

Who Will Cry for Justice?

Thousands of people around the world are forced into slavery and sexual exploitation. But one Christian organization, the International Justice Mission, is out to stop these atrocities.

Sold into slavery at the age of 12, Nagaraj grew up in the searing heat of a brick kiln under the thumb of a brutal owner. Now a grown man, he watches helplessly as his children toil beside him, knowing they too will one day become another's property. Theirs is a life without hope, an oppression few can comprehend.

Yet Nagaraj and his family are not alone. More than 27 million people worldwide are slaves—and experts say that is a conservative estimate. The majority of these slaves are in bonded labor or in sexual exploitation.

Some, like Nagaraj, work in wretched conditions to settle a debt whose interest is so exorbitant neither they nor their children's children will ever be able to repay it. Others are held against their will in squalid brothels where they are forced to service hundreds of men a week. These are not the exceptions; they are the rule.

But there is good news, says Gary Haugen, president of International Justice Mission: "The good news of injustice is that there is a God who hates it and wants it to stop." Haugen and his team of Christian lawyers, criminal investigators and social workers are taking on oppression throughout the world case by case.

“Injustice is about the abuse of power,” Haugen says, “to take from other people the good things that God intended for them—their life, liberty, their dignity, the fruits of their love and their labor. This is the sin of injustice.”

Founded in 1997, International Justice Mission (IJM) was created to confront injustice in its many forms. Headquartered in northern Virginia, near the nation’s capital, the operation is spread over 10 offices and several casework alliances in nine countries around the world.

In Africa, IJM is battling illegal detention, land grabbing, sexual violence, female genital mutilation and human trafficking. Similar issues are being encountered in Asia, where IJM’s work on sexual trafficking and exploitation of underage girls has garnered national and international media attention. In South and Central America, IJM is helping casework alliances combat high incidents of rape in local communities by assisting law enforcement in identifying and prosecuting the perpetrators.

Cases are referred to IJM by Christians ministering among the poor, by the victims themselves and at times by local police seeking assistance. IJM investigates these cases, collects evidence and, in coordination with local and national authorities, works to aid victims and to bring the offenders to justice.

Its mission—to rescue victims of violence, sexual exploitation, slavery and oppression—has attracted the best and the brightest.

Before joining IJM, Allyson McKinney was a commercial

litigator at a corporate law firm in Los Angeles. Struggling to discern God's will for her life, McKinney decided to take some time off and volunteered for the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. During her five-month term, she came face to face with the horrendous genocide and grave injustices hundreds of thousands of Rwandans suffered.

While traveling in northern Rwanda, someone lent her a copy of IJM's book *Good News About Injustice*. For McKinney, who had prayed that God would show her a way to direct her energy and labor toward a more significant purpose, the calling was clear. "I could not put the book down," she remembers. "I read it in one sitting on the long, windy, hot, dirty bus ride across Rwanda.

"I felt as if God had directly answered my prayer. It was so clear and so obvious. From that moment forward, I felt a very strong call to serve God and His children by joining IJM and advocating for the abused and oppressed."

Initially, McKinney returned to the firm. Eighteen months later, however, she was at IJM headquarters preparing to be deployed to Kampala, Uganda, in east Africa. She now works as the director and operational field presence for IJM in Uganda, where she is responsible for their advocacy and intervention efforts nationwide.

McKinney went from representing wealthy corporations to defending the rights of the penniless and exchanged an office in a large Los Angeles firm for one in central Kampala with seven staff members composed of one legal intern from Canada and six Ugandan nationals. And she says she could not be happier.

For more than two decades, Uganda has been torn by internal armed conflict. Millions have been internally displaced. Each week, thousands of people in refugee camps die from malnutrition and disease. Against this backdrop of violence, abject poverty and human rights violations, McKinney's office works case by case to prosecute sexual offenders, aid those illegally detained or otherwise subject to police abuse, and protect the property rights of the weak.

Land grabbing, in particular, is a problem throughout Africa. It involves the taking of land by the more powerful in direct contravention of laws on property and inheritance. After the deaths of their husbands, thousands of widows across the continent have seen their land stolen away by stronger families or their own relatives, leaving them and their children destitute.

Such was the story of Christine, who lives in a small village in Uganda. Her husband died, leaving her a small plot of land and a brick home.

Unfortunately, as so often happens, the deceased husband's family threatened to drive Christine from land and home. Under Ugandan law, such theft is illegal; however, without the means to enforce the law, one's rights are useless.

Christine, who had never met a lawyer, could hardly afford one. But with the assistance of a local pastor, IJM became involved in her case. "I would urge American Christians to please turn their attention to the plight of these people," McKinney says, "and to care about Ugandans as they would want others to care about them if they suffered in this manner."

Sharon Cohn was an associate at one of the more prestigious law firms in Washington, D.C. A graduate of Harvard Law School, she represented private and government entities in litigation and international trade. In 2001, however, Cohn left the firm to join IJM.

Initially sent to the Philippines and to West Africa, Cohn was first assigned a case involving several Nigerian girls who, after having their identification papers stolen, were trafficked to Côte d'Ivoire, where they were forced to work as prostitutes.

