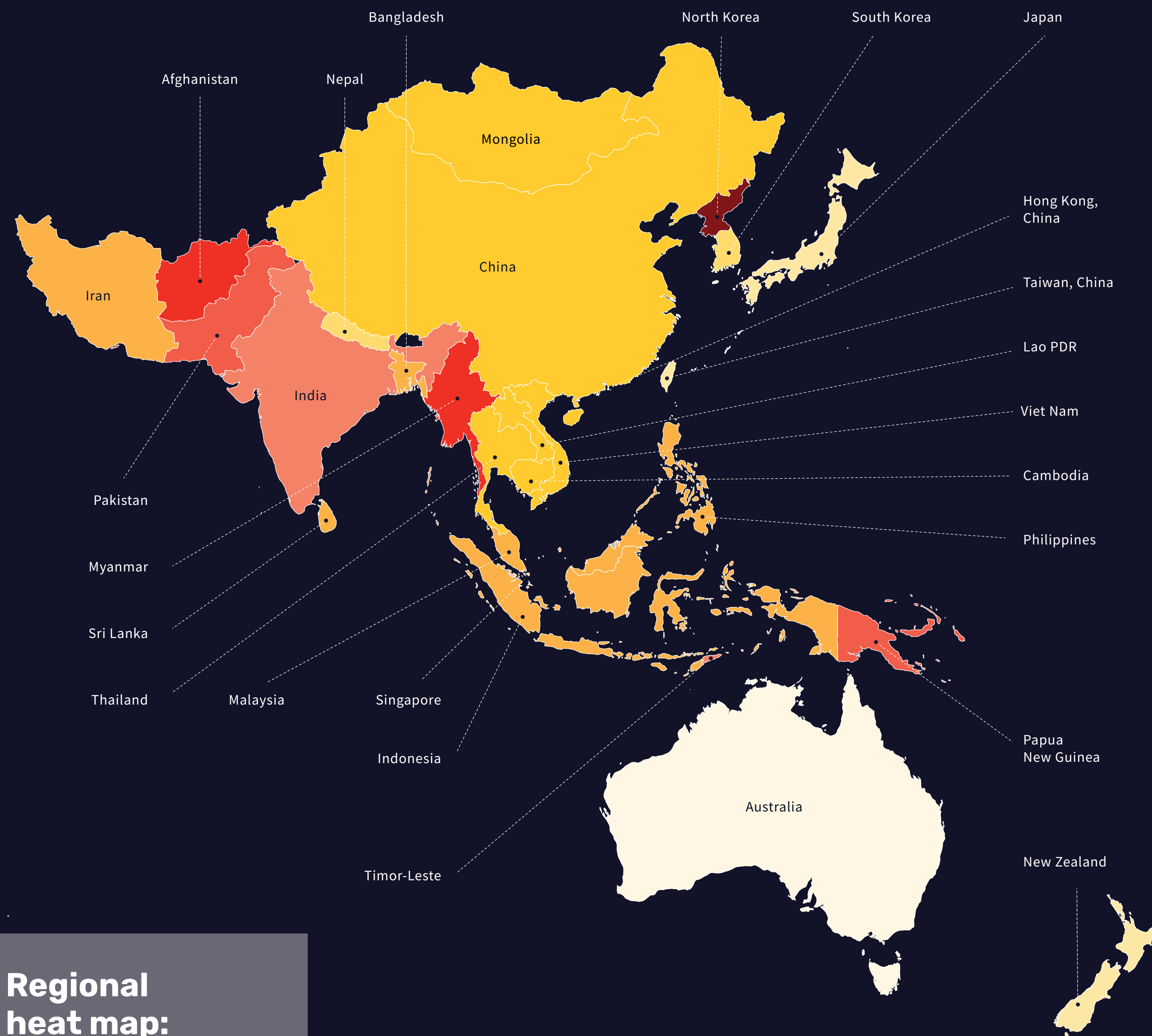
ASIA AND THE PACIFIC



Regional heat map: prevalence

Asia and the Pacific is home to 56 per cent of the world's population, including the two most populous countries, India and China, and experienced the greatest increase in international migrants from 2000 to 2020.[1] The region hosts the largets number of people in modern slavery, with an estimated 15 million people in forced labour. This includes debt bondage among migrants exploited within the region, hereditary forms of bonded labour in South Asia, and state-imposed forced labour in China, North Korea, and other countries. The prevalence of forced marriage in Asia and the Pacific is second highest in the world, after the Arab States, impacting an estimated 4.5 females and 2.1 males per every thousand people.

