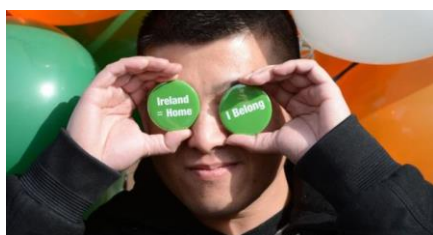




[Una Mullally](#) [Mon, Nov 25, 2013, 07:04](#) **First published:** Mon, Nov 25, 2013, 01:00

## We are in danger of becoming slaves to a broken system <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/we-are-in-danger-of-becoming-slaves-to-a-broken-system-1.1605837>

**Ireland has a long and complex history with slavery, which continues today**



An undocumented migrant worker at a Migrant Rights Centre Ireland press conference in Dublin. Photograph: Alan Betson

There is a small enough statue outside the courthouse in St Louis, Missouri, of Dred Scott and his wife Harriet. In 1857, the former sued for his freedom and that of his wife and two daughters. He lost the case, but it was a hugely significant one, igniting further discourse on the citizenship of slaves. When Abraham Lincoln made his famous “a house divided against itself cannot stand” speech while accepting the Republican nomination for the US Senate a year later in 1858, the implications of the Dred Scott case were fresh in his mind.

Two years later he would be president. And a year after that, the American civil war began. You do the math, as his contemporary fellow citizens might say.

The courthouse in St Louis – a city still unnervingly divided along racial lines – is an imposing structure, and the statue of Dred Scott and Harriet, clasping hands and looking towards the horizon, is dwarfed by it. The nearby Mississippi river divides the city from East St Louis, which has, depending what list you read, the highest crime rate in the US. Dred and Harriet have their backs to the river.

### Irish slaves

Slavery was disappearing in medieval Europe when it was reaching its peak in Ireland. In Iceland last year, I

met a farmer and hunter who rather proudly put the beauty and physical strength of Icelanders down to the careful selection of Irish slaves by the Vikings, extracting the prettiest women and hardest men as their “thralls”, the Norse term for serf or slave.

Ireland has a long and complex history with slavery, which continues today. Our patron saint was a slave. And we’re not unusual. It’s hard to think of a country or society that hasn’t been touched by slavery, be it victim or perpetrator or both, yet we continue to talk about slavery in abstract and historical terms. When one thinks of the term “slave” or “slavery”, almost immediately the African-American legacy of slavery is evoked. That terribly recent narrative has not been dealt with properly. The inequalities African-Americans face in the US are shameful. **Their statues commemorating people who fought for freedom are far too small.**

Modern slavery is complicated, as demonstrated by the unfolding story of three women rescued from a house in London. There are 30 million slaves in the world. They include those in forced marriages, bonded labour, forced prostitution and domestic slavery, as well as child soldiers and migrant workers forced into servitude, debt bondage and so on. Slavery can be a physically enforced horror or the psychological trauma inflicted on a person until they believe they have no choice but to remain in captivity.

The Global Slavery Index published last month by the Walk Free Foundation says up to 340 people are living as slaves in Ireland. The Migrant Rights Centre Ireland has called for action on the domestic servitude of people in diplomatic households in Dublin. “It may seem incredible that people are being trafficked in to be exploited and abused in the Dublin homes of diplomats,” Gráinne O’Toole of the centre said, “but we have seen numerous cases over the past few years.”

[Denise Charlton](#) of the Immigrant Council of Ireland, which has been putting pressure on the Government through the Turn off the Red Light campaign to adequately legislate against prostitution instead of criminalising victims of it, said recently that in the past 12 months in Ireland, 48 victims of trafficking were identified, including 23 children, most of whom were victims of sexual exploitation.

The regime under which asylum seekers live in this State is not slavery. But it is demeaning, restrictive, and denies asylum seekers the appropriate freedoms we should be proud to offer those who come to our country to seek better lives.

Youth detention is not slavery, but inspections often yield unnerving reports, such as the concerns raised last week about punishments doled out to young people at Oberstown detention school in north Dublin. These included “protection rooms”, where young people were placed for refusing to take direction from staff.

“Inspectors found that this cold and bleak environment was not suitable for children or young people for any purpose,” the report by the Health Information and Quality Authority said, although a good standard of healthcare and staff care was provided overall.

### **Shameful**

The same goes for conditions in some of our prisons. The Magdalene laundries, which existed until 1996, enslaved young women, yet the State’s resistance to fully admitting the collusion of imprisoning women in work camps and compensating survivors adequately is shameful.

There are horrible things happening all over the world that we do little about. But the least we could do is make our own society better. Freeing people from shackles starts at home, and we must do what we can to alleviate all restrictions imposed on people, be they clear-cut or complex. A caring society, which protects those vulnerable to falling under the restrictive control of another, can legitimately call itself “developed”. Otherwise, we’re just all slaves to a broken system.