

Bonded Labour Exercise

Introduction & Overview

Bonded labour is the most common form of slavery in the world today. The dynamics are simple:

1. An impoverished and vulnerable individual becomes indebted. Sometimes the debt is taken voluntarily, sometimes involuntarily, and sometimes voluntarily but without properly understanding the conditions of the loan;
2. The impoverished individual is required to work off their debt by providing labour. They are required to remain in the exclusive employ of the person making the loan and are not free to leave the employ of the person making the loan until the debt is fully discharged. If they attempt to leave they will be forcibly returned;
3. The individual is now trapped in debt bondage. If interest and other charges are added to the original loan an individual can remain trapped for life. In a position of weakness, physical violence and verbal abuse become commonplace.

This exercise uses a role play to show how people can be trapped in debt bondage. It follows the story of a poor parent in rural India who cannot afford medicines for his/her daughter. Without medicine the child will die. The role play sees the Concerned Parent turn to a number of people for help. By the end of the role play Concerned Parent will agree to take a loan from a Brickworks Owner which will be paid off by provision of labour. Unfortunately, this will also see them enslaved for life. The people Concerned Parent turns to are:

1. **Family Members**, who are also very poor and unable to provide the \$50 required;
2. **Neighbours**, also very poor and unable to provide the \$50 required;
3. **Current Employer**, who has the means to help but is unwilling to do so. The employer knows the debt cannot be repaid on the wages Concerned Parent earns and fears generosity to one employee will see all employees asking for the same;
4. **Bank Manager**, who refuses to consider a loan given the Concerned Parent cannot repay and has no collateral to offer;
5. **Money Lender**, who will provide the \$50 at an exorbitant rate of interest. Concerned Parent will not be able to meet the repayments. If Concerned Parent agrees to the loan his/her daughter will get her medicine, but very soon the moneylender will take possession of the family's meager belongings their situation will be even more parlous than before;
6. **Trafficker**, who will provide medicines if the daughter is provided to him for use as a prostitute for a period of 12 months. The trafficker would alternately provide the money and take another female family member for prostitution. If the mother offers herself there will be no-one left to care for the children;
7. **Brickworks Owner**, who will provide the \$50, plus board and lodgings to the entire family, on condition that the Concerned Parent works exclusively in his/her employ until the debt is repaid. Interest and the costs of board and lodgings will be added to the debt. When the Concerned Parent agrees to this, s/he will be unaware that the money earned making bricks is not sufficient to cover loan repayments, interest, board and lodgings. This means s/he will be forced to work for the brickworks owner, earning nothing, for the rest of his/her life.

