

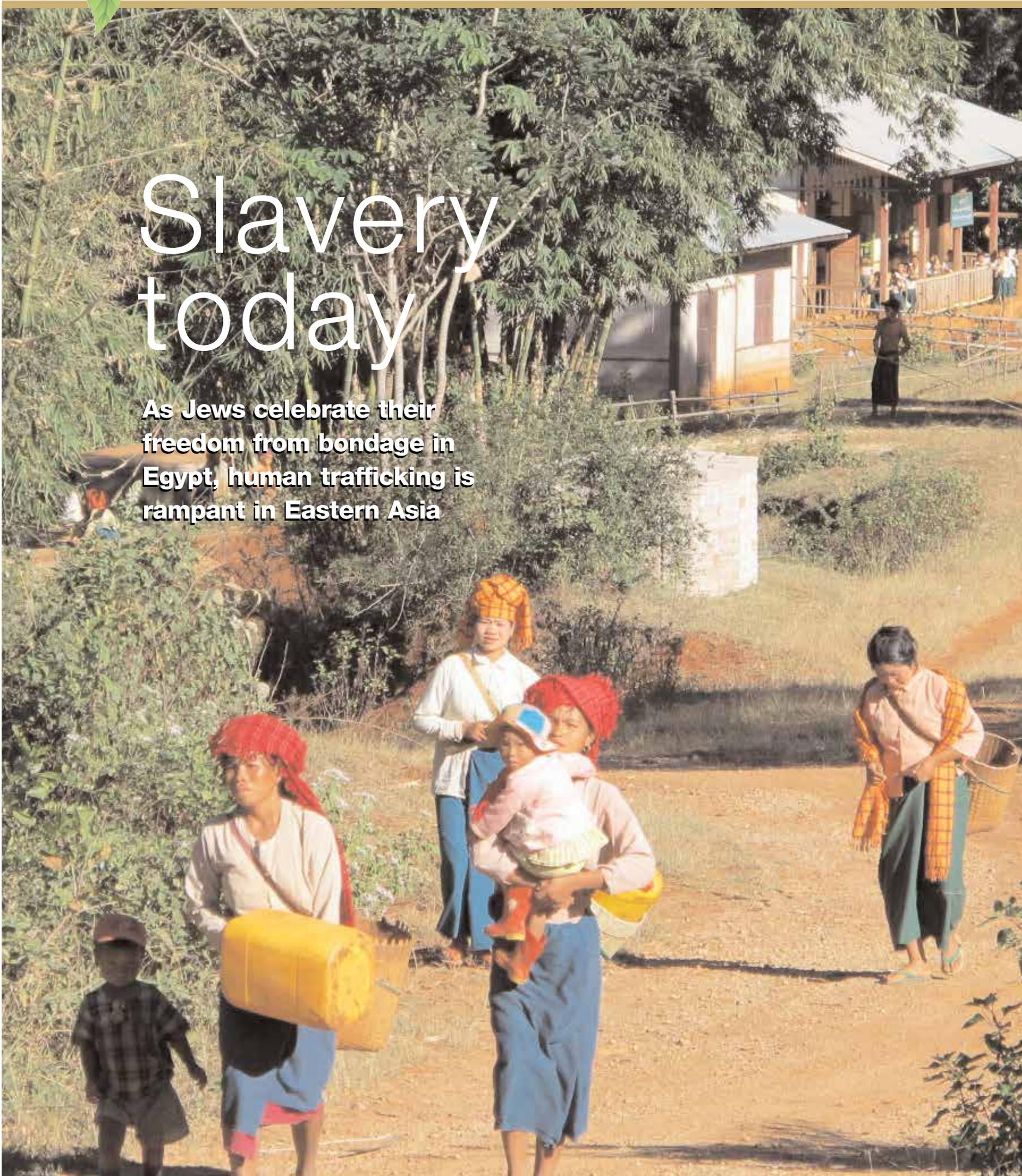


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Slavery today

As Jews celebrate their freedom from bondage in Egypt, human trafficking is rampant in Eastern Asia





