

## EPISODE 10: Kieran Gilbert Interviewed by Dr. Tina Davis

**TINA:**

Today, I am very excited to welcome Kieran Gilbert, who is the slavery and trafficking editor of the Thomson Reuters foundation. Welcome, Kieran

**KIERAN:**

Thank you, Tina, really, really looking forward to the discussion with you.

**TINA:**

Me too. Could you please tell us a little bit about the Thomson Reuters foundation and what you do?

**KIERAN:**

Sure. So the Thomson Reuters Foundation is the philanthropic arm of Thomson Reuters, the world's largest news and information provider. And really what we do is we leverage the reach and reputation of Thomson Reuters to deliver programs around the world and strengthen the rule of law and promote high quality, fair and balanced journalism. So really, we do this thing as three main somatic areas now, which is media freedom and human rights and inclusive economies. And so we work in these three areas and we we deliver different programs to achieve these goals. So we have a pro bono legal service called trust law, which connects social enterprises and NGOs with law firms looking to the pro bono hours in a way a bit of a matchmaking service and that's been wildly successful in the last 12 or 13 years, we've made something like 45,000 connections and save over 150 million dollars in legal fees to these NGOs and social enterprises who often cannot afford legal assistance or do not have the legal know how in house. We have a media development program. We run training courses for journalists around the world. We offer courses in something like 50 or 60 topics at last count, and everything from kind of oil and gas to financial flows to reporting on corruption, women's rights, modern slavery and human trafficking, of course, and I'll come on to that more later. And last, but certainly not least, we have a team of about 60 journalists around the world that cover what we call underreported issues, and we monitor now is the new frontier of human rights. So we tried to cover issues that maybe don't get an either enough or maybe less balanced and high quality coverage, and other publications. So we cover a really wide range of topics. We cover



humanitarian and development issues. We cover women's rights, climate change, land and property rights and food and agricultural share social innovation and modern slavery and human trafficking, which I'll talk to you a bit more about.

**TINA:**

So you are the slaving trafficking editor of Thomson Reuters foundations news team, which is the largest news team in the world, reporting specifically on modern forms of slavery, so can you tell me a bit about, you know, how many are you? Where are you based? And what is your strategy behind your reporting on this particular topic?

**KIERAN:**

Sure. So got a team of nine journalists around the world myself as the editor in London, we then have correspondence in Mexico, Brazil, India, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Thailand, and Cambodia. And there's many reasons why we're across these countries. But these are some of the country's most most affected by human trafficking and modern slavery, and also some countries that haven't really had much and maybe in some countries, any focus on these topics, you know, a country like Thailand, of course has been in the spotlight in recent years, you know, a long standing issue with sex trafficking and then in 2015, fantastic reporting by the Associated Press. This shone a light on modern slavery and it seems it industry, then you got a country like Cambodia. You know, neighboring Thailand, which perhaps hasn't had as much focus on human trafficking and modern slavery, they're having to fight today but to grow, you know, a huge government industry, which is now actually under scrutiny from the European Union, and then go to also a huge issue of women being trafficked to China. So it's a bit of a combination really, of making sure we go in and add value and in countries and contexts where perhaps there already is some discussion around these topics. And then in other countries starting that discussion and and really kind of trying to build a bit of a media landscape there and and issues that have perhaps never been covered. So the way we work generally is, is we aim to have what we call two track cover so we want to break news, we want to make sure that if there is a new policy or being discussed or bill being put to Parliament, or a new initiative, perhaps to support survivors, we're covering that as as a news item, and really, I think where we are most passionate and and the thing we do best is The breaking exclusives doing more insightful investigative journalism holding governments and companies to account any a revealing kind of wrongdoing or poor practices and in this fear that also often leave workers either vulnerable or indeed exploited or perhaps leave survivors without the care, support and compensation they so badly need.

**TINA:**

How do you see media's role in the efforts that are being made to address contemporary forms of slavery?

