

Contemporary Slavery?

Ensnaring Fishing Labor in Guinea-Bissau

Anna McEntrie, Brandon D. Lundy, and Kezia Lartey



Abstract:

This project examines modern day indentured servitude in the fishing industry of Guinea-Bissau and compares it to other forms of contemporary slavery. How do international fishers ensnare local labor into long term work (con)tracts?

Definitions:

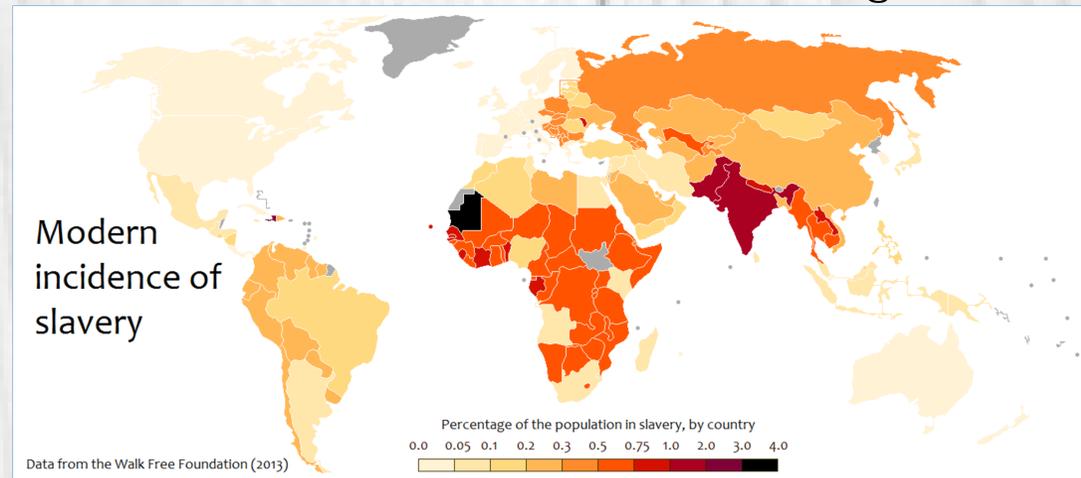
Modern Slavery/Contemporary Slavery, is essentially “the conduct involved in reducing or holding someone in compelled service” (U.S. State Dept.), which includes: forced labor, sex trafficking, bonded labor, forced child labor, etc. Estimates of the number of slaves today range from around 21 million to 29 million.

Bonded Labor/Debt Bondage, is the most widespread form of slavery when “recruiters unlawfully exploit an initial debt the worker assumed as part of the terms of employment” (U.S. State Dept.)



Introduction:

Modern slavery is a multi-billion dollar industry and is often viewed as a by-product of poverty. Bonded labor exists because of a persistence of poverty and is designed to exploit desperate laborers. The cycle begins with a debt that was acquired or inherited and cannot be paid off. In Guinea-Bissau, clandestine foreign fishermen (often described as “Korean”) arrive with fishing equipment and loan it out to local fishermen through the village leadership (Lundy 2014). Participants must agree to supply *bobo croaker* to offset their new debt. Once they have paid back the cost of the equipment in fish, they are debt free and can use the equipment for personal profit. The issue is that these nets wear out and break before they can ever pay back the loan so the local fishers end up needing more equipment and never being able to get out of debt. In isolated communities, these arrangements are often the only places to secure needed materials. Some local fishers will also work on board foreign vessels as contract labor. Captains often demand personal documents to keep them from jumping ship in foreign ports (Skinner 2012, Feb. 23).



Method:

This data comes from semi-structured interviews with Bissau-Guinean labor migrants (N=57) as part of a broader project on transnational migration and community integration in Cabo Verde, West Africa. The interview cited here references a Guinean man describing how he is essentially stuck in Cabo Verde due to a Chinese fishing vessel captain employing him and then not releasing his legal documents while in port. This theme appears in the interview data on several occasions.



“In Guinea, he started working for a Chinese fisherman. He made fishing nets. The Chinese company took them, all their documents, so they could not go anywhere, so he had no documents.” (Lundy, 2014)



“The Chinese knew that many people used to flee to Europe through that way [on fishing vessels] so they just took them [legal documents] for precaution.” (Interview, May 16, 2015)



Conclusion:

Countries that lack political, economic, and social stability create an environment where traffickers and recruiters can come in and exploit people looking to improve their livelihoods. Places like Guinea-Bissau have vulnerable populations (Bordonaro 2007, 2009; Einarsdottir et al. 2010). Eager for work, many take on debt, hand over their legal documents to recruiters, or worse, are kidnapped and trafficked across national borders, often as children. As this research demonstrates, this modern slavery can take place in one’s home village or in a faraway territory, both with equally inhumane results.

“They would not call it slavery but some other name. Slavery has been fruitful in giving herself names... and it will call itself by yet another name; and you and I and all of us had better wait and see what new form this old monster will assume, in what new skin this old snake will come forth.”

Frederick Douglas

To tackle slavery today and help those 28 million people find freedom, we must all better understand these “new forms” this “old monster” has assumed.

*Citations available upon request.