Coordinating with local authorities, Cohn succeeded in freeing these young women.

A similar case a few years later would bring global attention to the work of IJM. As early as 2000, reports began circulating about small children being sold into sexual exploitation in a remote town near Phnom Penh, Cambodia. IJM immediately began investigating the situation, but it would take several more years before the Cambodian government would take action.

In May 2002, Cohn traveled with an investigator to the village of Svay Pak, where she witnessed firsthand the plight of these girls. For Cohn, it was difficult to believe how young the girls were and to stomach the pernicious things done to them by ruthless men, including Western pedophiles who travel to Cambodia as child-sex tourists.

Often these girls, from the poorest villages of Southeast Asia, are sold into sexual slavery by family members or tricked with promises of a better life only to be trapped in a brothel and forced to service as many as 12 men a night. According to IJM's undercover investigators, the youngest

girls were sold for \$30 while the older might go for \$5. Perpetuating the cycle of abuse was a vast web of corruption and deceit, including police and government payoffs, which made escape virtually impossible and any rescue operation a risky proposition.

After more than a year of prayerful planning, international pressure and thorough investigation, throughout which Cohn says the hand of God was clearly present, a date was finally chosen and a team assembled to rescue the girls.

“God and God’s people have always been about the business of rescuing the ‘one,’” says Cohn, who is now IJM’s senior vice president of interventions. “Further, if you just meet the one, all the arguments that it’s impossible, it’s insufficient, nothing will ever change get lost in the face of the dignity of the one.

“This is what it means to love your neighbor. If they are enslaved, you free them; if their land has been stolen, you help them recover it; if they have been raped, you take them to a safe place and have the perpetrator brought to justice.”

Justice Served

In Isaiah 1:17, Christians are commanded to “seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” (NKJV). Across the globe, IJM is working to accomplish this mandate.

Remember Nagaraj, who was literally slaving away in a brick kiln? In conjunction with local authorities, IJM personnel participated in a dramatic raid that freed him and 137 other

slaves and their family members. The kiln's owner was arrested and is facing criminal charges. Nagaraj now runs his own kiln and is president of Dawn Association, a group started by those freed in the raid to help others avoid the economic trap of bonded slavery.

Concerning Christine, the Ugandan woman whose land was stolen, IJM lawyers, accompanied by a local pastor, traveled to her village where they confronted the land council about the illegal taking. As a result, not only was Christine restored to her land, but also all the widows in her village are now protected.

As for the girls of Svay Pak, in the winter of 2003, Cohn and her team from IJM, accompanied by more than 80 Cambodian police and a camera crew from Dateline NBC, rescued 37 child trafficking victims, the youngest of whom was 5 years old. In all, 13 perpetrators were arrested, including the former district police commissioner of Svay Pak, who was dismissed from the police force. Of these criminals, eight eventually were convicted, with sentences ranging from five to 20 years.

The impact of the Svay Pak rescue still resonates. The Dateline NBC special Children for Sale, which aired in January 2004, was awarded two Emmys. That program also was instrumental in the conviction of a Canadian child-sex tourist.

In addition, IJM has since been asked to assist in equipping officers in the Cambodian National Police with the tools necessary to continue rescuing girls and arresting traffickers. Moreover, the deterrent effect was immediate and lasting as the flesh peddlers quickly learned that the cost of exploiting young girls in Svay Pak had become too great.

The team at IJM believes God has a special place in His heart for the oppressed, as Deuteronomy 16:20 suggests: “‘Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue’” (NASB).

The pursuit of justice is at the heart of IJM and its multinational team of law enforcement and legal professionals.

Cohn, McKinney and the other members of IJM encourage the Christian community to pursue justice with them by praying, donating resources or volunteering in the U.S. or abroad. IJM is always looking for the very best lawyers, law enforcement officers and social workers. Those with a passion for IJM’s ministry are encouraged to read its latest book, Terrify No More, available via the Web site .

David Lee Mundy is an attorney and freelance writer based in Fairfax, Virginia.

Shocking Statistics

1. 27 million people around the world are enslaved in forced labor, bonded labor, forced child labor, sexual servitude and involuntary servitude.

Each year, **600,000 to 800,000** men, women and children are trafficked across international borders. This number does not even begin to count the millions of people trafficked within their own countries.

Every year, **14,500 to 17,500** people are trafficked into the

United States.

Of the 600,000 to 800,000 people trafficked across international borders every year,
50 percent are children.

Of the 600,000 to 800,000 people trafficked internationally every year, **80 percent are female** and 70 percent of them are trafficked for sexual exploitation.

UNICEF estimates that as many as **1.2 million** children are trafficked every year.

Nearly **1 million** new children are forced into prostitution every year.

30 percent to 35 percent of all sex workers in the Mekong subregion of Southeast Asia are between 12 and 17 years of age.

The United States along with **32** other countries have extraterritorial laws aimed at prosecuting child-sex tourists.

According to the FBI, human trafficking generates an estimated **\$9.5 billion** in annual revenue and is closely linked to other international crimes including money laundering, drug trafficking, document forgery and human smuggling.

Sources: International Justice Mission, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), U.S. State Department