## **KIERAN:**

That's a great question. I think it's something that we talk about a lot in the newsroom, I think, it's a challenge for the media to cover this topic in a way that is sensitive, and not just kind of scratching the surface but also in a way that grabs the reader so you know, you I'm sure you've seen it yourself and anyone who has an interest in this space will be aware, you know, it's all soft and hinges on the language you have to use a victim or survivor expression. We could work for a modern day slave victim of child sexual exploitation or teenage sex slaves. So if for example, that that form of phrase wouldn't really fit easily into a headline or a lead the intro of the story, but of course, seeing the latter that phrase teenage sex slave in print, may well understand that young survivor who had the courage to share that story. So the challenge for the media really is how do you report on this topic in a way that alienates neither the reader, the audience, or the survivor or the affected population? And I think one thing I'm proud of that we the Thomson Reuters foundation is that I think with a split like this, the media have a responsibility in a role not just to be kind of a mirror, reflecting this topic, but to be involved in advancing the narrative and making the narrative fuller less sensationalist, more complex, not just talking about the kind of comparabilities, but the symptoms but the, the the root causes themselves and I think it's kind of moving on now in two or three main things. One is moving on from just focusing on the exploitation of the victim. I think a few years ago, especially in tabloid journalism, there's still an obsession on the ordeal suffered by the victim, the pain they'd endured, the horror, the pursuit of justice against the perpetrators. But with little focus or analysis, on kind of what lay ahead for the survivor or perhaps the the politics and the policies, in say, the destination country or the reality on the ground in the source country that had driven someone into such a situation of trafficking, or exploitation. But now that the topic has gone, dare I say, a little more mainstream. And I think it's now the media's responsibility to build a more forward looking narrative. So you know, what kind of comes next? What do the survivors need? Well, you know, health care, counseling, education, training, jobs, you know, I think we, in a way become these forward looking stories can humanize rather than commoditize or exploit survivors who speak out and then also help in a way to tackle the stigma around this around this topic. I also think as well, historically in media coverage has seen modern slavery almost exclusively as a criminal issue. But again, not seen the kind of systemic drivers behind it. I think it's very easy. And of course, as we know, and you know, governments often do this governments often deliberately conflate smuggling or trafficking or like to paint this very simplistic picture of the, you know, the criminal and the victim, but you know, very black and white without, without capturing the gray area, the nuances of this issue. So I think that's something that we are increasingly trying to do to show there is a real continuum of exploitation. The modern slavery takes many forms, unchecked labor exploitation can descend into more egregious forms of modern day slavery. So it's not an easy task because of course, that doesn't sell, those headlines aren't going to be as clickbaity and as sexy, so to speak, but in telling these more nuanced and comprehensive and sensitive stories. You just help to build the public's knowledge and understanding and to really drive the wider conversation forward.

**TINA:**

What would you say is the state of today's media coverage? Broadly speaking?

**KIERAN:**

It's a mixed picture but I think we see publications like the BBC, like the Guardian, like the Independent, The New York Times, and you know, while they might not specifically cover modern slavery or human trafficking, per se, they'll cover it through humanitarian and development lens, they'll cover it through a criminal story lens or more, you know, for perhaps a big news story like the case at the end of last year of the 39 Vietnamese who were found dead in the back of a lorry in Essex in England, I think what you're seeing is you are seeing that more and more comprehensive coverage of seeing more sensitivity around how survivors are identified and interviewed. You are seeing more fuller pictures I think of their accounts and not just I think historically, especially with those so much focus on sex trafficking in the media, you have these really harrowing and garish, you know, accounts and portrayals of people that experience while in captivity and sex trafficking. But nowadays, we're going to moving beyond that moving past that was saying and longer form of reporting into companies supply chain is a really difficult job. And we you know, we do this well, but it's not easy. Trying to trace company's supply chain that takes a lot of time, a lot of expertise, a lot of patience for all the stories that have worked out for us tracking supply chains. I can tell you there are several if not dozens of stories that didn't make it because we couldn't quite trace the supply chains. And but but we are we are seeing that at Thomson Reuters foundation. We've always prided ourselves because we've covered this topic for so long and because we've done it with such care and sensitivity to the Thomson Reuters standards of fair accurate impartial journalism. You know, we we've been doing this for a long time, but we've made mistakes we've learned we've improved the way even we use our language, but it's heartening now, to see other big publications putting time and attention into this topic. Although it might not be, you know, as pressing a topic as climate change doesn't have necessarily, you know, there's not a champion let's say, behind, or face of modern slavery, like, you know, you have Greta Thunberg, perhaps, for climate change, I would say, there's still the tabloid journalism on this topic, very sensationalist. It's very simplistic, you know, they'll jump on the stories. You know, for example, you might see a story in the UK about a couple who kept a man in a garden shed and forced him to be their kind of domestic worker and they will run a huge long story on that with photos of the shed and the chain is that that I find it personally frustrating because while it's a shocking story, that's an isolated incident that's quite rare. As you know, in this day and age for anyone to be enslaved physically, it's as much more of a fight psychological crime ready now, you know, its threats is coercion, it's deception. So sometimes I get a little frustrated when you see some media publications covering stories of that and isolation which don't really reflect the wider crime or the wider trends accurately.

