

## EPISODE 8: Urmila Bhoola Interviewed by Dr. Tina Davis

**TINA:**

My name is Tina Davis. And I'm very excited to introduce you to our guest today, which is the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery. Miss Urmila Bhoola, who is joining us from South Africa.

**URMILA:**

Thank you, Tina!

**TINA:**

As we have just entered a new year and a new decade, I would like to take this opportunity to do a stock taking with you, Ms. Bhoola, about where we are today when it comes to contemporary forms of slavery in the global community, and hear your thoughts about what is working and what is not. I would also like to look ahead into the new decade to discuss tomorrow's slavery and what that looks like, and also what is needed to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goal 8.7, which is to eradicate all forced labor, human trafficking, modern slavery and child labor within its timeframe, which is set to year 2030. How would you describe the picture today, if you were to give an overview?

**URMILA:**

I would say that there have been a number of very significant initiatives undertaken in various countries, various international organizations and also national NGOs. So civil society has been very active in the struggle to end slavery. There also have been a number of changes in laws, both with governments, creating more criminal obligations around ending slavery and particularly forced labor, and also child marriage. We've seen increasing legislation specifically addressing business responsibility. So in the UK, for example, in Australia, we see the emergence of legislation. We've also seen an increase in multilateral stakeholder initiatives in the form of Alliance 8.7 and the knowledge platform Delta 8.7. We've also seen an increased interest in raising resources for addressing this issue of slavery through, say the Global Fund to end modern slavery, and also increasing government commitments. So there's a coherent and a big groundswell against ending modern slavery. But of course, as we know, despite all of those initiatives, there's still a number of challenges that lie ahead, Tina.



**TINA:**

What are some of the trends you see that may change the face of slavery going forward?

**URMILA:**

I think there are a number of key trends which define what is happening today. And that is firstly an increase in multi stakeholder initiatives with the action to enter modern slavery becoming more global and more coherent. And this includes 8.7, actively working towards meeting target 8.7 but we also see a resurgence on the ground where there are increasing international organizations as well as national civil society organizations working on the issue based on specific survivor centered experiences. We also see increasing funding and resources being directed towards the issue. And a number of governments are coming to the party by enacting specific legislation, both in regard to government accountability and business responsibility. We see that in the UK and Australia, so there are a number of initiatives that are being taken currently, which present a very good platform for working towards the future to eradicate future challenges.

**TINA:**

What are some of the challenges that may influence the risk of modern slavery in the future

**URMILA:**

Right, so if we're looking at what exists at the moment and what we need to do to be able to increase the impetus towards meeting target 8.7 is that and I mentioned in my report, as you point out, there are a number of, of challenges related to migration and demographic challenges. Indications are that internally displaced persons will increase, that there will be more global migration caused by both conflict and climate change, and that that creates a particular risk of vulnerability to modern slavery. There's also the numerous changes taking place in the world of work, and particularly in the future of work with the labor market and the nature of work undergoing significant changes with increasing digitalization of the economy. Use of artificial intelligence in the workplace, technological changes in the workplace and the way in which jobs themselves and the nature of work is changing. Then we also have changes related to the way in which the economy changes and new technology is emerging, global consumption patterns, environmental changes, as you know, are a huge risk factor. And given the increasing changes caused by climate change, there are a number of people who will be placed at risk of modern slavery. So these are all global issues, and they need a global solution. And in particular, they need a solution that governments are able to translate into transnational activity. And it needs the cooperation of business of all stakeholders, of international organizations, grassroots organizations, this is only really the tip of the iceberg. There may be millions of other issues

that are emerging, and particularly at the local level and district level and community level that we haven't yet specifically identified that need to be addressed.

**TINA:**

What do we know about the effectiveness of the measures being implemented today? Are they effective? Are they not? Or do we not really know?

**URMILA:**

The one, you know, that points to the one challenge that is having enough evidence and being able to measure whether we making progress or not. Now there've been a number of global initiatives by a number of organizations in this regard. And some of the research for instance, from the ILO and the Walk Free foundation indicate there's still almost 41 million people in slavery, including 25 million in forced labor. So it indicates that we are addressing we have to address these issues in a very specific, very pertinent in a very directed way, because of the numbers. So what we do know is that there are increasing numbers of people in slavery. Also, what we do know is that we still need to develop ways of measurement, that the indicators to measure target 8.7 have not all been developed, they've not been agreed globally. So we may be addressing different issues in different ways, but it may be a lot easier to combine our resources. So I think effectively, what we need to do in the future is we need to make sure that we have a continued approach to researching what is happening. And that means also researching what works and what can be effectively replicated in other areas. We also need to make sure that we direct resources at very specific problems, and that policies that governments develop and laws that are developed are based on research and evidence that the we undertake. So that remains a very key aspect of our future initiatives.