Running the Exercise

1. Print out the name-tags found on pages 4-5. Print the name on one side and the description on the other. Print enough name-tags for each person to have one. (Alternately you may like to have just one set of name-tags, with only eight people participating and the rest of the audience watching on).
2. Distribute the name-tags, one per person. Make sure you distribute the tags evenly (eg if you have 24 people ensure there are three people playing each role, not 12 people playing the role of moneylender and only 1-2 people in each other role).
3. Explain that they all live in a poor village in rural India, then ask everyone to quietly read the description of their character on the back of their name tag. When they have finished reading they should put the name tag on.
4. Once everyone has finished reading ask the Concerned Parents to stand. Invite one of them to explain their situation. Make sure all details on the role play card are covered, then briefly summarise the situation again for the audience.
5. Explain to the Concerned Parents that although they don't have any money, there are others they can call upon: family members, neighbours, their current employer. Ask one of the Concerned Parents who they would like to approach first, then ask the Concerned Parents to sit and the group they name to stand. Ask a member of the group standing if they are able to loan Concerned Parent the \$50 they require. After this group has answered, ask a Concerned Parent who they would like to turn to next. Repeat the process until the family, neighbours and current employer options are exhausted. (You may find a Brickworks Owner stands up believing they are an employer. If they do so explain their role will come later. You may also like to use the family and neighbour responses to point out the dilemma of many of the world's poor – not only are they desperately poor, so are their relatives and neighbours, meaning there is no-one to turn to when a crisis strikes.)
6. Ask Concerned Parents to stand again. Summarise the action to date and then explain that there are other people Concerned Parent can turn to: the village moneylenders, the bank manager, or traffickers. Ask a Concerned Parent whom they would like to turn to next and ask that group to stand. Work through the moneylenders, bank managers and traffickers groups as in step 5. As you proceed point out that one of the problems facing the world's poorest is they find it very difficult to access finance.
7. Explain that we have reached the end of the road. The Concerned Parents have just three options: (1) let their daughter die; (2) borrow from the moneylender, knowing that in a few months the entire family will be in an even more precarious situation than now; (3) sell their daughter to the trafficker for use as a prostitute for 12 months. Push each Concerned Parent to make and verbalise a decision. Point out how difficult and unfair it is for any parent to be placed in this position, but that this is the reality now facing them.
8. After Concerned Parents have given an answer, strike a positive note. Shout "Salvation is at hand. I have just heard about a Brickworks Owner who is looking for more workers and may be able to help you out." Ask Brickworks Owner to describe his/her offer. Elaborate if it is not fully explained, then ask Concerned Parents if they would like to change their decision and take up this new offer. If any Concerned Parents want to know more detail about the cost of board, lodgings, interest,

etc, be positive, but deliberately vague in your answer (eg “You’ll earn good money -\$13.50 a month – so you should pay off the debt in good time”).

9. Ask all Concerned Parents who agree to work for a Brickworks Owner to come out the front and sign a contract. Brickworks Owners should accompany them. Provide each Concerned Parent with a copy of the contract found on page 6. If Concerned Parents complain they can’t read it point out that of course they cannot as they are illiterate. Pass some copies around for the audience to see.
10. Ask everyone to resume their seats, then hand a copy of the contract to a Concerned Parent and ask them to tell everyone what was in the contract they just signed. When they reply that they cannot read it, point out that this is because they are illiterate.
11. Project a copy of the contract in English (page 7) onto the screen (use an Overhead Projector or Data Projector. If you don’t have access to either provide printed copies and pass them around). After reading the contract show the figures on page 8 and point out that the Concerned Parent is now in real trouble. They have signed a contract that makes them and their children debt slaves. They have agreed to work for no-one else and will never be free of their debt. This gives the Brickworks Owner great power over them. It is likely they will be badly treated – beatings, abuse, and poor working conditions will be common – and if they try to leave the Brickworks Owner will insist they have signed a legally binding contract and will have them hunted down and returned.
12. Spend a few minutes debriefing. Ask people to share their feelings and thoughts. Note that many will be searching for solutions. Ask them to hold off for the moment, as the purpose of this exercise is to understand how people fall into debt-bondage. Focus on people identifying with the impossible situation the Concerned Parents faced and how they feel about it. Before concluding highlight some ways forward:
 - Debt bondage is illegal under international law, and that of most countries. We could work with Governments to provide better training to police.
 - Groups such as the International Justice Mission work to expose situations such as these, free people in debt bondage and see the law properly enforced;
 - Groups such as Baptist World Aid Australia work with impoverished communities to help people earn a decent income. This helps them avoid getting into debt bondage in the first place.

CONCERNED PARENT

You are illiterate and extremely poor. You work hard, but use every cent you earn feeding yourself and your family of six (spouse, 3 boys and 2 daughters). You have no savings and nothing to provide as collateral for a loan. Your child is sick and you are desperate for money to buy medicine. Without medicine your daughter will die. The medicines will cost \$50.00

FAMILY MEMBER

You are illiterate and extremely poor. You work hard, but have barely enough to survive. You have no savings but use every cent you earn feeding yourself and your family. If you could help others you would, but you have no money.

NEIGHBOUR

You are illiterate and extremely poor. You work hard, but have barely enough to survive. You have no savings but use every cent you earn feeding yourself and your family. If you could help others you would, but you have no money.