85% OF Myanmar's slavery victims are young women, the majority of whom are trafficked for forced marriage into China and sexual exploitation. (Michal Strahilevitz)

Modern-day slaves

Tag International works to combat human trafficking and forced labor in Asia, and looks to Israeli organizations for guidance

◆ By RACHEL MARDER

Michal Strahilevitz tells a story told all too often about Myanmar. A desperate couple from a rural area sold their two daughters, ages 8 and 12, to a wealthy family because they could not afford to feed and clothe them. The girls' owners then forced them into hard labor for months. The sisters tried escaping, but the police caught them. They tried to run away again once in captivity, but were once again unsuccessful.

That's when Tag International, a UK-based NGO that works in partnership with Israeli organizations to manage health, agriculture and community projects in 15 countries across South Asia, East Africa, the Middle East and the former Soviet Union, stepped in.

Strahilevitz says when she heard the story, she and her team tried to connect the girls to a nearby NGO that assists victims and fights the robust industry.

"There is this culture in Myanmar that you will send your child to a wealthier family so they can get an education, not realizing that sometimes the family takes the child and uses them as labor in their house instead of providing them with educational support," says Strahilevitz, who keeps her ear to the ground as Tag's country director based in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city and commercial center.

It was this story, though, that served as a final straw for Tag.

"We now realize this is an increasing and really important issue that needs to be dealt with," says Strahilevitz. "People don't realize when we talk about slaves it seems like some-

thing that is far away, maybe thousands of years ago if we think about the Jewish context in Egypt. It's really so much in existence now and so much bigger than what it was."

Aside from children, impoverished women and men across Asia are imported in and exported out of their home countries, believing they are going to receive work with a salary, only to find that they are being held against their will in deplorable conditions, denied compensation, deprived of their papers and threatened with reporting their illegal status to the authorities if they try to escape.

Tag estimates that 27 million people are enslaved today as sex workers, in factory labor, construction, fishing, agriculture, manufacturing and domestic work in private homes, of which 11,700,000 are from Asia – 47 percent. Myanmar serves both as a major



TAG HAS enlisted help from those who have worked in Israeli women's shelters to help develop a similar service in Myanmar for survivors of trafficking. (Michal Strahilevitz)

source and transit country for trafficking mainly to or between Thailand, Malaysia, China, Bangladesh, India, South Korea and the Middle East.

Working with local groups, Tag brings in experts from organizations like Magen David Adom and MASHA – Israel Center for International Cooperation, to share their experience and knowledge. Now, as Tag adds combating human trafficking and modern-day slavery to its repertoire, Strahilevitz, who is Israeli and South African, says she is looking to Israel for guidance since it has a strong record in fighting forced labor.

ACCORDING TO a 2012 US State Department report on slavery, sex trafficking and forced labor in 186 countries, Israel was placed highest in Tier 1 of a

three-tier ranking system. It means the US recognizes Israel as among the top countries fighting against the forced labor and prostitution within its borders. Initially placed in the third tier in 2001 when the system first began, the recent report noted the work of NGOs, the government and police in cracking down on the burgeoning sex trade and assisting victims smuggled into Israel from the former Soviet Union via Egypt and forced to work in local brothels. In the last several years, Israel has also convicted and sent to prison well known pimps like Rami Saban in May 2012 and Angeliqe Sabag Gautiller in July 2011.

"We didn't do this to satisfy the State Department," Rachel Gershuni, national anti-trafficking coordinator at the Justice Ministry, told the Forward last year. "We

did it because Israel thought it was the right thing to do."

Tag believes that working with local groups to create economic opportunities for desperate men, women and youth, and warning vulnerable populations what to do if they find themselves in trouble, can make a dent in trafficking.

"A lot of people just don't know what their rights are," says Strahilevitz, who has a masters degree in international development from the University of Amsterdam and in Human Rights Law from Oxford University. Strahilevitz has been working in post-conflict and disaster recovery for over a decade. "When they're at risk they don't know who to turn to."