**TINA:**

What would you say is missing from today's anti-slavery efforts?

**URMILA:**

That is the big question. That really is what we're trying to understand as a global slavery community at the moment. But some of the research that we've done indicates that there certainly is a global coherence that is missing, that the initiatives and the work that is being done is still far too fragmented. And that there are a number of attempts to bring a number of parallel initiatives together, for instance, in delta 8.7, the knowledge platform of the Alliance 8.7. They have a Pathfinder country network with 45 countries have committed to sharing information and partnering to be more effective at ending slavery. That is a key example of an initiative that is effective and could potentially be more effective and that needs to be replicated. So it addresses one of the main gaps, which is the lack of global coherence and the increasing

need for more strategic and more systematic integration of all the initiatives. So that I would say is a big gap. Another gap is the lack of resources and capacity to still undertake this collective mandate of ending slavery. And although the increasing global efforts and governments have increasingly put overseas development aid, for instance, into specifically directing that governments address the issue, that is not enough given the huge profits that are earned from slavery. Another gap seems to also be that initiatives are still led by organizations excluding survivors themselves. So the work is not survivor lead and survivor centered, which I think is a huge constraint, because then we're designing policies up in the air. And then lastly, I think also governments lack coherence and a strategic framework for developing policy and for implementing legislation except for certain identifiable governments who clearly in their legislation address the issues that arise in their countries. So that is a huge gap and it also links to government accountability. There is still a great deal of impunity when it comes to prosecuting and identifying those responsible those criminals responsible for slavery and those who launder the financial proceeds. slavery. But there's still a huge gap when it comes to governments enforcing the law, making sure that the laws effectively criminalize these processes, and then making sure that the rule of law prevails. So those are some of the gaps that I think we need to address. Another issue I would say is that there's an increasing growth in technology and also using computational science to identify where pockets of slavery exist, and then using that research to prompt governments to act. And that's that is a key step in the global efforts. But I think that there's also a risk of this technology being directed towards being anti human centered and anti human rights oriented in a way that it undermines the human rights framework that is necessary to end modern slavery. So that I think is a gap that needs to be addressed. Because it also means that data and technology are critical in this area and to improve our leverage going forward. But they can also be a constraint on our efforts to end slavery. So those are just some of the gaps that I identify my report. And those would clearly need to be addressed if we are to move in to the future and to be more effective at doing what we do.

**TINA:**

What is the role of Alliance 8.7?

**URMILA:**

The Alliance itself envisages quite a critical role because it brings together a multitude of stakeholders, civil society, governments, business, entrepreneurs, philanthropies, and academics as well as researchers and activists committed to eradicating slavery. And that is a key role because you do need that global impetus to achieve the objectives of ending all forms of slavery and human trafficking as well as ending forced labor and child labor under SDG 8.7. But what it does is to rely on support from governments to make sure that they commit themselves to the process and of course, to incorporating target 8.7 into all the other work on the SDG's and it brings together a range of communities. One of the problems it has had though is that resources

are limited, research is limited, capacity is limited, and hence the global reach of the Alliance has been limited. But I would say it's played a very key role in identifying in a number of areas for instance, in relation to business responsibility, what needs to be undertaken, in relation to forced labor what needs to be undertaken by the different stakeholders? And then of course, its offspring Delta 8.7 is the knowledge platform that's been created by the UN University to provide for the Pathfinder countries who have committed themselves to working with other countries to create this global coherence, to share information and input data so that data and information is readily available. So it plays a very, very critical role in the different areas that need to be addressed as we work towards the future challenges and meeting target 8.7.

