
Addressing Modern Slavery starts with familiar statistics about the “estimated 40.3 million people enslaved around the world” and the daunting task of releasing 10,000 of those each day if we are to reach the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 8.7 of eradicating modern slavery. In this book, Nolan and Boersma combine statistics, case studies and conceptual reflections to show how concerted efforts by governments, businesses and civil society could accomplish that daunting task.

After summarizing the book, this review offers a critique of the current dominance of economic and supply chain strategies in the anti-slavery movement: dominance that is reflected in the focus of Nolan and Boersma’s book.

In Chapter 1, Nolan and Boersma outline the challenges of modern slavery, commencing with an admission that, despite growing public awareness about the problem, there is no globally recognized definition of contemporary slavery. They rightly question the connotations of the term “slavery,” especially the way it establishes a triad of victim, exploiter and rescuer. They note that such a framework can “deny agency to those exploited,” though they omit to note that this conceptualization also denies agency to the exploiters. I will say more about the importance of that omission later.

On the definitional issue, the authors propose that “modern slavery should be seen as part of a continuum of exploitation” (p. 10). I think that’s a sound approach, though as with any continuum, it raises a boundary issue – where to draw the line above which exploitation should be counted as slavery – which is one of the fundamental challenges for any attempt to measure the prevalence of modern slavery.

Nolan and Boersma cite a vast array of examples, not only in this chapter but throughout the book. They document cases and statistics ranging from seasonal harvest workers in Australia, hand car washers across Britain, fishing in Thailand, preparation for the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, debt bondage in Cambodian brick kilns, cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo, prison labor in the USA, state-sanctioned forced labor in North Korea, and so on. I believe one of the book’s most significant accomplishments is the thoroughness with which these examples have been compiled. The authors’ commitment to documenting the breadth of labor exploitation globally, as well as documenting the current range of commercial and legislative responses to that exploitation, is enormously valuable.

Another theme raised in the first chapter is that “the global economy is built on the backs of low-paid and exploited workers” (p. 22). This theme is taken up in Chapter 2, which describes the depth and complexity of supply chains and notes that “this mode of production generates immense cost pressures that are passed on to suppliers” (p. 40). Global business innovation outpaces regulation, resulting in a lack of responsibility for labor standards and human rights. As the authors point out, the small amount of legislation in this space lacks teeth, and often governments are complicit in the problem. Civil society is ineffective in dealing with the exploitation due to the lack of government support, and international organizations are useless because they lack local influence. Consequently, we rely on the very companies that benefit from labor exploitation to self-regulate. The chapter ends with the claim that “progress in the fight against modern slavery can only be achieved if this cycle is broken” (p. 71). However, after several readings, I am still unsure what the structure of that “cycle” is, or whether it is cyclical.

Chapter 3 discusses the possibility of corporations developing their social conscience. Nolan and Boersma are emphatic that the business sector must play a role in ending modern slavery and
provide some examples of companies that take corporate social responsibility (CSR) seriously. Nevertheless, from their perspective, the whole area of CSR is full of question marks. Drawing on Milton Friedman’s free-market analysis, they recognize the common assumption that the only responsibility of a business is to make money for its shareholders. How then can a corporation create a business case for human rights? In answer, the authors accept that although some pressure can be brought to bear via global compacts, national laws, and codes of ethics, the patchwork of regulations, guidelines, ad hoc naming and shaming, and self-regulation have not been effective levers to date.

Given the limitations of CSR, Chapter 4 considers the role law can play in regulating the business of modern slavery. The chapter outlines guidelines (‘soft law’) from the UN and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and regulations that specifically target modern slavery in the USA, the UK, France, and Australia. For the most part, these laws seek to increase the transparency of labor exploitation on the assumption that visibility will act as an incentive for corporations to address any human rights issues in their operations and the operations of their suppliers. Nolan and Boersma point out several problems with that assumption and conclude that although these laws “shine a spotlight on modern slavery in supply chains,” which is a useful first step, they “don’t force companies to change their practices or remedy the problems” (p. 146).

In a section headed “Leveraging change”, Nolan and Boersma start the task of proposing how legal reform, other government activities, business, and civil society can play complementary roles to ensure sustained cultural change. In that collaborative mix, consumers, investors, and worker organizations also play a part.

Chapter 5 offers a raft of suggestions about how modern slavery can be and is being, fought. They note the importance of continuing innovation around holistic approaches that treat root causes rather than only the surface-level symptoms. They list half a dozen recommendations for government, several for companies, and several for civil society. The chapter ends by examining how technologies such as artificial intelligence, data sharing, so-called “big data” analysis, and blockchain could assist.

