

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Modern slavery is hidden in plain sight and is deeply intertwined with life in every corner of the world. Each day, people are tricked, coerced, or forced into exploitative situations that they cannot refuse or leave. Each day, we buy the products or use the services they have been forced to make or offer without realising the hidden human cost.**

Modern slavery takes many forms and is known by many names — forced labour, forced or servile marriage, debt bondage, forced commercial sexual exploitation, human trafficking, slavery-like practices, and the sale and exploitation of children. In all its forms, it is the systematic removal of a person's freedom — their freedom to accept or refuse a job, their freedom to leave one employer for another, or their freedom to decide if, when, and whom to marry — in order to exploit them for personal or commercial gain.

An estimated 50 million people were living in modern slavery on any given day in 2021. These Global Estimates of Modern Slavery produced by the International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) form the starting point for the national estimates of modern slavery for 160 countries presented here in Walk Free's flagship report, the Global Slavery Index (GSI). Our estimates draw on thousands of interviews with survivors collected through nationally representative household surveys across 75 countries and our assessment of national-level vulnerability. This report, the fifth edition of the GSI, shows how the compounding crises of the last five years have impacted modern slavery and provides a road map for actions to eradicate it.

## A growing global problem against a backdrop of compounding risks

Nearly 10 million more men, women, girls, and boys have been forced to work or marry since 2016. The worsening situation has occurred against a backdrop of increasing and more complex armed conflicts, widespread environmental degradation, assaults on democracy in many countries, a global rollback of women's rights, and the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors have caused significant disruption to employment and education, leading to increases in extreme poverty and forced and unsafe migration, which together heighten the risk of all forms of modern slavery.

The 10 countries with the highest prevalence of modern slavery in 2021 are North Korea, Eritrea, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Tajikistan, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Afghanistan, and Kuwait. These countries share some political, social, and economic characteristics, including limited protections for civil liberties and human rights. Many are in volatile regions, which have experienced political instability, conflict, and/or authoritarianism. Several of these countries have governments that force their citizens to work in different sectors, in private prisons, or through forced conscription. Others are home to large numbers of refugees or migrant workers, who are often not afforded the same legal protections as citizens and are highly vulnerable to exploitation. Some, like Mauritania, live with the legacy of historical exploitation through hereditary slavery which continues to be practiced; and around the world, inherited systems of inequality continue to embed risk of modern slavery for the most marginalised groups within communities.



The largest estimated numbers of people in modern slavery are found in the following countries — India, China, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Indonesia, Nigeria, Türkiye, Bangladesh, and the United States. Collectively, these countries account for nearly two in every three people living in modern slavery and over half the world's population. Notably, six are G20 nations: India, China, Russia, Indonesia, Türkiye, and the US.

Most of the countries with lowest prevalence of modern slavery — Switzerland, Norway, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Ireland, Japan, and Finland — are also members of the G20. Yet, even in these countries, thousands of people continue to be forced to work or marry, despite their high levels of economic development, gender equality, social welfare, and political stability, as well as strong criminal justice systems.

The widescale deterioration of civil and political rights in the face of multiple crises increases risks for those already vulnerable to modern slavery. The most vulnerable — women, children, and migrants — remain disproportionately affected. Over half of all people in modern slavery are female. A quarter are children. Women and girls are disproportionately at risk of forced marriage, accounting for 68 per cent of all people forced to marry. Migrant workers are more than three times more likely to be in forced labour than non-migrant workers. People who belong to multiple marginalised groups — such as those related to religious beliefs, ethnicity, race, caste, sexual identity, or gender expression — face even greater risks, reflecting deeply entrenched biases around the world.

Those fleeing conflict, natural disasters, or repression of their rights, or seeking to migrate for work, are particularly vulnerable. More people are migrating now than at any other point in the last five decades. Refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, and irregular migrants face even greater risks during their precarious migration journey, during which they are typically coping with significant upheaval to social networks and economic status. Increasing anti-immigrant sentiment in many countries, including Europe, where many seek to start a new life, has led to more restrictive policies, which in turn expose displaced people to even greater risks of exploitation.

## Low prevalence among the G20 masks their responsibility

While estimating prevalence of modern slavery where it occurs is critical in identifying where the need for intervention is most pressing, it does not paint a complete picture of where responsibility lies. Forced labour occurs in all countries regardless of income, with the majority occurring in lower-middle and upper-middle income countries. It is deeply connected to demand from higher-income countries. The production and movement of goods between countries — from the sourcing of raw materials to manufacturing, packaging, and transportation — creates complex and opaque supply chains, many of them tainted with forced labour.