**TINA:**

What role can survivors play in the work to successfully tackle contemporary forms of slavery

**URMILA:**

Survivors are central to the success of initiatives, often initiatives that are under taken in their name and for their rescue and rehabilitation, and their recovery from certain situations, but unless they themselves play a role, and this was pointed out by a key organization, the National Survivor Network in initiatives linked to my report, and they made submissions on which parts of my report are based, and they make the point that unless the survivors themselves are involved as leaders and have real agency in effecting change within government, and in business, and prompting change from the part of civil society, these initiatives are not always going to address what the challenges are that they face, and they're not going to be based on the real issues on the ground that need to be addressed. So they also make the point that survivors are often sidelined, they call to tell their stories and that's the be all and end all of their participation. But their real voice and their real agency has to be factored into initiatives and actions that are undertaken. And only then will we see real progress that benefits survivors themselves and addresses their real need.

**TINA:**

In your recent report, your point to six "S-es" as a strategy for moving forward. Could you please share with us what those six "S-es" are?

**URMILA:**

Yes, I think that they actually consolidate what the key issues are that I think need to be focused on for us to continue to remain effective in addressing the issue in the future. And the first is that anti slavery efforts need to become more systematic, because this means action taken at every possible level in every possible system, from local communities up to the international community and involving every organization addressing these issues as a system addressing a

systemic problem. Also, with these efforts need to become more scientific, we need to continue to invest in data collection, information sharing. And we need to continue to identify and measure processes and policies. And our data needs to inform public policies. They need to inform government legislation. They need to inform how we allocate resources to different activities. And the data is also central in prioritizing where action needs to be taken. The other issue is that we need to be more strategic and this is not just about being more coherent as a global initiative and putting together all the multiple initiatives that are being undertaken to end slavery, human trafficking and forced labor. But we need to have a framework that directs the resources that we have towards addressing the specific problems that are experienced, whether they are in prioritized specific communities, or whether they are general regional or global initiatives. We also have to make sure that we allocate resources, and that we obtain resources and that we prioritize how those resources are used based on the specific agendas that are emerging in different countries. And there is research indicating that slavery is more prevalent. For instance, there's a higher prevalence rate in Africa, and more numbers of people enslaved in Asia Pacific. So if we identify where those happen and how they happen and we direct resources specifically to them in a strategic way, then we are more likely to make progress. And then fourthly, we need to be more sustainable because our anti slavery initiatives in general and the initiatives to address target 8.7. and meet those commitments have to be integrated into other SDGs. And they also have to be linked to what governments and other stakeholders are doing around meeting commitments on the other SDGs because that all the SDGs are integral to achieving this future, free of suffering and a future based on human prosperity and one that is based on human rights. The fifth is survivors need to be empowered for them to lead anti slavery efforts, and for them to have real agency in changing the slavery situations they've been subjected to, and to creating a better future for others. And then lastly, to address the growth in technology initiatives need to be smart they need to be linked to harnessing digital technologies and in the process, ensuring that digital technologies that are used to bolster the struggle against slavery but also in a way that no human rights are infringed because technology can do harm, but it can also be very beneficial. So in a nutshell, that is the six S initiative. And the six S approach, which I hope captures a number of principles that governments and all stakeholders need to bear in mind, as we look at ways to make accelerated progress to end slavery.

**TINA:**

As we're coming to the end of our conversation, do you have any final words you would like to share with us?

**URMILA:**

I think that what I would like to say is I've spent six years in the mandate and the mandate concludes in a few months time. And in terms of going forward next year, it's also the end of 2019, where we've seen a number of significant changes in the global economy, in the political systems that drive our economy. And I would say that looking forward, I want to emphasize that

government accountability given their duties and obligations under international law, to end slavery and end human trafficking and end forced labor and other forms of slavery still remains critical. And there is still a great deal of impunity that needs to be addressed where the perpetrators of these crimes get away. And although we know that slavery requires addressing all the systemic root causes of slavery, addressing criminal justice for slavery is also a problem ensuring that those who commit this crime are prosecuted and that their victims get redress. And in this respect, I would say business responsibility is key and that needs more work. There is talk about a binding treaty on business and that will possibly find its way to a conclusion next year. Also the issues around technology and using technology and creating more digital tools and innovative apps to both identify slavery and help victims of slavery is quite key. And then lastly, I would want to commend both yourself, the journal and other organizations and society, international organizations, even individual academics and researchers who've been working unstintingly committed to this issue for many years and to commend them and wish them all well on the way forward. I look forward to a future world free of slavery and a world based on human rights. And in the words of the ILO, a human centered world of work, where there's a human centered world of work, and decent work in human rights for all.

**TINA:**

Thank you so much, Ms. Urmila Bhoola, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, for sharing your thoughts with us today.

**URMILA:**

Thank you so much, Tina.