Although the region is highly diverse in terms of geography, ethnicity, culture, religion, and wealth, modern slavery occurs in every country. Discrimination on the basis of gender, race, caste, and ethnicity drives vulnerability to modern slavery. This vulnerability is compounded by conflict, as seen with the mass displacement of the Rohingya population in Myanmar, political instability, as shown by the seizure of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan, and economic insecurity, as illustrated by the economic crisis and humanitarian emergency in Sri Lanka. To varying extents, the effects of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated vulnerability across the region — driving increased unemployment, poverty, and gender inequality.

Australia took the most action to combat modern slavery in the region, followed by the Philippines and Thailand, while North Korea and Iran took the least. Across most countries, governments should address significant gaps including raising the age of marriage to 18 for girls and boys with no exemptions and ensuring that labour rights are extended to all workers, including migrants.

What is the extent and nature of modern slavery in the region?

On any given day in 2021, an estimated 29.3 million people were living in modern slavery in Asia and the Pacific. This accounts for 59 per cent of the global total. When population size is taken into account, Asia and the Pacific had the third highest prevalence of modern slavery in the world with 6.8 per thousand people in the region forced to work or marry. Among the five regions, Asia and the Pacific had the second highest prevalence of forced marriage (3.3 per thousand) and the third highest prevalence of forced labour (3.5 per thousand).[2]

The country with by far the highest prevalence in Asia and the Pacific, and, indeed, the world, is North Korea, where the population is forced to work by the state or risk being penalised with hard labour in prison camps.[3] In North Korea, an estimated one in every 10 people are in situations of modern slavery.

Following North Korea, Afghanistan, and Myanmar had the second and third highest prevalence of modern slavery in the region. India, China, and North Korea had the highest number — and together accounting for two-thirds of all people in modern slavery in the region. Instability continues to shape experiences of modern slavery across high prevalence countries in Asia and the Pacific. For example, the worsening humanitarian situation caused by the political and economic turmoil drives modern slavery practices in Afghanistan and Myanmar.[4] In these contexts, families may resort to negative coping mechanisms, such as marrying their young daughters, to deal with economic stress.[5] In other countries with a high prevalence of modern slavery, such as Pakistan and India, economic insecurity drives workers to take on risky jobs or loans from unscrupulous employers. Employers then exploit these workers by forcing them into labour-intensive jobs to repay their debts.[6]

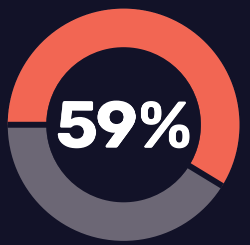
Although these regional figures of modern slavery are the most reliable to date, they are conservative estimates given the gaps and limitations of data in key regions and subregions. For example, difficulties in conducting surveys in countries that are experiencing conflict means that our estimates for these countries likely understate the problem, despite our efforts to address data gaps. These estimates also do not include the recruitment of child soldiers or organ trafficking, which other sources note occur in parts of the region.[7] The true number of people living in situations of modern slavery in Asia and the Pacific is likely much higher.

