

UN International Day of Remembrance for Victims and Survivors of Slavery

Sherry Wanjiru, Lived Experience Project Officer
Additional Referral Pathway, Family Violence & Modern Slavery Stream

On 25 March, we gather to remember the victims of the transatlantic slave trade – millions of lives taken, exploited, and dehumanised.

But remembrance, on its own, is not enough. Because for many of us, this is not just history. It is lineage, it is lived reality, and it is still unfolding.

I come from Kenya. My grandfather, from the Agikuyu tribe, was part of the Mau Mau resistance, those who fought against British colonisation for freedom, dignity, and land. He fought a system built on control, on extraction, and on the belief that some lives were worth less than others.

Today, I stand here as his descendant. But I also stand here as a survivor of human trafficking in Australia. Two different contexts. Two different time periods. But disturbingly, rooted in the same logic.

We are often taught to see slavery and colonisation as something that ended, as something we have moved on from. But the truth is, these systems did not disappear. They adapted and became more complex.

Today, exploitation does not always wear chains. It wears contracts. It hides in migration systems. It exists in labour markets and supply chains. It lives in the quiet spaces where vulnerability is met with opportunity - not for empowerment, but for exploitation.

Today, modern slavery can look like an opportunity that feels too good to be true. It can look like a debt that keeps growing, no matter how much someone works. It can look like people tied to employers through visa conditions, unable to leave. It can look like underpaid or unpaid labour. Isolation. Threats. The removal of choice.

And often, it exists in plain sight ... but goes unrecognised.

For many of us, especially those from formerly colonised countries, the impacts are layered. We inherit histories of dispossession. We navigate systems never designed for our thriving. We face barriers that are often invisible to those who benefit from them. And sometimes, we find ourselves caught in cycles that feel familiar, just under different names.

This is why days like today matter. Because they ask us not only to remember, but to recognise.

To recognise that the past is not past.

That the structures that enabled slavery and colonisation still shape who is vulnerable, who is protected and who is believed.

As someone with lived experience, I want to say this clearly:
Survivors are not just stories. We are not just moments of awareness. We are experts in the systems that failed us.

If we are serious about ending modern slavery, then lived experience must sit at the centre of solutions. We need responses that go beyond rescue, beyond compliance, beyond statements.

We need people to understand what modern slavery looks like today. To not look away, but to recognise the signs, ask questions and respond. Awareness is not just about knowing it exists, it's about what we choose to do when we see it.

We need systems that address the root causes - inequality, exploitation, lack of access and the enduring impacts of colonisation.

My grandfather fought for freedom in one form, and I fight for it in another. I know I am not alone.

So today, as we remember those who suffered and those who resisted ... I invite us all to reflect: What does remembrance require of us now?

Because honouring the past is not just about looking back. It is about having the courage to confront the present, and the commitment to change the future.