

## Lesson Five

# Maintaining the Social Conditions for Justice: The Role of Government



## Before You Press Play

In previous lessons, we've looked at essential components of social justice, including close friendships that provide personal knowledge and meaningful connections, families and churches that offer comprehensive care and responsibility, and hard work that generates dignity and economic opportunity.

But these relationships and opportunities need secure social conditions to flourish. This brings us to the responsibility of government.

Government's role is to sustain an overall environment of safety, order, freedom, and peace. That includes upholding justice through laws and responding to threats to social harmony.

By doing these things, government ensures that healthy relationships can grow and thrive in the context of family, church, and community. In the video for this lesson, you'll witness the story of Shyima, whose dire situation required government intervention on her behalf. As you watch the video, consider these questions:

- What steps did government authorities take on Shyima's behalf that only government authorities can? What is government specifically equipped to do well?
- What needs did Shyima have that government was not well-equipped to meet?



## Watch

### **Liberty and Justice: Shyima's Story**

with commentary by Sean Litton, Vice President of Field Operations, International Justice Mission (see DVD or watch online at [SeekSocialJustice.com](http://SeekSocialJustice.com))



## Read and Discuss

*This lesson focuses on fighting human trafficking to highlight government's role in pursuing justice in society. While it may seem like a problem that exists only abroad, human trafficking is more prevalent in America than many people realize.*

What is the proper role of government in a just society? To answer this, we first need to address the question: What kinds of need is government best able to meet?

### What Kinds of Need is Government Best Able to Meet?

#### Law and Order

Although we often take the point for granted, a just society requires law and order. Laws express a community's agreement about the basic rules of conduct for its members' lives together. In other words, laws express a society's understanding of justice. Government articulates and implements specific laws to provide order for our public interactions.

*"It was a good day.  
They went to justice."*

-Shyima Hall

- 1 How did public awareness of the law help bring about Shyima's rescue? Who first tipped off the police about her situation?

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Government acts on behalf of—and seeks the good of—all citizens of a society, not just a particular family, church, or social group. Government also has a “monopoly” on the use of public force. In other words, government is the only institution in society that is authorized to use force to uphold public law. Without such a monopoly, rogue groups or gangs would take it upon themselves to impose their own notion of justice on the larger society.

- 2 In the video, how did government bring about freedom through the use of appropriate force?

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- 3 According to Sean Litton from International Justice Mission, why is it important to have only one institution in society that is authorized to enforce public laws on all citizens?

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### Protection for Civil Society

As we've discussed throughout this guide, effective social justice strategies seek to cultivate and restore healthy relationships. These relationships are best nurtured locally, in families, neighborhoods, and congregations—collectively referred to as *civil society*.

Individuals in these various spheres and communities need the freedom to serve one another and to exercise their proper role in society. This is difficult to do when their personal safety or possessions are in jeopardy. It's also difficult for families and churches to cultivate relationships and for businesses to supply economic opportunity through work if other entities interfere with their proper roles and responsibilities. Government serves to guard against such interference as various institutions intersect in public life.

In addition to protecting the freedom and authority of individuals and institutions, government also protects the freedom of a society as a whole—its freedom to pursue its way of life. A just society is one in which members are bonded to each other through sharing common goods, traditions, and a sense of moral purpose. Government safeguards these bonds and ensures that a society's heritage can be handed down to future generations.

- 4 Read Romans 13:3-4. What do these verses identify as the role of governing authorities?

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- 5 Discuss how government protected and allowed for a strong civil society response in Shyima's case.

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- 6 The family that trafficked Shyima into America and held her captive not only treated her as less than human but also refused to abide by basic assumptions, norms, and expectations of American society. If actions like this went unpunished, how would they threaten not only individuals like Shyima but also the larger society?

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Not all needs are best met by government. While government is very good at protecting freedom and physical safety, it lacks the ability to provide the personal care that is necessary for healthy relationships. Government is not well-equipped to address “problems of the heart” such as severe depression or destructive addictions—problems that often contribute to poverty and social breakdown. While the state can safeguard the conditions of a just society, it shouldn’t seek to respond to needs it doesn’t have the capacity to address. Government has an obligation not to overstep the boundaries of its own legitimate responsibilities. That was a significant concern when our nation’s Founders drafted the U.S. Constitution, which was carefully written to limit government’s role in a way that would allow civil society to thrive.

Government is at its best when it protects what civil society cultivates.

- 7 According to Sean Litton, in addition to their physical rescue and the prosecution of their perpetrators, what other needs do trafficking victims usually have? Which of these needs do you think government agencies are well-equipped to address?

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- 8 According to Lt. Derek Marsh, which of Shyima’s needs was the government not able to meet? What does this say about the possibility of achieving social justice if we primarily look to government to fulfill it?