Estimated number living in modern slavery:

29 MILLION

(6.8 per thousand)

Regional proportion of global estimate:



Forced labour

52%

Forced marriage

48%

Average vulnerability score:

48%

Average government response rating:

40%

Top 3 countries:

Australia	67%
Philippines	59%
Thailand	55%

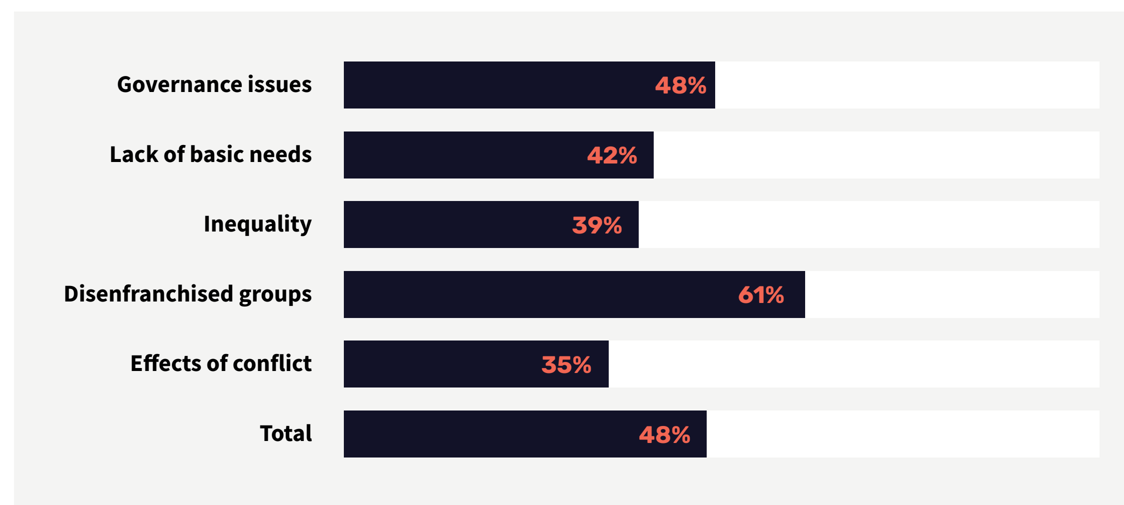
Bottom 3 countries:

North Korea	-3%
Iran	8%
Vanuatu	26%

Table 16
Estimated prevalence and number of people in modern slavery, by country

Regional rank	Country	Estimated prevalence of modern slavery (per 1,000 of population)	Estimated number of people in modern slavery	Population
1	North Korea	104.6	2,696,000	25,779,000
2	Afghanistan	13.0	505,000	38,928,000
3	Myanmar	12.1	657,000	54,410,000
4	Pakistan	10.6	2,349,000	220,892,000
5	Papua New Guinea	10.3	93,000	8,947,000
6	India	8.0	11,050,000	1,380,004,000
7	Philippines	7.8	859,000	109,581,000
8	Iran	7.1	597,000	83,993,000
9	Bangladesh	7.1	1,162,000	164,689,000
10	Indonesia	6.7	1,833,000	273,524,000
11	Sri Lanka	6.5	139,000	21,413,000
12	Malaysia	6.3	202,000	32,366,000
13	Timor-Leste	6.1	8,000	1,318,000
14	Thailand	5.7	401,000	69,800,000
15	Lao PDR	5.2	38,000	7,276,000
16	Cambodia	5.0	83,000	16,719,000
17	Viet Nam	4.1	396,000	97,339,000
18	Mongolia	4.0	13,000	3,278,000
19	China	4.0	5,771,000	1,439,324,000
20	South Korea	3.5	180,000	51,269,000
21	Nepal	3.3	97,000	29,137,000
22	Hong Kong	2.8	21,000	7,497,000
23	Singapore	2.1	12,000	5,850,000
24	Taiwan	1.7	40,000	23,817,000
25	New Zealand	1.6	8,000	4,822,000
26	Australia	1.6	41,000	25,500,000
27	Japan	1.1	144,000	126,476,000

Figure 16
Level of vulnerability to modern slavery, by dimension



What drives vulnerability to modern slavery in the region?

Asia and the Pacific is the third most vulnerable region in the world to modern slavery. The drivers most influencing this risk include widespread discriminatory social norms, political inequality and instability, and economic insecurity. While conflict-induced displacement and disruption widened gaps in wealth and social capital in some countries, vulnerability was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-related disasters. Overall, Afghanistan had the highest levels of vulnerability (86 per cent) and Australia the lowest (7 per cent).

