to smuggle Chinese migrants into the country. Other models involved agents and gangmasters charging 'finders' fees for jobs, often along with fees for travel and accommodation, and deliberate underemployment, combining at times to create 'zero wage' jobs. These are the business models of forced labour, supplying cheap work for mainstream business.

Although there are a range of protections in UK law for employees, accessing knowledge about rights and entitlements and getting support for enforcing labour rights can be very challenging in practice. Over recent years, membership of trades unions has become concentrated amongst public sector professionals, with the most recent figures showing that only 16.8 of private businesses have collective bargaining agreements in place. Membership is also focused on UK nationals. For forced labourers, mostly foreign nationals doing low paid unskilled work in private businesses, the likelihood of being able to join a union and get help is slim indeed.

Finally, there is the supply side of the global labour market, where the relative ease of international travel combines with vast inequality between incomes in the wealthier and poorer nations to create a situation where many people are prepared to make long, expensive journeys to do exploitative work.

This story of migration and hardship in order to achieve a better life for yourself and your family is an old one, and is woven throughout our study on Chinese migrants. In contrast to older waves of migration from China, most of the workers in our study came from rural or semi-rural areas where people are surviving on below subsistence incomes (under a dollar a day)

'In Fuqing, a worker's salary was the second lowest in China. Only about RMB100 (£10) a month. But in the UK I could earn about RMB10,000 per month... I only had one choice, which was to work abroad'

(forthcoming study on Chinese migrant workers)

One of the more problematic issues in forced labour stems from the nature of this 'choice': for some workers, the pay and working conditions of forced labour in the UK are better than the pay and conditions prevalent in their country of origin. Not only does this mean they are unlikely to see themselves as being exploited, and hence, are less likely to seek help, but it also means that some commentators have raised the idea that people may 'choose exploitation'.

Guy Standing's notion of a growing global 'precariat' is useful here. In his book, he distinguishes between the precariat – a large global workforce living lives characterised by social and economic insecurity, and the 'salarariat' a secure, economically and socially privileged minority. People who experience forced labour are part of this 'precariat', only able to choose between different types of insecurity and poverty.

So what can be done?

If the increasing prevalence of forced labour in private business is indeed in part a function of globalisation, then any answer to the question 'what can be done?' will inevitably sound glib and insufficient.

Today, as politicians across Europe struggle with recession, stagnation, currency collapse, worklessness and

inflation, the question of how we can build sustainable local labour markets that offer decent work is harder than ever to answer. But the solution for the worker experiencing forced labour is also the solution for the low income worker, or the worker trapped in the low pay / no pay cycle: we need an approach to growth that moves us away from our hourglass economy, and towards better quality, not just more jobs.

Legislation, regulation and enforcement also have an important role to play, and we have seen significant moves towards a more effective system in recent years.

Until recently, there was no criminal offence specifically addressing forced labour in the UK, and prosecutions were based on anti-trafficking legislation. In 2009, the UK government created a new criminal offence s71 of the Coroners and Justice Act, making it illegal to hold 'someone in slavery or servitude, or [require] them to perform forced or compulsory labour'.

Unlike the trafficking legislation, this new offence would cover the vast majority of cases we have uncovered as part of our research. However, it is important to remember that investigations in this field have mostly been expensive, multi-agency affairs and convictions hard to secure.

Across our research, and in the anti-slavery and labour rights field as a whole, there is consensus that the Gangmaster's Licensing Authority, which was set up in response to the Morcambe Bay tragedy, has done an excellent job of regulation and enforcement in the sectors it covers (the agriculture, forestry, horticulture, shellfish picking and food processing and packaging). In fact, there is strong anecdotal evidence that the quality of the GLA's work has displaced exploitative gangmasters into unregulated sectors. This alone is a persuasive argument to expand its remit.

However, part of the challenge of using regulation to reduce the incidence of forced labour in the UK is the extremely broad range of ways in which forced labour practices break the law, and the equally broad range of agencies responsible for addressing these breaches. Local Health and Safety officers, HMRC, the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, the Employment Agencies Standards Inspectorate (EASI) and of course, the police are just some of the organisations involved in regulation and enforcement in this field. Working towards a system where information is shared and collated across these agencies would at least begin to build a better understanding of forced labour in the UK, and would help ensure fewer workers are left without protection.

While it appears that the majority of workers experiencing forced labour are legally resident in the UK, it is clear from our research that immigration status can increase vulnerability to forced labour. A simpler system for migrants entering the UK to work would reduce this risk, as would ending the practice of linking visas to particular jobs.

For irregular migrants trapped in forced labour, a temporary status or bridging visa that supported people to come forward and seek help (currently available for trafficking victims), and changing the rules for employment tribunals to allow irregular migrants to make claims, would both reduce the level of protection we are currently giving exploitative employers.

Raising awareness of forced labour amongst mainstream advice and support organisations, whether the Citizens Advice Bureaux or local public services, could help reduce the isolation of workers and support them to seek help and redress. In particular, extending the excellent work done by the TUC on vulnerable workers to ensure that local union representatives are actively looking for workers at risk of forced labour could make a real difference.

Despite the challenge of managing complex supply chains, businesses can and must take a lead role in eradicating forced labour. Recent developments in corporate social responsibility as well as a concern to protect brand have both contributed to a more active approach to eradicating forced labour from supply chains. The work of the Ethical Trading Initiative has been key in supporting this, as it brings together companies, trades unions and voluntary organisations to improve conditions for workers on a global scale. However, more focus on workers in the UK would be welcome, and there is a need to maintain an emphasis on workers rights and social sustainability alongside the environmental sustainability agenda.

Finally, we too have a part to play.

We can support organisations such as Anti Slavery International, which has been working towards the abolition of slavery globally for more than 170 years.

We can raise awareness of forced labour in our own communities, with our MPs, with local business groups, even amongst our family and friends.

We can consider the choices we make about what we buy and where it comes from.

And we can play a positive role in the wider public conversation about the future of our economy.

Ignatius Sancho, though clear about the relationship between commerce and slavery, was equally clear that business could be a force for good:

Commerce was meant by the goodness of the Deity to diffuse the various goods of the earth into every part ... Commerce attended with strict honesty - and with Religion for its companion - would be a blessing to every shore it touched at.

In the current economic climate, a conversation about what our economy could be like, how business and commerce might be shaped for good, is happening all around us. We can be part of this conversation, and make sure that the most vulnerable workers in the UK are not pushed aside or blamed for their own exploitation.

I began this evening with the words of a slave, and I'd like to end with the words of a forced labourer, to remind us that while much has changed since the days of the transatlantic slave trade, too much remains the same:

'She fed us all with a huge container. She put all the food in one container, for us to eat. A man asked the boss' why are you feeding workers with this container?' and the boss said to him they come from mainland China - they are like pigs'

(forthcoming study on the food industry)

© Nancy Kelley, Gresham College 2011