Modern slavery:
A weapon and consequence of war

Each year, people living in warzones and those fleeing them are subjected to horrific violence and abuse. For children, the elderly, and everyone in between, sexual and gender-based violence, psychological trauma, torture, family separation and disappearance, recruitment and use by armed groups, abductions and kidnapping for ransom, forced marriage, forced labour, starvation, and being left for dead, are a daily risk. Perpetrators range from the organised to the opportunistic, including smugglers, traffickers, parties to the conflict, community members, and sometimes state actors.

While protracted conflict is a known risk multiplier, our understanding of the intersection between conflict and modern slavery is beginning to grow more nuanced. In the immediate aftermath of crises, including the outbreak of conflict, where governments and systems break down, we may see a temporary suspension of modern slavery and related crimes. However, as conflict becomes more protracted, large-scale disruption increases the risk of forced labour and forced marriage. This complexity is evidenced in Ukraine. There has not been an increase in the number of trafficked persons identified largely due to a proactive early warning system, and, unlike many communities who experience conflict, refugees from Ukraine have been largely welcomed into their host communities. Even here, however, there is a need for the international community to stay vigilant due to concerns of under-reporting and ongoing challenges associated with the conflict (see case study on Ukraine in the European and Central Asia regional section). There is a need for more data to truly understand the intersection of conflict and modern slavery in both acute and protracted settings.

In protracted situations, people struggle to provide for their basic needs or to safely seek protection as conflict damages infrastructure and disrupts services. At the same time, the breakdown in the rule of law enables perpetrators to act with impunity. Parties involved in conflict may recruit children into their ranks, forcibly marry women and girls to their members, or force civilians to perform labour or sexual services. Those who try to flee conflict-affected areas may be targeted by traffickers at any point on their journey. The countries with protracted conflicts have some of the highest overall vulnerability to modern slavery, and relatively, a high prevalence of modern slavery. These countries include Afghanistan, Syria, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali, Pakistan, Iraq, Central African Republic, Sudan, and Libya.

Women and children are particularly vulnerable to modern slavery in conflict. High levels of displacement following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to an increase in the number of women and girls fleeing conflict and displacement, and left for dead, including cases of deceptive offers of work abroad that result in sexual exploitation. In Afghanistan, the erosion of women’s rights following the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul compounds vulnerabilities to modern slavery, including forced marriage, forced commercial sexual exploitation, and forced labour. Under the laws of the Caliphate established by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014, 6,000 Yazidi women and children were captured, forcibly converted, and subjected to domestic servitude and forced marriage. Many are allegedly still enslaved in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, or held captive in ISIS widow camps, such as the al-Hawl detention camp in north-eastern Syria. The ways in which children and adolescents are vulnerable to modern slavery also manifest differently depending on gender. While girls are especially vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, or forced marriage, boys are typically at risk of forced labour, forced begging, or of being used in combat or support roles by armed groups or forces.

Although conflict and forced displacement are known to exacerbate vulnerabilities to modern slavery, there is little data on the scale of modern slavery among displaced populations. To address this evidence gap, Walk Free, together with the ILO and IOM, set out to measure the prevalence of certain forms of modern slavery among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in three countries facing protracted conflict and widespread displacement: South Sudan, Nigeria, and the DRC. Surveys on experiences of modern slavery and related abuses were conducted among IDPs residing in displacement sites in North Kivu province in the DRC, South Sudan, and Northeast Nigeria.

The results indicated that not only were modern slavery and related abuses prevalent among the IDPs surveyed, but they were inherently linked to conflict. One in five IDPs surveyed in North Kivu experienced either forced labour, forced recruitment, or abduction in the preceding five years. In South Sudan, 1 in 20 IDPs and in Nigeria, 1 in 60 IDPs were identified largely due to a reactive early warning system. In South Sudan, Nigeria, and the DRC, surveys captured experiences before and after displacement. These surveys captured experiences before and after displacement. The countries with protracted conflicts have some of the highest overall vulnerability to modern slavery, and relatively, a high prevalence of modern slavery.
No safe path: Perspectives from a former child soldier

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On four occasions I was taken to clear the forest next to the military soldier's house. We could not refuse because we would be whipped to death.

Respondent, DRC, 2017

In conflict situations, IDPs are at risk of modern slavery following their displacement, including at displacement sites. For instance, in North Kivu, half of respondents who reported forced labour were living in a displacement site when the forced labour began. Similarly in South Sudan, more than half of forced recruitment cases, 61 per cent of abductions, and 21 per cent of forced labour cases occurred after displacement. Though sufficient data was not available for Northeast Nigeria, similar experiences are likely. The need for urgent action to address the vulnerabilities inherent in forced displacement is increasingly apparent as understanding of modern slavery in conflict settings grows, and the number of IDPs displaced due to conflict and violence increases.

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