Discriminatory social norms that devalue marginalised groups on the basis of their migration status, race, ethnicity, and/or sexual orientation are the greatest driver of vulnerability in the region. In Myanmar, the Rohingya minority continue to face mass displacement, abductions, sexual violence, and murder,[8] driving many to seek protection in Bangladesh. Once in Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees face increased risks of modern slavery as offenders prey on their extreme vulnerability,[9] while families living in camps struggle to cope with food and economic insecurity,[10] which, coupled with gender discrimination, has led to increased rates of child marriage.[11] The persecution of religious and ethnic minorities occurs in China, including the use of state-imposed forced labour to control the Uyghur population and other Turkic and Muslim majority groups in the Uyghur region.[12] The extent of arbitrary and discriminatory detention of Uyghur and other predominately Muslim groups has been called a crime against humanity by the UN Human Rights Commissioner.[13]

Political inequality and instability pervade many countries in the region, driving vulnerability to modern slavery. Notably, Afghanistan is considered the least peaceful country in the world.[14] In August 2021, after four decades of war, the Taliban seized control, triggering political, economic, and social shocks and worsening the humanitarian situation.[15] The crisis has caused many civilians to turn to smugglers to flee the country, often to countries with measures in place to actively deter Afghan refugees,[16] which compounds their vulnerability to exploitation. Afghan women and girls have reportedly been forced into marriages by their families to escape the country.[17] In Iran, physical and sexual violence is perpetrated by security forces as a means to repress women's rights and stifle political dissent, which has attracted coordinated sanctions from 30 countries in March 2023.[18] Hundreds of activists have been unfairly imprisoned and subject to torture and sexual assault or killed since protests erupted in September 2022, following the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini — who was arrested for wearing her hijab incorrectly.[19] Personal status laws that deny women equal rights in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and children further entrench gender inequality and vulnerability to exploitation.[20]

Economic instability and increasing poverty limit access to essential needs for survival such as shelter, food, and water, and increase vulnerability to all forms of modern slavery in Asia and the Pacific. This is underpinned by widening wealth gaps: in 2021, an additional 80 million people were forced into poverty due to pandemic-related disruptions in economic activity.[21] This risk is compounded for disenfranchised groups who were already living in precarious conditions. In India, for example, a sudden lockdown in early 2020 left many migrant workers, who were largely employed as day labourers, stranded and without support from the government or their employers.[22] Many had no alternative but to make the journey home on foot,

Kabul, Afghanistan, August 2021.
Men walk past an all-girl school in Afghanistan. The Zarghuna High School previously educated 8,000 girls, until it was locked and shuttered per orders from the Taliban-controlled Education Ministry. Photo credit: Marcus Yam/ Los Angeles Times via Getty Images.

often walking hundreds of kilometres,[23] while others took out loans to meet their basic needs.[24] After a devastating second wave of COVID-19 buckled the Indian health system in 2021[25] and caused many deaths from the disease,[26] thousands of newly orphaned children were exposed to higher risks of abuse and trafficking.[27]

Climate change and climate-related disasters exacerbate risks to modern slavery by reducing access to essential needs and increasing existing disparities in wealth and social capital levels. These burdens were not evenly shared across the region. Many people in low-lying countries in the Pacific Islands expect to be displaced from their homes due to the effects of climate change,[28] if they have not been already.[29] Intensifying weather events and rising sea levels contribute to food and water insecurity through crop loss, loss of arable land, overcrowding, poor health and sanitation, and increased competition for limited jobs.[30] These conditions create opportunities for traffickers to exploit vulnerable individuals,[31] particularly where avenues for regular migration are not readily available.[32] Risk of modern slavery also increases through reliance on negative coping mechanisms. For instance, in Bangladesh, one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change,[33] extreme weather has been linked to child marriage to both minimise household expenses and protect daughters from the heightened risk of sexual violence.[34]

Table 17
Level of vulnerability to modern slavery, by country

Country	Total (%)
Afghanistan	86
Pakistan	80
Papua New Guinea	79
Iran	68
Myanmar	67
North Korea	67
Philippines	66
Bangladesh	58
Cambodia	58
India	56
Sri Lanka	56
Lao PDR	52
Timor-Leste	51
Mongolia	50
Indonesia	49
Thailand	46
Nepal	46
China	46
Viet Nam	44
Malaysia	37
South Korea	29
Hong Kong	28
Singapore	24
Taiwan	21
Japan	11
New Zealand	8
Australia	7

What are governments in the region doing to address modern slavery?