### Strait of Gibraltar, Atlantic Ocean, September 2018.

*A boat carrying migrants is pictured while stranded at sea, before being rescued by the Spanish Guardia Civil and the Salvamento Marítimo rescue agency. More people are migrating now than at any other time in the last fifty years, according to reports by the International Organization for Migration; and many of these migrants are driven to leave their homes due to crises, such as conflict or displacement caused by the effects of climate change. Photo credit: Marcos Moreno / AFP via Getty Images.*

The purchasing practices of wealthier governments and businesses fuel exploitation in lower-income countries that are at the frontlines of global supply chains. In fact, G20 nations account for more than 75 per cent of the world's trade and consume many products at risk of forced labour. Collectively, these countries import US\$468 billion worth of at-risk goods per annum. The top five highest value at-risk products imported by the G20 were electronics (US\$243.6 billion), garments (US\$147.9 billion), palm oil (US\$19.7 billion), solar panels (US\$14.8 billion), and textiles (US\$12.7 billion).

### Spotlight on sectors

The growth of consumer culture and demand for goods has both positive and negative impacts. On one hand, it can drive economic growth and innovation, create jobs, and improve quality of life. On the other, it can contribute to environmental degradation, social inequality, and unsustainable patterns of consumption and waste. Goods produced using forced labour now travel farther around the world than ever before, with nearly two-thirds of all forced labour cases connected to global supply chains. Workers are exploited across a wide range of sectors and at every stage of the supply chain, although most forced labour occurs in the lowest tiers such as the extraction of raw materials and production stages.

Modern slavery permeates industries that are characterised by informality, with higher numbers of migrant workers, and where there is limited government oversight. Global demand for fast fashion has spurred exponential growth in the garment industry, while garment workers, hidden deep in supply chains, face poor and exploitative work. Forced labour in fisheries is driven by the motivation to reduce costs amid diminishing profits and as the industry tries to meet the global demand for seafood. Despite the progress of some companies, forced labour and the worst forms of child labour are used to farm and harvest the cocoa beans that end up in chocolate. Perhaps surprisingly, recent investigations have uncovered troubling associations between children's institutions (including orphanages) and modern slavery.

Greater connectivity between countries, economies, and people can create new risks of exploitation. For example, modern slavery has permeated the entire digital value chain, from the raw materials that create the devices that consumers use daily to connect online to the overseas workforces processing data and even onto social media platforms themselves. The growth of new "sustainable" industries to create renewable energies to tackle the climate crisis has led to further risks of exploitation, with evidence of state-imposed forced labour of Uyghurs and other Turkic and Muslim majority groups in China occurring in the supply chains of solar panels and other renewable technologies.

## Government action is critical but current efforts fall short of the challenge

The strongest government responses to modern slavery were found in the United Kingdom, Australia, Netherlands, Portugal, the US, Ireland, Norway, Spain, and Sweden. Among these countries, the most notable improvement in the last five years is the passing of Australia's Modern Slavery Act, which requires certain companies to report on modern slavery risks in their supply chain and actions they are taking to respond. However, while we commend all efforts to address modern slavery, the improvements since our 2018 assessments were far fewer and weaker than the situation requires.

During the same period in which millions more people were forced to work or marry, efforts by the wealthiest nations stagnated and, in some cases, hard-won progress has reversed. Many wealthy countries are failing in their duties to protect the most vulnerable. For example, while the UK currently has the strongest response, significant gaps in protections expose survivors to risks of re-trafficking. Some countries with strong responses, such as Brazil and the US, undermine their own efforts by forcing their citizens to work beyond the specific circumstances that international conventions deem acceptable. In the Gulf States, where eight in every ten workers is a migrant and working under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, many of the reforms intended to provide much needed protection have not been fully implemented or fall far short of providing real protection for a highly vulnerable group. Migrants working in high-income countries across Asia and Europe are also subject to tied visa systems which offer them limited protection from unscrupulous employers. Most G20 governments are still not doing enough to ensure that modern slavery is not involved in the production of goods imported into their countries and within the supply chains of companies they do business with.

There has been some notable progress since 2018. Another 15 countries have criminalised human trafficking in line with the UN Trafficking Protocol, bringing the total to 137. Some countries, such as Republic of the Congo and Brunei Darussalam, have improved their response to modern slavery, while Albania, Georgia, and the Philippines have relatively stronger responses despite having fewer resources at their disposal. More countries are beginning to engage with survivors in the development of policies and programs, although this remains woefully low at only 16 governments. The high proportion of modern slavery connected to global supply chains, while dismaying, also presents new opportunities to drive change through businesses and investors whose actions could quickly and directly improve the working conditions and livelihoods of workers across at-risk sectors — and perhaps succeed where governments have failed.

Stagnating action on modern slavery appears to be connected more to compounding crises than to changes in attitudes or a diminishment of the will to eradicate this crime. There is no doubt that governments have faced many challenges since 2018, including those that have significantly impacted funding and delivery of modern slavery programming as national resources are diverted to tackling more immediate harms. However, the obligation of governments to protect people from modern slavery cannot be set aside when crises occur. In fact, addressing modern slavery needs to be embedded into crisis responses if we are to get progress towards ending it back on track.

