

The real price of our purchases:

How consumer culture fuels modern slavery

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From raw materials to manufacturing, and through to packaging and delivery, modern slavery is embedded in the supply chains of the global garment industry. The clothing industry has doubled in size in the last 15 years alone, partly driven by demand for fast fashion. Garment workers, hidden deep in these supply chains face exploitative working conditions, including forced labour and debt bondage. Nasreen Sheikh is a former child labourer, forced marriage survivor, and a leader in the movement to end modern day slavery.

In this essay, she reveals the ugly truth behind consumer culture, revealing the human cost that we so often choose to ignore. While reflecting on the interconnected nature of globalisation, Nasreen offers hope that radical supply chain transparency, strong government legislation, and meaningful engagement by businesses could ultimately transform industries built on the exploitation of workers and the cognitive dissonance of consumers.

As a survivor of modern slavery who has escaped both forced marriage and child labour, over the past decade, I have trodden the long road of educating the public on these issues and working directly with those affected. I am acutely aware of how entrenched systems and societal behaviours in one part of the world can have a direct impact on communities in another. It is my belief that blind consumption is at the very centre of the exponential rise in the number of people living in modern slavery that this report highlights.

I come from a very remote village on the border of India and Nepal, where, like most births, mine was undocumented. Growing up, I witnessed my sister and many girls forced into marriages as children. While I hope most would agree that this is an unconscionable act, I know that far fewer would be aware of how it can be connected to consumerism. You see, forcing young girls into marriage is a way to preserve the slave labour force in countries that sell cheap labour to foreign export companies.

This is because forced marriage can serve as a means of control — it impedes upon girls' education and their opportunities in life, making them more likely to be forced into exploitative work. It also supports a generational cycle of poverty and modern slavery, as children born into these circumstances are more likely to have their freedom, rights, and options restricted in a similar way. I knew as a young girl that I would be next, so I chose to escape the village to the city of Kathmandu in hopes of finding a better life.

It was in Kathmandu that I was exploited in forced child labour and fell prey to the massive organisation of illegal sweatshops in the inner-city slums. It was here that I realised my childhood, along with the childhood of thousands of others, were traded for a life of pure suffering, malnourishment, and industrial poisoning happening on a scale unimaginable to the average consumer. I worked 12 to 15 hours per day in a textile sweatshop, receiving less than the equivalent of US\$2 per gruelling shift — but only if I completed the hundreds of garments demanded of me. I ate, slept, and toiled in a sweatshop workstation the size of a prison cell. Even then, I knew in my heart that people would not choose to purchase these items if they truly understood where they came from and how they were made.



After breaking free from my exploitation, I came to America and went to a large chain store for the first time. I walked the aisles in disbelief looking at the thousands of products available to purchase in one location. I had never experienced this level of both luxury and convenience, but it was horrifying to connect with the reality of how these products had likely come to be. When I gazed upon the countless consumer goods as I walked from aisle to aisle, I couldn't help but see the faces of children in each of them, of men's and women's lives marred by poverty, inhumane working conditions, and unimaginable exploitation. The suffering woven into each fibre and reflecting on every surface. That night I just wept in pain for this world.

Businesses have increasingly complex global supply chains that lack transparency of who is working where and under what conditions. Too often, this works to their advantage; by failing to meaningfully engage with modern slavery risks, businesses can turn a blind eye, avoid remediation, and continue to place profit over people. The sad fact for most businesses is that if they look hard enough for worker exploitation — or if they even look at all — they will find it.

While businesses should willingly take on the responsibility to ensure their supply chains are free of modern slavery, governments also have a role to hold them to account and to set a level playing field for our global economy. This role includes ensuring businesses and government are actively looking for forced labour in supply chains.

While some governments around the world are stepping up, there remain serious gaps in legislation which businesses can exploit. For example, research

by Walk Free finds that most companies are falling at the first hurdle when it comes to even reporting on the actions they are taking.

The result is decades of corporate social responsibility that is merely voluntary, modern slavery reporting legislation with no consequence for non-compliance, and greenwashing campaigns that could convince the savviest of consumers that they are acting ethically.

The development of policy to address modern slavery will always be impeded as long as it ignores how the issues are deeply intersected with wider structures, systems, and behaviours. Focusing on issues in silos will potentially hold us back from solutions for more decades to come. Modern slavery thrives in the shadows and darkness, the unspoken truth, the hidden parts of our global society too ugly or horrific to witness in light. But truth is the key.

We need radical supply chain transparency and non-negotiable, meaningful engagement from all businesses. We need modern slavery legislation that imposes the duty to protect all workers in supply chains, that holds companies liable for breaches and inaction, and that leaves no one behind in the pursuit of a thriving global economy.

For the 50 million people living in modern slavery around the world, the time for meaningful action and renewed commitment is now. It is my life story, my life mission.

See page 176 "Stitched with slavery in the seams" for a wider discussion on this intersection, including recommendations for government action.

Kandla, India, September 2022.

A worker sorts jeans according to grade at a used textile factory. The garment industry impacts many issues. Overconsumption and high volumes of garment waste fuels climate change, and the fast-paced industry is rife with the exploitation of workers. Photo credit: Prashanth Vishwanathan/Bloomberg via Getty Images.