An analysis of historical and modern-day slavery: A crime against humanity

Credit: Written and compiled by Tony Stone, Global Slavery Index

The global consensus is that slave traders committed crimes against humanity. While they viewed themselves and operated as ordinary businessmen, the reality is that their profits relied on the kidnapping, torture, and forced exploitation of human beings.

Slavery has no single point of origin; it developed independently across multiple ancient civilizations as agricultural societies emerged. The earliest written record of slavery is the Code of Hammurabi (1750 BCE) in ancient Mesopotamia, though archaeological evidence suggests the practice existed in prehistoric times. Different forms of forced labour arose globally in the ancient world:

- **Ancient Mesopotamia:** The Mesopotamia slave trade was highly localized rather than a massive, export-driven market. Spanning over 3,000 years, ancient Mesopotamian slavery primarily revolved around a mercantile credit mechanism and domestic servitude. The scale of the trade was generally small, with most households owning just one to three slaves at a time.
- **Ancient Egypt:** The size of Egypt's slave trade varied drastically across its history, with two major peaks: the New Kingdom's influx of foreign captives and the 19th-century commercial boom. The trade spanned multiple eras, fluctuating from small-scale domestic servitude to massive agricultural and military coercion. Slaves were heavily trafficked into Egypt across the trans-Saharan routes from Darfur, Kordofan, and Abyssinia, as well as from Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region via the Ottoman Empire
- **Ancient China:** China's historical slave trade varied dramatically depending on the era. While domestic slavery existed for millennia, China did not participate in the transoceanic slave trade to the degree seen in the Middle East, Europe or the Americas. Instead, modern forced labour remains a prominent issue.
- **Europe**: Europe was both a victim and perpetrator in the slave trade. As the victim, the Barbary slave trade involved the capture of Europeans and selling them at slave markets in the largely independent Ottoman Barbary states of North Africa i.e. Morocco, Algeria Tunisia and Libya, during the 17th century. As the perpetrator, Europe's transatlantic slave trade was the largest forced migration in human history, forcibly deporting roughly 12 to 15 million African men, women, and children to the Americas between the 16th and 19th centuries. This systematic enterprise generated immense wealth for European empires and reshaped global economies.
- **The Americas:** Hereditary and war-based slavery was documented among indigenous fishing societies along the Pacific coast, the Maya, and the Inca. However, the Transatlantic slave trade was massive, forcing between 10 and 12.5 million enslaved Africans across the ocean to the Americas. Of these, approximately 388,000 were forcibly brought to North America. By 1860, due to natural increase, the enslaved population in the United States reached nearly 4 million people.
- **East Africa:** Historians estimate that between 10 to 18 million Africans were enslaved and trafficked through the Sahara, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean to the Arab world over a 13-century period. The East African and Indian Ocean routes alone accounted for approximately 9 million of these captives.
- **South Africa:** The South African slave trade, primarily centred around the Cape Colony between 1653 and 1806, was smaller in scale than the Atlantic slave trade but uniquely diverse. An estimated 63,000 to 70,000 people were forcibly brought into the Cape region via the Indian and Atlantic Ocean trade networks.

Who sold slaves to slave traders

During the transatlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades, African tribal chiefs, elites, and military middlemen captured and sold the vast majority of enslaved Africans to Arab, European and American slave traders. Historians estimate that approximately 90% of the Africans transported to the New World were captured by fellow Africans who ran complex business networks along the West and West-Central African coasts.

These African kingdoms and empires, powerful centralized states, used their military dominance to wage wars against neighbouring groups specifically to capture people. Major participants included, the Ashanti Empire (modern-day Ghana), the Kingdom of Dahomey (modern-day Benin), the Oyo Empire and Yoruba kingdoms (modern-day Nigeria) and the Bono State (modern-day Ghana)

Notable African monarchs and tribal chiefs engaged heavily in the trade to consolidate their own power. For instance, Queen Njinga Mbandi of Ndongo and Matamba famously sold nearly 200,000 captives to Portuguese traders during her conflicts.

Groups like the Imbangala of Angola and the Nyamwezi of Tanzania acted as professional raiders and middle-tier merchants. They travelled inland, captured individuals, and marched them down to European coastal fortifications.

African tribal chiefs are not held legally accountable today because modern international law relies on the principle that you cannot prosecute someone for an action that was not illegal at the time it was committed. The actions of these chiefs occurred centuries before human rights laws and treaties outlawing slavery were established. And yet Africa holds Europe and America accountable for their part in the slave trade.

The Arab slave trade is often omitted from mainstream historical accountability discussions due to a lack of organized Western abolitionist movements, assimilation patterns that dispersed the African diaspora, and modern geopolitical sensitivities surrounding Islam and Arab-African diplomatic and trade partnerships.

African hypocrisy!? Absolutely!!