CURRENT EMPLOYER

Concerned Parent has worked in your cement factory for four years. You pay Concerned Parent and all your other employees the going rate of pay (which is very low) and have a strict policy that you will not loan money to employees. If you provide a loan to one, all the workers will expect the same. You know that on what they earn none of your workers has any hope of repaying a loan.

TRAFFICKER

You trade in human beings. You are willing to buy girls and women to be used in prostitution. For a healthy teen girls you will pay \$US100 and \$US60 for an adult woman. You would consider paying the medicinal and hospital costs of a sick child if she would be provided to you for at least 12 months afterwards.

BANK MANAGER

You manage a local bank. None of your customers come from the ranks of the poor. Your bank has a strict policy that it will lend only to people who can provide collateral and demonstrate a capacity to repay the loan. Although you feel sorry for Concerned Parent you are not running a charity and will not provide them with a loan.

MONEYLENDER

You are a moneylender. You will make loans to the poor at an interest rate of 100%pa. If necessary you will use violence to secure repayments, and in the event of failure to pay will acquire any goods the debtor possesses, even those essential for living. You must make this clear to Concerned Parent if they ask you for a loan.

BRICKWORKS OWNER

You own a brickworks and need cheap labour. You are willing to loan Concerned Parent money for medicine on condition that Concerned Parent pays off the debt by working in your brickyard. Concerned Parent must work exclusively for you until the debt is fully repaid. As well as advancing money for medicine you will provide board and food while the debt is being repaid. If Concerned Parent agrees take them to the front and have them sign a contract.

FAMILY
MEMBER

CONCERNED
PARENT

CURRENT
EMPLOYER

NEIGHBOUR

TRAFFICKER

BANK
MANAGER

MONEY-
LENDER

BRICKWORKS
OWNER

Contrato entre tijolos e proprietário em causa mãe

Dono de tijolos concorda Preocupado Parent empréstimo de um montante de US \$ 50. Preocupado Parent concorda em pagar juros de 10% ao mês sobre o empréstimo, que será adicionada à dívida. Parent concorda em causa a trabalhar em exclusivo a empregar de tijolos Dono até esta dívida é totalmente reembolsado.

Enquanto a dívida está sendo reembolsado tijolos Dono vai fornecer bordo e alojamentos para Preocupado Pais e Preocupado Parent da família. Todas as despesas efectuadas pelos tijolos Proprietário em fazê-lo, será adicionado à dívida por Preocupado Parent.

Preocupado Parent será pago um montante de US \$ 4,50 por mil tijolos produzidos, a atribuir contra a dívida do Preocupado Parent. Em caso de Preocupado Parent morrer ou se tornar incapaz para o trabalho Preocupado Pais da dívida e os termos e condições vai passar a Preocupado Pais do cônjuge e filhos.

Assinatura

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Contract Between Brickworks Owner and Concerned Parent: English Translation

Brickworks Owner agrees to loan Concerned Parent an amount of \$50. Concerned Parent agrees to pay interest of 10% per month on the loan, which will be added to the debt. Concerned Parent agrees to work in the exclusive employ of Brickworks Owner until this debt is fully repaid.

While the debt is being repaid Brickworks Owner will provide board and lodgings to Concerned Parent and Concerned Parent's family. All costs incurred by Brickworks Owner in so doing will be added to the debt owed by Concerned Parent.

Concerned Parent will be paid a sum of \$4.50 per thousand bricks produced, to be allocated against the debt of Concerned Parent. In the event of Concerned Parent dying or becoming unable to work Concerned Parent's debt and the terms and conditions will pass to Concerned Parent's spouse and children.

Sinking Into Debt Bondage

INCOME		13.50
Earnings for Month 1	13.50	
EXPENSES		70.00
Debt at Start of Month 1	50.00	
Interest at end of Month 1	5.00	
Board and Lodgings for Month 1	15.00	
DEBT AT END MONTH 1		56.50