**TINA:**

Your role sits within an infrastructure where you have laws, you know, government policies, and many different stakeholders who are working differently, addressing this issue of modern slavery. How would you say that your work is affected by say something like the UK Modern Slavery Act and what is that done for you work in what you are doing in pushing for progress on forced labor in supply chains?

**KIERAN:**

That's a good question. I think, you know, to be honest, the the Modern Slavery Act was with a blessing kind of, first for journalists because you know, the world's first legislation to define and tackle modern slavery per se. It suddenly gave a benchmark it's only gave us you know, as journalists, especially here something something to analyze something to hold the government to account with and even your NGOs, especially organizations that support survivors, suddenly, you know, the way that they could work back so within within that framework, it has been interesting for us to see, you know, now similar legislation passed in Australia to analyze how you know, Australia's legislation is much more specific just focused on reporting requirements. It goes quite a bit further than the UK Modern Slavery Act, it is more stringent on the requirements there are some are there's more scope for punitive measures with companies who don't comply. And I think it's going to be interesting to see there was a review of the Modern Slavery Act in the UK last year, whether the UK may tweak its legislation to kind of keep pace now, with the Australian legislation you do have similar, you know, similar and pieces of law in in countries like France, the Netherlands. In the state of California in the, in the US, again, similarly, due diligence and supply chain law that is quite heartening to see again, from a journalistic point of view that we're even starting to see some some progress with kind of transnational cases. And for example, the US Supreme Court is weighing up, whether to hear lawsuits about child labor and cocoa farms. In West Africa, you've got a case with British American Tobacco, Malawi now face legal action being launched by lawyers in the UK. So I think it's a really exciting time in that legal framework, the Modern Slavery Act, a was a huge watershed moment. In 2015 it had the momentum of the Sustainable Development Goals and target 8.7 being adopted to enforce labor by 2030. And so yeah, well, I think this this now shift towards pursuing cases transnationally is is really heartening, and I think at the moment it and it's definitely without giving too much away. There's some reporting we're going to be doing this year into into analyzing The the strategy and the effectiveness of such cases whether whether there is scope for them to succeed, whether that's there to some extent, it is maybe a bit of a PR move just to raise right attention, whether those cases will get off the ground and will have success remains to be seen. But it's great that those actions are being launched.

**TINA:**

Recently, your team published a story on slave labor in the Brazilian billion dollar coffee industry, despite years of efforts, trying to weed out the severe exploitation taking place there. Can you tell me a little bit about the story, how you worked on it, and how you managed to put this all together because it's involving, you know, big companies. It's also of course, dangerous territory, being out on some of the Brazilian farmlands.