Nolan and Boersma’s analysis is detailed and insightful. Nevertheless, I believe it suffers from two significant limitations: limitations that can also be seen in the currently dominant strategic direction that the global anti-slavery community has adopted. First, the forms of modern slavery being addressed are restricted to forced labor exploitation and, to some extent, state-imposed forced labor. The book is silent about forced marriage, people being trafficked for sex, the growing problem of online sexual exploitation of children, and child soldiers. In the typology used by the Global Slavery Index (GSI), forced marriage accounts for 15.4 million of the 40.3 million total. Forced sexual exploitation takes another percentage off the total. Child soldiers, while acknowledged as part of modern slavery by the GSI, are explicitly excluded from the GSI estimates (at least in the 2018 report). In the absence of those categories, the forced labor exploitation that Nolan and Boersma focus on constitutes maybe only half of the cases of modern slavery.

These other forms of modern slavery exhibit different modes of operation than labor exploitation. Whereas most forced labor is used to produce components that can be processed through manufacturing and distribution channels to be eventually sold to remote consumers, the core of sexual exploitation is the direct demand for a personal service. Certainly, people may be traded multiple times before they are delivered to the final consumer – arguably they are more extensively trafficked than victims of other forms of forced labor – but they are not “processed” in the way that cobalt or clothing are. In this case, the person is the product rather than merely providing the labor that produces the product. The nature of sexual abuse leads to a very low price elasticity of demand, making that form of modern slavery, especially resistant to economic interventions. Forced marriage is driven by cultural values rather than economics. The recruitment of child soldiers is a product of abusive ideologies that see youth as easy to brainwash.

I believe this is not just a criticism of the scope of this book, for Nolan and Boersma are reflecting a perspective taken by large parts of today’s anti-slavery movement. For instance, the same
assumption underlies the strategy of the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS), which is to end modern slavery by making it economically unprofitable; and the profit motive as a driver of labor exploitation seems to be an implicit assumption behind most recent modern slavery legislation. Economic interventions may be useful in reducing modern slavery, but that is still an open empirical question.

The second limitation of this book is the range of options it considers as interventions. In part, this is a consequence of the emphasis on forced labor exploitation. If the problem being addressed is that workers are misused so that goods can be produced cheaply to satisfy supply contracts with large corporations and ultimately to satisfy the demands of consumers, then it makes perfect sense to muster the resources of consumer pressure, investment pressure, legal restrictions, corporate social conscience, and worker empowerment to regulate global supply chains.

This is not, however, the only possible approach. The book may more appropriately be titled *Addressing Forced Labor Exploitation through the Collaborative Regulation of Supply Chains*. But given its current title, shouldn’t alternatives be at least canvassed?

What, for instance, do the authors think about the many organizations and millions of dollars spent each year on the rescue and rehabilitation of victims? This approach to addressing modern slavery is not mentioned. Perhaps it is not an effective strategy, but surely it needs to be discussed. Only the briefest of comments are made about the shortage of convictions for forced labor and trafficking offenses (pp. 156 and 167). In contrast, Gary Haugen and Boutros (2014) claims that improving the effectiveness of law enforcement needs to be a significant component of the anti-slavery strategy. What about the importance of reducing corruption, reducing poverty, reducing the human displacement caused by wars and environmental collapse?

I believe all these issues need to be kept on the table in strategic discussions about how to address modern slavery. While Nolan and Boersma make passing references to complex solutions and holistic approaches, their depiction in this book places the supply chain strategy on center-stage and leaves alternative methods in the wings.

The major gap in current anti-slavery discourse, and this book, is any robust analysis of the role of slave owners and human traffickers. The perpetrators are implicitly assumed to be an intractable obstacle cocooned in an impermeable ‘Black Box.’ We do not know what goes on inside that box, and our interventions are limited to imposing various pressures to constrain the box from the outside because we assume it is impossible to change what happens inside that box.

An old form of that assumption was that perpetrators were morally corrupt, irredeemable, and deserving of extreme punishment. If they were all killed or imprisoned, then the problem of slavery would go away. The more recent, capitalist version of the assumption is that the perpetrators are solely motivated by profit. If we can only adjust the supply and demand equation properly, then the problem of slavery would go away.

These simplistic assumptions – that perpetrators are immutable, evil, or profit-driven – are significantly uninformed, for there has been almost no research into why slave owners and traffickers behave as they do. A rare exception is the investigation by Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick (2017) among employers of bonded labor in India. Choi-Fitzpatrick’s research needs to be replicated a dozen times in different locations and for various forms of slavery. Psychologists and sociologists need to study the actual, rather than assumed, drivers of perpetrators’ behavior. How else can we expect to know what types of interventions are likely to change those behaviours?

Nolan and Boersma’s *Addressing Modern Slavery* is a valuable description of one strategy for dealing with labor exploitation. Today’s anti-slavery movement, however, needs to broaden its discourse beyond this dominant economic narrative. If we are to address the breadth of abuses that constitute modern slavery indeed, then other strategies, particularly the perpetrator-centric strategy, must also be considered.
References