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*“The government can take care of the law and order part of the equation, but other people have to step in and help that person heal.”*

—Sean Litton,  
Vice President of  
Field Operations  
International Justice Mission

## No One Has a Monopoly on Responsibility for Social Justice

Listening to public debate, it’s easy to get the impression that government bears the primary, if not sole, responsibility for social justice. Politicians and pundits often imply that a hurting society is the result of a cold-hearted and stingy government failing to uphold its responsibilities. In contrast, Sean Litton suggests that no single institution has the capacity to meet all the needs of social justice. Instead, responsibility for those requiring help is distributed throughout society, with different institutions called to serve in different ways. This approach matches the multi-dimensional nature of human need. Social breakdown is most often due to people failing to carry out their responsibilities to others—parents for their children, spouses for their mates, churches for their members, etc. Government cannot substitute for these foundational relationships.

**9** Read 1 Peter 2:13-14. What do these verses say is the responsibility of government? How could government “praise those who do good” in society?

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**10** Accountability can be uncomfortable. Why is it sometimes easier to avoid face-to-face contact and personal relationships?

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*“Each person that comes to the table does not provide a full set of utensils to deal with things.”*

—Lt. Derek Marsh,  
Orange County Human  
Trafficking Task Force

## Crowding Out Civil Society

As we’ve seen, government best promotes social justice when it protects what civil society cultivates. But when government assumes ever-more responsibility for providing goods and services directly to citizens, it can work against the cause of social justice by crowding out civil society efforts in terms of both responsibility and resources.

For example, Social Security and similar government programs that provide for the elderly can shape our sense of responsibility for taking care of our own parents and grandparents. Government-funded unemployment benefits can weaken a congregation’s or neighborhood’s sense of obligation to its members who lose their jobs.

Government assistance programs rely on taxes that take money out of the hands of families, friends, churches, charities, and businesses. That leaves the institutions that are best able to care for and equip those in need with fewer resources while putting more resources into the hands of government, which can't provide people with the meaningful relationships they need to flourish. When they crowd out civil society, government assistance programs actually work against the cause of social justice.

Without a doubt, we should be very generous in committing resources to fighting poverty and social breakdown. However, the question is what kinds of resources are most effective—Money? Time? Emotional support? And which institutions are best equipped to deploy them given the specific circumstances—family, church, ministry, business, or government?

- 11** The more government crowds out other institutions, the more we place expectations on it to solve problems. Yet the more expectations we place on government, the more likely it is to grow and crowd out civil society institutions even more. The process of crowding out is self-perpetuating. How can we break this cycle when it comes to our own actions and expectations?
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### ***A Safety Net that Doesn't Trap***

What happens in emergencies when civil society organizations are unable to meet people's basic tangible needs? In dire situations, the government does have a responsibility to intervene by providing a "safety net." But a government safety net can only help a person or a family so far. Government cannot effectively build the relationships required for true human flourishing.

Safety nets should be a last resort and they should be temporary. Earlier in American history, government assistance was limited to cases where people fell through the primary net of civil society. When government intervenes today, it should do so in a way that supports rather than crowds out smaller, voluntary organizations. Government policy should also avoid fostering a dependence that discourages people from working and fulfilling their responsibilities to others.

It would be better to think of the safety net as a trampoline—a flexible place to land that helps people bounce back into independent living.

- 12** In what ways do government safety nets foster dependence and undercut justice?

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- 13** Strong relationships and work skills nurtured by family, church, and ministries are important for human flourishing. How might government intervention support rather than crowd out the role of families, churches, and work in our society?
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## Rethink

Government plays a crucial role in social justice by establishing and maintaining social conditions such as safety, order, freedom, and peace. These conditions allow families, churches, and ministries to nurture healthy relationships and businesses to provide the opportunity to work. Government is distinctly equipped and authorized to meet those needs in society that require the use of force to safeguard lives, property, institutions, and social identity. When government fails to respect the authority of other social institutions by stepping outside its proper limits, it inhibits human flourishing.

- 14** How might it change your perspective and involvement to view government's primary responsibility as protecting what civil society provides?
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## Read On

Check out these verses and other sources on the role of government. Visit [SeekSocialJustice.com](http://SeekSocialJustice.com) for hyperlinks to these and additional material.

Leviticus 19:15

Proverbs 29:4

1 Timothy 2:1-2

*The Heritage Guide to the Constitution*, Edwin Meese, Matthew Spalding, and David Forte

*To Empower People: From State to Civil Society*, Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus

*Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*God and Government*, Charles Colson

*Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville

*The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom*, Robert Nisbet

*From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*, ed. Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan

*Vindicating the Founders: Race, Sex, Class, and Justice in the Origins of America*, Thomas G. West

"The Government Cannot Do It All," Herbert Hoover, April 25, 1949, New York City

"A Moral Case Against Big Government," Ryan Messmore, The Heritage Foundation

"The Size and Scope of Means-Tested Welfare Spending," Robert Rector, The Heritage Foundation

## Behind the Scenes

### ***What is going on in the opening footage?***

The opening footage is of a raid of a massage parlor in Orange County, California, suspected of trafficking women. The police treat the girls working there as victims; the girls are taken to the police headquarters where their needs can be assessed and where they can talk openly and freely about how they were treated at the massage parlor.

### ***What is a "john"?***

"John" is a slang term used for a person who solicits prostitution services.