**KIERAN:**

Sure. I could talk for hours on this so I'll try and keep it short and free for the sake of the podcast but and no this is fantastic reporting from our Brazil based correspondence Fabio Tecselas as essentially in a nutshell, you know, we were talking at the start of 2019, about industries to keep an eye on, industries that are known to be particularly affected by labor exploitation, and modern slavery. And we talked a lot about coffee. And Fabio started putting some feelers out with contacts and he's got really good connections with labor, prosecutors and inspectors across Brazil. And he got invited on a raid on coffee plantations today and suspected were being propped up by slave labor. And he went on this raid that 69 workers were rescued in really poor conditions. They're all undocumented, underpaid, lacking safety equipment as required by law, so severe breaches of Brazilian labor law and the story in a way spiraled from there because when he was they found out that those plantations had been supplying to Starbucks and Nespresso and it was also certified by the Rain Forest Alliance. So then we thought okay, this this is interesting. We have something to work with here because obviously there are concerns about the effectiveness of these third party certification schemes. You've got major brands here. So let's let's dive in and let's try and show why the slave labor is so prevalent it is going unchecked. Despite the money involved despite the brands and the certifiers involved in and through building sources and getting exclusively obtained data, analyzing public records, speaking to so many officials, we basically just showed there are so many farms being probed in Minas Gerais, the main coffee producing state and being found to have used slave labor. But the Brazilian inspectors are really struggling because they're so understaffed because they're really underfunded, because under Jair Bolsonaro the labor ministry has been shackled, you know, there's less of an appetite now under this current government to tackle the crime but at the same time, the industry is growing and growing and growing as the world's largest coffee exporter, you know, So many of our exports are going to the US, you know, major brands, they're certified to death. But if you don't have of course in this case the adequate oversight from from the government You can't expect the private sector really to be comprehensively you know, rooting out slave labor so I think I was probably a proud of the story because it was such a comprehensive deep dive and it really showed quite a unique snapshot in the failings of such a major supply chain and again the issues with brand's ability to oversee their supply chains and even they certified themselves in a Rain Forest Alliance said in response to reporting they were considering changing the way they audit farms because administrators to have this set up by their group certification, so they certify a whole cooperative of 90 to 100 Farms is slavery free.

You know, as workers rights being respected, even though only visit 10, which you know, the limitations there are stark or obvious.

**TINA:**

I'm going to switch over to another topic because I know we could talk to talk about this for much longer. But unfortunately, we don't have that time. So our listeners can also go and read up on the story if they want to look at the reporting of that particular Brasil case, but Thomson Reuters handles and also have other initiative that is aimed at reducing modern slavery. And first of all, you have something called the Bank Alliance Project. And can you tell me a little bit about this project and what the thought behind this is?

**KIERAN:**

Sure. So essentially, it's an idea we had back in 2014 and 15. We were just wrecking really recognizing the kind of the contribution the financial sector can make in the anti trafficking movement and with that in mind, we created the the Banks Alliance Against Trafficking or just Banks Alliance for short and essentially what this is, is a series of regional multi stakeholder working groups, that support banks to fight trafficking using their own data. So the model brings together experts from financial institutions, civil society and law enforcement agencies, and we've done this now in the US in Europe and Asia and the core aim of each of these regional working groups really, it's making map at the financial footprint of human trafficking in the banking system. And then develop kind of red flag indicator of suspicious activity that help financial institutions to basically spot when there might be suspicious financial flows. So it was an ambitious undertaking, because to get different banks around the table and talk quite candidly, around, you know, suspected criminal financial flows is not easy, but it's done in a way where the data is anonymized and it's all very Chatham House kind of off record. And in that way, the banks are basically able to share with each other, their approach you know, the the trends, they're seeing how they might deal with this. So this has been really promising. I know that it established really good links between law enforcement and the banking sector, sometimes there's links already there and we strengthen them. Maybe In parts of Asia, those relationships, the links were there, we'd have to build them. So that's been a really impressive and successful initiative to date.

**TINA:**

And do you see any synergy effects with this initiative? And the work that you and your news team do in terms of your thinking.