Tag's approach to build local groups' sustainability and import Israeli expertise has proven successful in its other projects. In

'Slavery is really so much in existence now and so much bigger than what it was'

– Michal Strahilevitz



SHAIKE STERN, agronomist, beekeeping expert and Tag senior program manager, gives a beekeeping course in Myanmar in 2012. (Courtesy Tag)



Slavery still exists in 2013.
Will you help us intervene?

TAG'S PROMOTIONAL appeal to help end slavery in Myanmar.

Georgia, it works with the Georgia Red Cross to provide home care and social support for homebound seniors and with MATAV, Israel's largest home care for the elderly organization, to train social workers and volunteers, and retrain retired nurses in helping with homecare.

27 million people are enslaved today, 47% of whom are from Asia

In Myanmar, MDA staff have visited to help implement a viable ambulance transportation system. In Malaita, the largest of the impoverished Solomon Islands, Tag, MASHAV and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee are building the Malaita Chazon Development Authority to stimulate projects for agro-processing, sustainable fisheries and integration of solar technology.

"Our aim is always to work along with [local organizations] and to support them in building their capacity in different sectors," says Strahilevitz.

In Myanmar, Strahilevitz explains that Tag has already begun a project to support the country's beekeepers and train new ones, in an industry she says could prove a viable alternative to migrating. Tag co-launched the venture in July 2012 with MASHAV, bringing 70 queen bees from Israel to help diversify their colonies and improve the quality of the bees, their honey and medicines they produce. Two Israeli experts trained some 17 beekeepers from the private and public sectors during the two-week mission, and together with Tag, government officials and private beekeepers, developed a joint action plan.

Beekeeping is not a time-consuming venture, explains Strahilevitz, it does not require

land or intense labor, and is a feasible option particularly for women looking to support themselves and their children.

A MAIN focus of Tag's mission is women's empowerment, and with 85% of Myanmar's slavery victims being young women, the majority of whom are trafficked for forced marriage into China and sexual exploitation, Strahilevitz says they are also looking to Israel for its expertise in helping survivors.

Tag has enlisted help from those who have worked in Israeli women's shelters to help develop a similar shelter service in Myanmar.

"I think this is a very big gap that exists in Myanmar," says Strahilevitz. "This is something we can bring from experience in Israel... in dealing with people who have suffered from abuse and different forms of violence."

Strahilevitz explains that Myanmar does not have a strong system in place to deal with the trauma of victims once they are sent back to their home country. In 2012, there were approximately 600 cases of governments from neighboring countries sending people back to Myanmar, and 686 cases in 2008 of governments repatriating victims, according to the UN Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking. These are rough estimates however, and the real numbers could be far higher, according to Tag.

"They come back sometimes and they give them a few days to recover and then they send them to their village and families," she says. But even years later, their families don't understand them and they have trouble integrating socially or finding work as they haven't developed skills. Survivors easily become outcasts, while their peers have married and started their adult lives in their absence, says Strahilevitz.

'WHEN WE talk about slaves it seems like something that is far away, maybe thousands of years ago if we think about the Jewish context in Egypt.' (Michal Strahilevitz)

"We're trying to see how we can provide a holistic approach and economic empowerment," she says, including raising awareness in vulnerable communities, working with high-risk groups like women and young people who are considering migrating, and offering services to victims.

While laws on overseas employment, against trafficking and "suppressing" prostitution have been on the books for years, until 2011 when a new government in Myanmar took over, they were largely not implemented.

Strahilevitz says she has noticed changes for the better as the government has signed agreements with China and Thailand against slavery, and the police have shown their willingness to work with civil society actors to address the crisis.

Myanmar was upgraded from a Tier 3 country to Tier 2 in last year's US State Department report on forced labor, thanks to the Southeast Asian country's pledge to outlaw state-sponsored forced labor.

"The government has shown really a willingness to be engaged in this and fight this battle." ❖