## The urgent need to move from intention to real action

World leaders agreed on an ambitious agenda to address the world's most intractable problems when they adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) nearly 10 years ago. This included a commitment to ending modern slavery, forced labour, and human trafficking by 2030 (Target 8.7). In 2018, we warned that progress towards ending modern slavery was too slow to achieve this goal. In the period since, a significant increase in the number of people living in modern slavery and a stagnation in government action highlights that the global community is even further from achieving the goals they agreed to make a priority. This sobering picture of the current state of progress is not necessarily a signal for the future. In fact, it likely reveals truths that can point the way to success.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world largely awakened to the need for an overhaul of current systems in order to curtail the worst impacts of the pandemic and to better respond to the climate emergency. The impacts of COVID-19 drew global attention to the points at which vulnerable populations fall through the gaps and to the structural inequalities that advocates have long highlighted as core drivers of modern slavery but that governments have failed to meaningfully address. Despite the uncertainty created during the height of the pandemic, a great deal of hope lies in an important lesson that it revealed — that the global community is, in fact, capable of rapidly responding to crisis at scale.

When it comes to addressing modern slavery, the global community must move from intention to action without delay. This requires reinvigorating the movement to end modern slavery, with survivors leading the way to identify lasting solutions. It requires recognising that the world's great challenges are all interconnected: modern slavery, climate change, conflict, poverty, gender inequality, and racial injustice. None can be effectively addressed in isolation. Recognising this interconnectedness, and resolving to act on it, presents a huge opportunity to ensure the resources mobilised go further and have lasting impact for the world's most vulnerable people.



**Portland, United States, January 2018.**

*Cary Dyer tells her story of survival during a vigil in support of the National Human Trafficking Awareness Day held by Hope Rising in Monument Square. Dyer graduated from Hope Rising and is now the president of Survivor Speaks USA board of directors. Photo credit: Brianna Soukup/Portland Press Herald via Getty Images.*

## Recommendations

- 1 Governments and the international community must recognise and respond to modern slavery as an intersectional issue.**
  - Embed modern slavery responses in humanitarian responses, including by providing training for humanitarian actors.
  - Strengthen social protection and safety nets so vulnerable communities are more resilient to shocks, including addressing discrimination of people who belong to multiple marginalised groups, such as those related to religious beliefs, ethnicity, race, caste, sexual identity, or gender expression.
  - Ensure that human rights, including right to freedom from forced labour and from other forms of modern slavery, are embedded in efforts to build a green economy to respond to the climate crisis.
- 2 Governments must focus on prevention and protection for those already vulnerable.**
  - Increase access to primary and secondary school education for all children and particularly girls. These programs should focus on those most at risk of not receiving an education, such as girls in conflict zones, people with disabilities, or those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
  - Ensure survivor support services, including shelters, crisis support centres, and community-based protection. Cover all populations — including males, adults, and migrants — and make available specialised support for children.
  - Strengthen efforts to protect vulnerable populations on the move by repealing hostile migration policies that place national security above human rights, expanding the provision of safe and regular migration pathways, and by screening asylum seekers and irregular migrants for modern slavery indicators, regardless of how they arrived in the country.
- 3 Governments must ensure effective civil and criminal protections in legislation to tackle forced and child marriage.**
  - Raise the legal age of marriage to 18 without exceptions, criminalise the act of marrying someone who does not consent, regardless of age, and provide civil protections that allow survivors to choose which solution best suits their needs, as not all wish to pursue criminal actions, particularly when it can involve bringing an action against family members.
  - Provide trauma-informed protection measures for survivors of forced marriage, including safe accommodation, emergency funds, and psychosocial support.
  - Tackle underlying drivers of forced marriage, including engaging with communities to subvert harmful patriarchal norms and amending gender discriminatory legislation.
- 4 Governments must implement stronger measures to combat forced labour in public and private supply chains.**
  - Introduce mandatory human rights due diligence to stop governments and businesses from sourcing goods or services linked to modern slavery. In G20 countries, enact additional legal measures, such as import controls on products linked to forced labour, Magnitsky-style sanctions, and public lists of companies found to tolerate forced labour in their supply chains.
  - Extend labour laws and fundamental labour rights to all groups without exception, including freedom of association and collective bargaining. Extend social protection to all workers and provide remedy for modern slavery survivors.
  - Introduce and enforce laws to prohibit charging of recruitment fees to employees, register and monitor recruitment agencies for deceptive practices, and ensure contracts are made available in a language migrants can understand.
- 5 Governments and businesses must prioritise human rights when engaging with repressive regimes.**
  - Conduct due diligence to ensure that any trade, business, or investment is not contributing to or benefitting from state-imposed forced labour, including where it occurs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China.
  - Where links to state-imposed forced labour are identified, and operating in line with the UN Guiding Principles has become impossible, withdraw from sourcing goods and services.
  - Ensure survivors of state-imposed forced labour have access to remediation, which may include financial compensation and access to legal, health, and psychosocial services.



**Newtok, Alaska, June 2019.**

*Indigenous women living in temporary housing, as erosion caused by climate change has displaced communities. Social instability caused by increasing volatile climate events increases risk of exploitation and modern slavery. Photo credit: Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post via Getty Images.*