**KIERAN:**

That's an excellent question, and that is not and the reason I'll briefly explain is because we do have a bit of a church and state divided in Thompson Reuters foundation between our editorial team and the rest of our projects. Because, you know, because we are on our corporate side and our legal side, very closely aligned with a bank, NGOs, police government, in some cases, in my I am in the file, I think, between the rest of the foundation and my team, so that we can have an initiative like the Banks Alliance, where the banks are very happy to come on the table. You know, it's personally frustrating for me, I say with a smile on my face, because I have some knowledge of what goes on there. But of course, it's not something that's very that we would then use for reporting because it's, you know, that they're doing it in good faith. That it's off the record not not for, not for the eyes only of the journalist but of course, either the relationships we build that do help and I have managed to write some stories and you know, still around financial flows with the contacts gathered through that kind of initiative, if not the information itself.

**TINA:**

You also have established an award for businesses who are making serious efforts to be leaders when it comes to addressing modern slavery, the Slavery Awards. And I know that also this year, you have made some new additions to your format of the Slavery Awards. Tell me about the what the rewards are, first of all, and and what it's going to be this year.

**KIERAN:**

So we're really excited about the the Stop Slavery Award. So this was set up in 2017. And the Stop Slavery Award essentially engages the corporate sector and professional services with the aim to improve human rights and working conditions in their supply chain. So the award really celebrates corporates leading the way in best practice. And it provides a platform for them to share their expertise in their supply chain transparency, and how they manage their operation. We're not saying that any company that shortlist to win flavor award is perfect or anywhere near perfect, but it's these companies who are really, you know, making genuine and concrete efforts to improve and our thinking is that the creating a race to the top here that the foundation can drive companies of all sizes really to actively address the issue of modern slavery in operations. And so previously, the the awards already just focused on large businesses. So all previous winners include Adidas, Apple, Unilever, Intel, Thai Union, CNA, Standard Chartered, but this year we're excited because we already brought in the awards out. So we're focusing on on impact on innovation, on campaigning on sale, survivor support and even journalism. So we're just wanting to broaden those awards out past the private sector and also recognize, you know, some SMEs and smaller companies that are making big strides in those areas. And of course, those those NGOs, whether that's kind of survivor support or campaigning to change policy, or



tech innovation so we're really excited the the Stop Slavery Award is is next month in London on February the 20th. And so we're really, really looking forward to kind of celebrating a much wider range of actors this year, not just, you know, large companies in the private sector.

**TINA:**

We've come to an end with our conversation today but do you have any final comments you want to share?

**KIERAN:**

Um I just really want to, you know, encourage kind of, I think, the media particularly just to keep keep digging in and investing in in this topic. It's not a topic that has many quick or easy wins. It's a topic where you have to be so careful not fall into the simplistic trap of just focusing on the victims or deal because you know that I'll get clicks and eyeballs of you know, seeing it perhaps is just a criminal story there's a real value to to really tackling this for as as the issue is systemic issue is as a societal issue as a cultural issue as a political issue in telling telling that wider story and just some of the the variety of stories. Yeah, now we're running out of time. But you know, the story we've done this year, we've kind of exposed the failings of Brasil, the Dirty List in Brasil are going to name and shameless, which is used the whole company's account to account we showed how in India, although under a compensation scheme set up in 2016, the survivors of bonded labor there's not one survivor has been paid the full compensation they deserve. We've done a story we did a story a year ago showing how gloves made by forced labor labor in Malaysia entering the NHS and the public procurement supply chain. So you know, these stories, you know, you might not really want to always read on the front page, you might not stop and click on them when you're scrolling through the Twitter feed. But these, these are really important stories to do because they show, you know, failings in public policy. They show failings in law, they show failing survivors, they show issues with the private sector's ability to map and to clean up their supply chain. So I think it's these kind of stories are going to affect change. And they're going to drive governments, companies and even NGOs to basically do more to tackle this issue to stop people falling into exploitation. And then of course, to help those people out of exploitation and help them rebuild their lives after. So I'm really hoping. I've seen a huge improvement in recent years. I really hope in the next five years to 10 years that that we really see an end the kind of simplistic sensationalist media coverage of these topics.

**TINA:**

Thank you so much for our conversation. I really enjoyed that and all the best of luck for the work that you and your team do.

**KIERAN:**

It's a pleasure to talk to you.