

# Modern slavery: A weapon and consequence of war



*Gumuruk, South Sudan, June 2021.*  
A woman from Murle ethnic group stands near her burnt tea shop after an attack on her village by an armed youth group. In the wake of conflict, thousands have been displaced in South Sudan, which has deepened humanitarian needs in a country already dealing with famine. Photo credit: Simon Wohlfahrt/AFP via Getty Images.

**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,<sup>1</sup> recruitment and use by armed groups, abductions and kidnapping for ransom, forced marriage, forced labour, starvation, and being left for dead,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

In protracted situations, people struggle to provide for their basic needs or to safely seek protection<sup>5</sup> as conflict damages infrastructure and disrupts services.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the breakdown in the rule of law enables perpetrators to act with impunity.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Those who try to flee conflict-affected areas may be targeted by traffickers at any point on their journey.<sup>9</sup> The countries with protracted conflicts have some of the highest overall vulnerability to modern slavery, and relatedly, 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.<sup>10</sup> High levels of displacement following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to concerns that predators masking as volunteers were targeting vulnerable

Ukrainian refugees, particularly women and children, in border towns.<sup>11</sup> Ukrainian women have been targeted for exploitation,<sup>12</sup> including cases of deceptive offers of work abroad that result in sexual exploitation.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> Many are allegedly still enslaved in Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye,<sup>16</sup> or held captive in ISIS widow camps, such as the al-Hawl detention camp in north-eastern Syria.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

Although conflict and forced displacement are known to exacerbate vulnerabilities to modern slavery,<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> These surveys captured experiences before and after displacement.

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

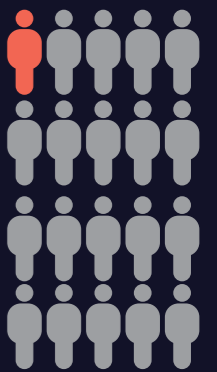
## IDPS AND MODERN SLAVERY

IDPs who experienced forced labour, recruitment and abductions

**NORTH KIVU, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO**  
1 in 5\*



**SOUTH SUDAN**  
1 in 20



**NORTH EAST NIGERIA**  
1 in 60



\*Among the sample of IDPs in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo



years. In South Sudan, an estimated one in 20 IDPs experienced at least one of these slavery-related abuses, and an estimated one in 60 IDPs in Northeast Nigeria. In all three settings, perpetrators were most often members of the armed groups or armed forces who deliberately exploited displaced populations to further their operations.<sup>21</sup> In South Sudan and North Kivu, most forced labour activities (63 per cent and 75 per cent respectively) directly supported armed groups and armed forces, including through fighting, military service, or providing support services such as portering or spying.<sup>22</sup> Armed groups also use modern slavery and related abuses as weapons in conflict. In Northeast Nigeria, Boko Haram and its factions have recruited thousands of children to undertake support roles or engage in violence, including suicide attacks. The group has also abducted girls to be forcibly married or provide sexual services to its members.<sup>23</sup>

### No safe path: Perspectives from a former child soldier

James\*, 17, is the eldest of three brothers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Their father died and their mother worked in the fields to support their family. One day, James was walking home from school with three friends from his village when he heard someone calling his name. As they crossed the fruit plantation, a boy of about 10 years old suddenly appeared. He amused James by telling him stories and asking strange questions, so James told his friends to go ahead. Then, everything changed.

**“...four armed men appeared and forced me to go with them, knocking me about and striking me with a whip. That is how I found myself recruited into an armed group.”**

While held by the armed group, James was forced to learn their ideology and received training in military intelligence, armed robbery, weapons, livestock theft, and intimidation methods for robbing people on the road or in the fields or abducting them. He was forced to perform many jobs, starting as a cook before being promoted to bodyguard of the camp commander, and was eventually made to lead operations on a national road. He was sometimes sent with other children to support joint operations with different armed groups.

