



I don't want slaves working for me

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I have the power to show, through the choices I make, that everybody matters – that I don't want any slaves working for me, says Good Samaritan Sister Sarah Puls.

BY Sarah Puls SGS

One of the most courageous people I've ever had the pleasure to know is a woman named Mary (not her real name), who was a victim of human trafficking.

Mary and I meet up regularly so that we can, together, negotiate the challenges of her day-to-day life which she lives with courage and determination, but also with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). One day Mary would like to tell her own story; I could never do it justice anyway. But I'd like to tell you how Mary has become a part of my story.

When Mary was brought to Australia she was held captive, deprived of food and subjected to physical and sexual violence by multiple men every day for almost two years. Before I met Mary and heard something of her experience, I could never have imagined that a human being could subject another human being to such inhumane, violent, horrific treatment. I certainly could never have imagined how a person who'd been a victim of such treatment could not be fundamentally broken.

And yet, what I see in Mary is a woman who is fundamentally changed, but definitely not broken. I, too, am fundamentally changed through knowing Mary's story and walking beside her in her pain.

As I listened to her story I had so many unanswerable questions: How could those men do that to her? How is it possible for one human being to use another person like they are a 'thing' to be abused and discarded? What does it mean to live in a community where there are people who can treat other people in this way? And if this darkness exists in my community, what is my responsibility for that?

Over the past year there has been growing awareness in the community about human trafficking and modern slavery. With the encouragement of [Pope Francis](#) and [our bishops](#), many people have been praying for the safety and recovery of victims and for a change of heart for the traffickers. Praying and working for change is terribly important, but I wonder if there is another aspect to the issue which I could be considering.

I can think of people like Mary's abusers and imagine the 'bad guys' are very different from me. I may think of cocoa farms in Western Africa, cotton farms in Uzbekistan or sweatshops in Bangladesh and think that the problem of modern slavery is far away, beyond the reach of my influence. But the disturbing reality is quite the opposite.

Regularly in my day-to-day life I bump up against the edges of the world of trafficked people, because here in Australia, we all do. The distressing truth is that it is easy for me – and for all of us – to be complicit in systems and processes which allow human trafficking to be a growing problem in our world. Though not abusing people directly, our choices every day connect us with the systems and supply chains in which people are used as objects, in which the life of a human person is worth very little indeed.

Everyday purchases like clothing, food and technology connect us with supply chains in which slavery and labour exploitation are endemic. The choices I make reflect my values, my commitment to human rights and my ability to recognise every person as having equal dignity and value.

When confronted with issues as disturbing and challenging to my understanding of humanity as human trafficking, it can be very tempting to say with the Pharisee: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people" (Luke 9:11). But the reality is that my indifference to the suffering of others – my 'sinfulness' – is held at a distance, allowing me to feel I am not responsible. It is so much easier to look away and try not to think too much about the \$3 t-shirt and how it is possible for a product to be produced so cheaply. I don't want to think about the hands that held that t-shirt before me, and the kind of life that worker had.

But that worker and I do have a connection. And in the relationship between us I am not able to wash my hands entirely of the way he/she is treated. I may not have the power to change that person's life, but I do have the power to show, through the choices I make, that everybody matters – that I don't want any slaves working for me. If I really believe that every person matters, then maybe this Lent is a good time to make sure that my actions match that truth.

The season of Lent calls me, and each one of us, to turn away from the darkness in the world and in ourselves, and recommit ourselves to be people of the light. For me, an essential part of that is to be willing to look truthfully at my own life and the times I show indifference to the suffering of others, including those who I am connected to through the supply chain of goods I buy and use.

These issues are complex, and finding reliable information is not always easy. Our efforts to be aware and to make a difference can feel small in comparison to the magnitude of the problem. But we can't be indifferent to the humanity and dignity of people who suffer.

As a community and as individuals who have so often been unaware, or chosen to ignore and avoid our own connection to slavery, this Lent could be the opportunity to be informed so that we can, in a very real way, "turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel".

Mary escaped from her slavery, but her suffering continues every day. Her suffering is not just the physical and psychological effects of being abused; it is also the deep woundedness of someone who has been treated as though their life was worth nothing at all.

As an ally on the painful road Mary is travelling, I find myself often having to explain to her that I think differently – that I think her life is important and that she matters. Through my words and my actions I say to her that, unlike her abusers, I think she is a person of value and dignity.

I believe that about every life and every person, but I know I could do more to ensure that is true, not just in how I treat Mary or the person in front of me, but for all people.

If you would like to find out more, or take action, you could:

- [learn about slavery in the supply chain of goods coming into Australia;](#)
- [sign the declaration with the Global Freedom Network: United to end slavery;](#)
- [learn about slavery-free Easter eggs.](#)

Some other helpful resources:

- Inform yourself about, and support, the work of [Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans \(ACRATH\)](#) who work to ensure victims in Australia are supported and also advocate on issues such as slavery-free supply chains;
- An interactive guide to [learn more about your slavery footprint;](#)
- [Pope Francis' Message for World Day of Peace, 2015;](#)
- [Joint statement](#) from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans (ACRATH).

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