



*Yangon, Myanmar, October 2020.*

*A young woman in Personal Protective Equipment takes a break outside a medical facility where people were being quarantined due to suspected COVID-19 infections. Social and economic disruptions caused by the pandemic increased risks of domestic violence, labour exploitation, and forced marriage. Photo credit: Sai Aung Main/AFP via Getty Images.*

# FOREWORD

**For over a decade, Walk Free has studied the number of people living in modern slavery around the world. Through each edition of the Global Slavery Index, our understanding of the problem has deepened, our estimates have become more precise, and our advocacy has catalysed global efforts. Despite having more knowledge about modern slavery than ever before, the situation has worsened.**

**GRACE  
FORREST**

Co-Founder  
Walk Free

This edition of the Index highlights how fragile hard-won human rights still are throughout the world, and how in times of crisis — be it the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing climate crisis, or ongoing armed conflict — it is the world's most vulnerable people who are hit hardest and fastest.

Modern slavery permeates every aspect of our society. It is woven through our clothes, lights up our electronics, and seasons our food. At its core, modern slavery is a manifestation of extreme inequality. It is a mirror held to power, reflecting who in any given society has it and who does not. Nowhere is this paradox more present than in our global economy through transnational supply chains. The growing demand for goods has led to the accumulation of vast wealth, with G20 countries accounting for 85 per cent of the world's GDP. It has also led to environmental degradation, deep social inequality, and prolific forced labour.

Unsurprisingly, no country in the world is effectively responding to modern slavery — an issue which the international community continues to rally against but has failed to address. Since the release of the 2018 Global Slavery Index, we have seen only four countries introduce mandatory human rights due diligence or modern slavery laws — with Australia, France, Germany, and Norway setting new standards for the type of legislation we would like to see adopted everywhere. While this progress is promising, it is nowhere near enough. Governments worldwide continue to display a shocking capacity for cognitive dissonance; for example, funding

support services for women and girls while simultaneously failing to close legislative gaps that increase their risk of being forced to marry, such as not having a legal minimum age of marriage set at 18 without exception.

If modern slavery reflects existing man-made power structures, it follows that we cannot win this fight working within the bounds that those same structures created. As the effects of historical slavery are still felt today, we cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the millions of people suffering in modern slavery around the world. It is time for governments, businesses, and individuals to take a stand and demand change.

This report comes at a critical juncture — a time when the world is awakening to ongoing injustices and their connection to historical inequalities, while confronting unprecedented crises. At the same time, Walk Free's reporting has also grown more accurate and truly global by increasingly embedding survivor voices in our data collection, our methodology, and our advocacy.

If there is one message you should take from this Index, it is that exploitation is by design, not default. As you read through the report, remember that each statistic reflects the reality of tens of millions of people. Let this data serve as an alarm bell, one that shakes us from inaction and loudly demands that we all act now.