**“On four occasions I was taken to clear the forest next to the military soldier’s houses and to build their huts. 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.<sup>24</sup> Though sufficient data was not available for Northeast Nigeria, similar experiences are likely.<sup>25</sup> 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,<sup>26</sup> and the number of IDPs displaced due to conflict and violence increases.<sup>27</sup>

**“There were times when I cried, especially when I thought about my mother and my two brothers, but I couldn’t leave the bush because all the paths out were watched by members of the armed group. They also kept a watch on me.”**

One day, during an operation to steal livestock, James seized his opportunity to escape. He left his weapon on the roadside and reported to the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who took him to Uvira where the International Committee of the Red Cross helped him to find his family.

James was happy to be reunited with his mother. He received assistance from an NGO to start his own hairdressing salon, which now enables him to support himself and his mother. He is starting to think about having his own family.

**“I think the armed groups should lay down their arms and stop recruiting children because it’s not right.”**

James shared his story for the 2019 International Review of the Red Cross, which features the experiences of former child soldiers recruited in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, their difficulties, and hopes for a new life.<sup>28</sup>

*\*Not his real name*

### Responses to modern slavery in conflict settings

Much more needs to be done to prevent modern slavery in conflict-affected areas and to protect those fleeing warzones. Significant gaps remain in the humanitarian response and in peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts to ensure adequate support to at-risk persons; in fact, humanitarians and peace actors are often denied access.<sup>29</sup>

To address this gap, Walk Free supported the development of the Global Protection Cluster’s 2020 Guidance to support Protection Clusters to detect, identify, refer, protect, and assist trafficked persons in internal displacement settings.<sup>30</sup> Following dissemination of the guidance and the training of humanitarian protection actors, Protection Clusters are increasingly reporting risks of modern slavery and related crimes — abduction, sexual and gender-based violence, recruitment and use of children by armed groups, forced labour, and child and forced marriage — in the areas where they are carrying out their work.<sup>31</sup>

Despite this, there remains limited data about what works to tackle modern slavery in times of conflict. Systematic reviews have found few peer-reviewed studies exploring the connection between humanitarian disasters and modern slavery<sup>32</sup> and even fewer that have made subsequent policy recommendations.

Responding to specific forms of modern slavery in conflict settings requires equally tailored programming. To date, the evaluations<sup>33</sup> of programs providing support to former child soldiers<sup>34</sup> highlight that traditional disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programs are not enough to successfully reintegrate child soldiers into their communities. These evaluations emphasise the significance of community-based interventions, non-formal education, and apprenticeships for affected children, in addition to support for host communities.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, responding to child and forced marriage requires gender and age-sensitive approaches, and in the context of humanitarian settings, should be introduced at the early stages of the crisis.<sup>36</sup> An analysis of lessons learned emphasises the importance of enhancing the agency of girls, promoting access to support and referral services, empowering girls through education, coordination among relevant actors, and long-term community engagement.<sup>37</sup>

There is a need for increased action to prevent modern slavery in conflict settings and protect victims and survivors.<sup>38</sup> This will require better coordination among humanitarian actors, those working in protection and the anti-slavery sector. Addressing this complex crime within equally complex contexts requires concerted action.

### Recommendations for governments

**1 Support the integration of anti-slavery action into humanitarian and peacebuilding responses, including humanitarian response plans, action plans to address grave violations against children in armed conflict, Women, Peace and Security agendas, and transition measures for peacebuilding and peacekeeping.<sup>39</sup>**

**2 Work with humanitarian actors to raise awareness of modern slavery among populations at high risk of displacement. Ensure that needs-based, protection-specific assistance is provided in areas of high displacement, which includes facilitating access to livelihood opportunities, education, medical services, and legal counsel.**

**3 Activate safe referral and incident reporting mechanisms in humanitarian settings. Ensure frontline humanitarian and peacebuilding actors are trained on modern slavery concepts and responses, particularly how to identify and refer cases of exploitation to support services.<sup>40</sup>**

**4 Ensure effective access to international protection and family reunification for those affected by conflict and expand resettlement and planned relocation opportunities.**

**5 Take urgent action to address the drivers of conflict by reducing gender-based discrimination and violence, improving women’s access to social and economic opportunities, reducing poverty, combating climate change, and taking measures to address community violence based on religious, ethnic, racial, or other statuses.**