How People Were Captured

People sold into the slave trade were typically acquired through three primary methods:

1. **Warfare:** Prisoners of war captured during inter-tribal conflicts.
2. **Kidnapping Raids:** State-sanctioned or rogue raids targeting vulnerable, decentralized smaller communities inland.
3. **Judicial Punishment:** Individuals condemned to slavery as punishment for crimes, debts, or religious infractions.

The Economic Incentives

The trade relied heavily on a mutual business partnership between African tribal chiefs and Arab and European commercial agents. Both the Arab and European traders generally stayed anchored on the coast or inside fortified trading posts (like Elmina Castle) because tropical diseases made travelling inland highly lethal.

Arab trade in Tanzania laid the foundations for the Swahili Coast's culture and economy, shaping East Africa for centuries. Centred largely on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba, this historical commerce drove the exchange of spices, ivory, and enslaved people, which connected the African interior to the global markets of the Middle East and India.

African tribal chiefs exchanged captive slaves for highly sought-after foreign manufactured goods, including:

- Firearms and gunpowder (which tribal chiefs used to further expand their kingdoms and protect themselves from rivals)
- Textiles and luxury cloths
- Cowrie shells (used as local currency)
- Brass, rum, and tobacco

The Broader Historical Context

Various forms of domestic servitude and regional slave trading networks existed within Africa long before the Arab and European arrivals. However, the astronomical demand from Arab and European powers transformed this into a highly destructive, commercialized global supply chain.

Over time, the availability of European firearms created a vicious cycle. African states chose to participate in the slave trade to acquire guns for self-defence, or refuse to participate and risk being conquered and enslaved by neighbouring kingdoms who did.
Beyond the Transatlantic and Indian Ocean routes, African and Arab merchants also sold millions of people north across the desert through the Trans-Saharan trade, and east across the Indian Ocean trade into the Islamic world and Asia.

Who ended slavery?
Slavery was not ended by a single person, but by a combination of grassroots activists, enslaved people leading rebellions, and legislative actions over centuries. Historically, slavery was outlawed in stages across the globe:

- **The British Empire:** Led by abolitionists like William Wilberforce and movements within Parliament, Britain passed the Slave Trade Act in 1807 and the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, freeing enslaved people throughout its colonies. Approximately 1,600 British sailors and soldiers died serving in the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron between 1808 and the 1860s in direct combat against armed slavers.
- **The United States:** President Abraham Lincoln formally ended slavery in Confederate territory with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. It was permanently abolished nationwide by the 13th Amendment in 1865. Approximately 365,000 Union soldiers died during the American Civil War to abolish slavery.
- **Global Abolition:** Many other nations ended the practice through individual legislation, such as Brazil in 1888. Mauritania became the last country to legally abolish chattel slavery in 1981

Are reparations justified today?
The question of whether financial, systemic, or territorial reparations are justified today is one of the most deeply contested and complex debates in global politics, economics, and ethics.

The movement has gained immense institutional momentum, highlighted by the United Nations General Assembly passing a landmark resolution declaring the transatlantic slave trade a "grave crime against humanity", and the African Union launching its official Decade of Reparations (2026–2036).

The Ghana-led resolution declaring the trafficking of enslaved Africans and racialised chattel enslavement the ‘gravest crime against humanity’ was adopted at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on 25 March. Most countries (123) voted in favour, while 52, including all 27 European Union (EU) states, abstained. Argentina, Israel and the United States (US) voted against.

And yet, as we have read, Ghana was one of the main perpetrators of slavery in West Africa.

The United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU) resolutions requires member states, individually and collectively, to engage in inclusive, good-faith dialogue on reparatory justice, including formal apologies, financial compensation and restitution.

On the face of it, it is a win for Africans and people of African descent worldwide, but is non-binding and has no enforcement mechanism. The UN’s 2001 Durban Declaration against racism and related intolerance – also non-binding – has seen no measurable outcome.

The Declaration acknowledges that slavery and the slave trade are crimes against humanity, which it is, and requires remedy. In contrast, the new resolution focuses on transatlantic slavery, which is described as the gravest of crimes against humanity, and explicitly calls for reparations. The Indian Ocean slavery is not even mentioned, nor the fact that Africans themselves, West and East African tribal chiefs that enslaved their own people and sold them to slave traders.

So, while the resolution is a win for Africans and their descendants, it is non-binding and has no enforcement mechanism.

The primary arguments driving both sides of this enduring debate focus on historical accountability, economic legacy, and practical implementation.

The case for reparations

Despite the omitted history, and the selectivity of the resolution, proponents argue that reparations are a necessary requirement for justice, drawing on several core assertions:

- **Intergenerational Wealth Gap:** The primary argument is that modern global wealth disparities are rooted directly in historical exploitation. Wealth built from centuries of free, coerced labour—and the subsequent systems of colonialism and Jim Crow laws—was passed down through generations of Western institutions, while the descendants of the enslaved were systematically denied the ability to accumulate assets.
- **Ongoing Systemic Harms:** Advocates emphasize that the past is not dead; it has evolved. The psychological trauma, economic underdevelopment of African and Caribbean nations, and modern systemic racism are viewed as direct, downstream consequences of historical atrocities that require structural correction.
- **Precedent Exists:** Proponents point out that reparations are frequently paid in other contexts. Germany paid billions to Holocaust survivors, and the United States compensated Japanese-Americans interned during World War II. Notably, the British government paid billions (in modern equivalent) under the Slavery Abolition Act—but to the *slave owners* for their loss of "property," a national debt that British taxpayers only finished paying off in 2015.