Walk Free assessed government responses to modern slavery across 32 countries in the region. Asia and the Pacific scored an average 40 per cent rating on government response, the second lowest score of the five regions. Overall, governments did not have sufficient measures to support survivors or the criminal justice process, coordinate the response, address underlying risk factors, or eradicate modern slavery from supply chains — though responses vary significantly across the region.

Within Asia and the Pacific, there are stark differences in GDP per capita PPP (current international $),[35] meaning certain economies have far more resources available to dedicate to responding to modern slavery than others. However, on overall government response scores, countries with a higher level of wealth, particularly Brunei Darussalam, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Japan are taking relatively little action to respond to modern slavery. In comparison, Bangladesh, Fiji, Lao PDR, the Philippines, and Thailand are all taking positive steps to respond to this issue relative to their level of wealth.

Australia took the most action to combat modern slavery in the Asia and the Pacific region, followed by the Philippines, Thailand, and New Zealand. For the first time, Australia allocated a budget to support implementation of its National Action Plan.[36] In December 2021, the President of the Philippines signed Republic Act (R.A.) No. 11596 into law, which effectively criminalises child marriage, setting the minimum age of marriage at 18.[37] The Philippines is only the eighth country in our assessment of the region to do so. However, the Philippines has not yet criminalised forced marriage, which remains a critical gap across the region, with only 10 countries having done so.[38] Thailand, New Zealand, Australia, Bangladesh, and Malaysia recently joined Sri Lanka as the only countries in the region to have brought the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 into force.[39]

North Korea and Iran still demonstrate the weakest response to modern slavery, reflecting a lack of political will to address modern slavery and, in the case of North Korea, the active use of state-imposed forced labour. For many Pacific Island countries, the challenge of operating in resource constrained environments largely accounts for existing gaps in the response to modern slavery.[40]

Many countries in the region took further action to combat modern slavery since the last edition of the Global Slavery Index in 2018. For example, since then, Palau, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Nepal, and Pakistan[41] acceded to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children.[42] Brunei Darussalam finalised a National Action Plan on human trafficking[43] and established a National Committee on Trafficking in Persons.[44] Palau, which was not included in the previous edition of the GSI, has also made significant strides in improving the modern slavery response over the last four years, during which it set up a coordinating body and adopted a National Action Plan,[45] ratified the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182),[46] and established a trafficking hotline.[47]

> **"Once they are rescued and back in their communities, the victims needed to be connected with services within their community. They need services so that there is no re-trafficking."**
>
> *Female survivor of modern slavery, India, 2019*

There are significant gaps in legislative frameworks to combat modern slavery across the region. Nine countries in Asia and the Pacific have stated in legislation that survivors are not to be treated as criminals for conduct that occurred while under the control of criminals. However, even where this protection exists, it is not always implemented in practice. A total of 19 countries in the region treated survivors of modern slavery as criminals. For example, in 2020, 81 returned migrant workers who had been exploited in Viet Nam were jailed in Bangladesh.[48]

This is not the only gap between policy and practice. While almost all countries have criminalised corruption, there were reports that official complicity in modern slavery cases were not investigated in 19 countries. In India, officials allegedly received bribes from traffickers in exchange for protection against prosecution, while in the state of Tamil Nadu, local politicians allegedly benefitted from the commercial sexual exploitation of children and forced begging rings.[49] Further, despite National Action Plans in 28 countries, only 11 governments routinely reviewed their modern slavery response and just two countries monitored the government response to modern slavery through an independent entity, such as the Office of the Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons in Nepal, which is tasked with monitoring human trafficking in the country and making recommendations to government.[50] More recently, Australia announced funding to establish an Anti-Slavery Commissioner.[51] Of 26 countries that have a legal framework that supports compensation or restitution for modern slavery crimes, only 15 awarded compensation or restitution to survivors in practice.

