

## Guest Comment

On NRO

[E-mail Author](#)  
[Author Archive](#)  
[Send to a Friend](#)  
[Print Version](#)

February 02, 2004, 8:37 a.m.

### Children in Chains

That boy begging you for money could be a slave.

By Donna M. Hughes

**A**t the airport in Dhaka, Bangladesh, little boys push themselves in front of every well-dressed person. They gesture into their open mouths with grubby fingers and make grunting noises to indicate they are hungry. With the other hand outstretched, they beg for coins. It is a gut-wrenching sight and sound. Confronted by them, I feel compelled to open and empty my purse — anything to get them to stop making that pathetic noise.

On one occasion, instead of rushing past the boys and trying to put them out of my mind, I watched. There were a half dozen of them, approximately five years old, working the crowd, seemingly tirelessly. Then one boy stopped to rest, and after a moment, he looked over his shoulder and the look of fear on his face made me quickly follow his line of sight. Back about 15 feet was a man. He glared and jerked his chin at the boy, and the boy whirled and started begging again.

At that moment, I realized that these little children were slaves. I continued to watch, now with the realization that I was observing a slave master at work. The man controlled the boys by staying in the background and moving about every 30 seconds, each time positioning himself near a boy who wasn't begging aggressively enough. When he made eye contact with the boy, he threatened him with a sharp jerk of his hand or chin.

The constant, intense level of threat the boys were under was chilling, and I could hardly contain my rage at the piece of human scum that spent his day abusing them.

I am an anti-slavery researcher and activist, so many questions immediately popped into my head. How many boys are there? Where does he get them? How much money does he make from them each day? Do corrupt officials get a cut? What does he do to the boys that causes them to fear him so? Where do they stay at night? Does he feed them? Enough? Certainly, he doesn't bathe them. What happens to them in a couple of years when they aren't so cute anymore?

From then on, whenever I've seen children begging, I suspect I'm looking at slavery — and I start looking for their master.

In a city in Siberia, a little boy kept running in front of my friends and me, thrusting out his hand. He was persistent, demanding that we give him money. I discouraged my friends from giving him anything, explaining that the money would benefit someone else, not the boy. When he wasn't successful, he left, and went to talk to a couple of adults sitting on a park bench. He returned a few minutes later with a bloody scratch across his cheek. Was he punished for not getting money? Was he wounded to stir our sympathy? After thinking about it, I realized that his aggressiveness most likely grew out of desperation. He was told to get money from us, or else.

In St. Petersburg, in an underground subway passage, a little boy with a voice like an angel was singing. Every tourist that passed threw money in his box. He was such a handsome little boy, clean and well dressed; I wondered: him too?

My awareness had changed as a result of doing anti-slavery work. I could no longer smile; give the boy some coins, and walk away. Instead, I started scanning the crowd, looking for someone who was monitoring him, waiting to collect the money. On this occasion, I recall mentally chastising myself for being so cynical; maybe this time it was different. Then as I walked up the stairs, I saw him: the slave master. He was perched on the railing, holding a watch in his hand, observing and listening. How many minutes did the boy have to sing before he could take a break? How long did he have to sing each day?

Slavery still exists around the world, and often the slaves are hiding in plain sight. We see them; we just don't recognize the miserable conditions of their even more miserable lives. No one knows how many children around the world are forced to beg. The U.S. State Department's 2003 Trafficking in Persons Report mentions trafficking of children for begging in Austria, Greece, Moldova, and Albania. In France there are an estimated 3,000 to 8,000 children forced into prostitution and labor, including begging. An estimated 6,000 Albanian children have been trafficked to Western European countries for begging and prostitution.

People that buy, sell, or rent children for begging are criminals. They exploit and abuse the youngest victims, ruining their lives. When the children outgrow their cute and vulnerable looks, they graduate into other criminal activity, or learn the beggar-slave trade themselves.

As the global campaign for the abolition of modern-day slavery grows, we have to remember these children. They need liberation too, and perhaps most of all.

— *Donna M. Hughes is a professor and the Carlson Endowed Chair in Women's Studies at the University of Rhode Island.*

---

<http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/hughes200402020837.asp>