The Case Against Reparations

Opponents argue that reparations are impractical, unfair, selective, and/or counterproductive, focusing on the following themes:

- **Individual Responsibility:** A core objection is that it is ethically unjust to financially penalize or guilt-burden modern citizens for actions committed by ancestors centuries ago. Opponents argue that current generations bear no personal culpability for historical wrongs.
- **The Problem of Logistics:** Critics highlight the extreme difficulty of implementation. There is no consensus on who should pay (especially given that many modern citizens are recent immigrants whose families had no connection to slavery) and who exactly qualifies to receive funds. Estimates for global slavery damages range into the trillions of dollars, which critics argue could destabilize modern economies.
- **Risk of Elitist Corruption:** Scholars and critics express concern that macro-level financial transfers between governments would not actually reach ordinary citizens. They argue that funds run a high risk of being mismanaged or co-opted by corrupt political elites in developing countries rather than aiding the oppressed majority.
- **Focus on the Present:** Many opponents believe that instead of litigating the past, society should focus resources on universal, colourblind social programs. They argue that investing heavily in modern education, infrastructure, and job creation for all marginalized communities is a more effective way to eliminate poverty.

What Reparations Look Like Today

The debate has evolved beyond simple cash payouts. International bodies like the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) and the African Union structure "reparatory justice" into a variety of non-monetary forms.

Type of Reparation	Description
Restitution	Returning looted cultural artifacts and ancestral land.
Systemic Debt Relief	Cancelling historical debts imposed on developing nations.
Satisfaction	Issuing formal, legally binding state apologies and funding truth commissions.
Development Funds	Western financing for African and Caribbean health, technology, and educational institutions.

A key question is whether Africa is pursuing an alternate agenda. The narrative that Africa approaches the West with a "traditional begging bowl" is a heavily debated metaphor representing economic dependency and unequal global power dynamics. It highlights an ongoing political and economic

tension regarding how the continent engages with former colonial powers and global financial institutions.

Critics and Pan-Africanists argue that despite vast reserves of natural resources, many African nations have historically relied on foreign aid, loans, and debt relief from the West. Scholars like the late Professor George Ayittey have pointed out that this dependency often enriches a small political elite while perpetuating poverty among the general population.

Africa is its own worst enemy

Africa's economic trajectory is complex. While the continent possesses vast natural wealth, its overall prosperity has been hindered by a failure of leadership, by various individual's greed, victim mentality, constant internal strife, various individual's lust for power, wars and conflict.

Since 1950, over 100 distinct state-based wars, civil wars, and major insurgencies have been fought in Africa, with millions of lives lost. The continent accounts for about one-third of all global armed conflicts since World War II. While the vast majority have been internal civil wars, they have spanned more than 40 different countries.

According to the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Conflict Trends, Africa has seen an escalation in conflict complexity in the 21st century, heavily driven by the rise of jihadist insurgencies, foreign geopolitical meddling, and resource-based conflicts in regions like the Sahel, the Great Lakes, and the Horn of Africa.

This behaviour is known as self-sabotage or self-defeating. Africa needs a change of attitude.

Which countries are engaged in slavery today

Modern slavery affects an estimated 50 million people globally through forced labour, debt bondage, forced marriage, and human trafficking. While illegal worldwide, it is most prevalent in countries lacking the rule of law, recovering from conflict, or governed by repressive regimes. The nations with the highest prevalence of modern slavery, according to the Global Slavery Index, include:

The 10 countries with the highest prevalence of modern slavery are:	
1. North Korea	6. Tajikistan
2. Eritrea	7. United Arab Emirates
3. Mauritania	8. Russia
4. Saudi Arabia	9. Afghanistan
5. Türkiye	10. Kuwait

Four of the five world regions — Africa, Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe and Central Asia — are represented in the list of countries with highest prevalence, which underscores the global reach of modern slavery.

The last few years have taught us that the ability to respond to modern slavery in times of crisis requires governments to continually invest in modern slavery responses and to build resilient systems that can withstand external shocks. However, governments in the top 10 global responses to modern slavery in 2023 have largely stagnated.

The South African government, hypocritically, supports and has promulgated laws opposing Gender Based Violence (GBV) and ostensibly opposes slavery and yet is friends with countries that appear in the top ten list. But they are not alone. The UN and AU also do not condemn these states for practising slavery.

Turning a blind eye is convenient. One can only but wonder what happened to six-year-old, blue-eyed Joshlin Smith who disappeared in Saldanha Bay!?