Labour laws in 18 countries prevented certain groups, such as migrant workers or domestic workers, from exercising their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining, and only the Philippines has ratified the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).[52] Despite significant levels of regular and irregular migration — largely intra-regional but also to destinations such as North America, Europe, and the Middle East[53] — only six countries had ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, 1990[54] and fewer than half have ratified the Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air.[55] Further, recruitment agencies were registered and monitored by governments in only 13 countries, and even fewer countries in the region had laws or policies stating that recruitment fees — a known driver of risk among migrants — are to be paid by employers.

Only six countries took any steps to eradicate modern slavery from supply chains. This includes Australia's 2018 Modern Slavery Act, which requires businesses with an annual consolidated revenue of at least AU$100 million (approximately US$67 million) to report on their efforts to address modern slavery within their operations and supply chains.[56] In 2022, New Zealand also proposed legislation to prevent modern slavery within business supply chains.[57]

> **"Holding company owners directly liable for what happens in their business or supply chains."**
>
> *Female survivor of modern slavery, India, 2019*

Regional cooperation through the Bali Process Government and Business Forum

The Bali Process Government and Business Forum provides a unique platform for government and business leaders from 45 countries across the Asia-Pacific to collaborate on initiatives with the joint goal of eradicating modern slavery. Its "Acknowledge. Act. Advance." Framework was the first major policy document agreed upon by the private and public sectors to tackle issues of human trafficking and forced labour in the region. It focuses on the pillars of supply chain transparency, ethical recruitment, and worker protection and redress.

At the high-level meeting in February 2023, many business leaders called on their own governments to introduce robust legislation addressing modern slavery offences, noting that such legislation can create a level playing field for those businesses complying with their human rights obligations. Future plans include a series of regional events to raise awareness of modern slavery risks and promote closer collaboration between business and government. For example, the Indonesian co-chair will hold a forum aimed at young entrepreneurs, while the Nepalese business leader will host a Responsible Business Summit in Kathmandu.

Table 18
Government response score, by country and milestone

Country	Survivors identified and supported (%)	Criminal justice mechanisms (%)	National and regional level coordination (%)	Risk factors are addressed (%)	Government and business supply chains (%)	Total (%)
Australia	64	69	75	79	38	**67**
Philippines	59	73	75	50	13	**59**
Thailand	50	65	75	64	0	**55**
New Zealand	45	65	50	64	25	**54**
Indonesia	45	65	50	57	0	**50**
Bangladesh	41	69	50	50	0	**49**
Sri Lanka	45	65	50	50	0	**49**
Singapore	55	54	38	57	0	**47**
Taiwan	45	36	63	79	13	**47**
Viet Nam	64	46	75	36	0	**47**
Fiji	50	50	38	64	0	**46**
India	36	58	75	50	0	**46**
Lao PDR	59	50	50	43	0	**46**
Malaysia	41	58	50	50	0	**45**
Nepal	36	58	63	50	0	**45**
Japan	45	42	63	57	0	**44**
Cambodia	41	46	75	43	0	**42**
Myanmar	50	42	75	36	0	**42**
China	41	46	50	36	13	**40**
Mongolia	36	54	25	43	13	**40**
South Korea	41	46	50	36	0	**38**
Maldives	41	38	38	50	0	**37**
Pakistan	36	42	50	43	0	**37**
Brunei Darussalam	27	42	25	57	0	**35**
Timor-Leste	32	42	50	36	0	**35**
Hong Kong	27	35	38	50	0	**32**
Papua New Guinea	23	42	50	29	0	**31**
Solomon Islands	14	42	50	43	0	**31**
Palau	27	31	25	36	0	**27**
Vanuatu	9	38	50	29	0	**26**
Iran	-5	19	25	0	0	**8**
North Korea	-9	8	13	-21	0	**-3**

Aceh province, Indonesia, August 2019.
Fishermen collect their catch. Fishing is a high-risk industry for forced labour. Migrant workers are particularly at risk of experiencing exploitation in the Indonesian fishing industry. Photo by Chaideer Mahyuddin/AFP via Getty Images.

Promising Practices in Asia and the Pacific

Within the Promising Practices Database, 46 per cent of evaluated programs are delivered in Asia and the Pacific, covering 22 countries in the region. While most programs tackle known forms of modern slavery in the region such as forced marriage, there are significant gaps in relation to debt bondage and forced labour despite the high prevalence of these issues in the region. Over three quarters of evaluated programs delivered in Asia and the Pacific had met some or all their objectives; yet as only 19 of these evaluations featured reliable methodologies with a control or comparison group, the ability to determine lessons learned or identify promising practices in the region was limited.

Spotlight on what works

Using a community-based program to empower adolescent girls with life skills, the Bangladeshi Association for Life skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents (BALIKA) aimed to reduce child marriage across three high-prevalence districts. The program offered nearly 10,000 adolescent girls 44 hours of life skills lessons in addition to 100 hours of training focused on education support, gender rights awareness, or livelihoods training. The program also engaged local young women as mentors and engaged with communities to build awareness around adolescent skills development. The evaluation of the BALIKA program found that all three interventions significantly reduced child marriages, demonstrating the importance of a community-based approach and investment in education, skills development, and livelihoods training for adolescent girls.[58]

Recommendations for governments

1. **Ensure survivor support services, including shelters, crisis support centres, and community-based protection, cover all populations — including males, adults, and migrants — and make specialised support available for children.**
2. **Strengthen legislation to protect survivors of exploitation by ensuring they are not treated as criminals for conduct that occurred while under the control of traffickers. Ensure legislation supports compensation and restitution for survivors of modern slavery and that this occurs in practice, including by setting up a compensation fund for survivors.**
3. **Raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 for girls and boys with no exemptions.**
4. **Extend labour laws to ensure that all groups are covered without exception and ensure that labour inspections are regularly conducted across all sectors, including the informal sector. Introduce and enforce laws to prohibit charging of recruitment fees to employees and register and monitor local recruitment agencies for deceptive practices, ensuring contracts are made available in a language migrants can understand.**
5. **Introduce mandatory human rights due diligence to stop governments and businesses sourcing goods or services linked to modern slavery.**

Frontline voices:

"I have no way out": Forced into marriage, Afghan girls fear for their future

THE FULLER PROJECT AND ZAN TIMES

Afghanistan has experienced decades of political instability and insecurity amid successive wars and violent conflicts. The most recent Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, in August 2021 following the withdrawal of US troops, saw the militant group seize control of the country's capital city, Kabul, after a rapid advance across the country. The Taliban's return to power has seen mass degradation of human rights in the country as well as mass violence and terrorism. The emerging restrictions on women and girls' mobility and participation in government and education are further contributing to the rapid rise of modern slavery risks across the country.

With Afghan women increasingly confined to their homes, reports on their welfare are difficult to obtain. For this piece The Fuller Project, a global newsroom that reports on issues that impact women, and Zan Times, a women-led investigative newsroom that covers human rights in Afghanistan spoke to women facing the worst impacts of Taliban rule. What their interviews reveal is a nation grappling to resist ongoing violence and exploitation.

Afghan teenager Rukhsar once dreamed of becoming a doctor and finding a well-educated husband who would support her work. That was before the Taliban banned secondary education for girls and the 15-year-old's father forced her to get engaged to an older man.

"Sometimes I think to myself, it is better to … run away from home," said Rukhsar, whose name has been changed for her protection, in the western city of Herat.

Yet Rukhsar said she feared that fleeing home would lead to her being caught by the Taliban — putting her in an even worse situation.

Her situation is far from unique. Reports of early and forced marriages have soared since the Taliban seized power in August 2021 and excluded girls from middle and high schools, according to Afghan experts and international organisations working in the country.

Rukhsar's father arranged her engagement to the son of his business partner — a 22-year-old car salesman, in December. Without an education, Rukhsar said her father saw marriage as the only option for her. Her desperate appeals to him have been answered with violence.

"Every time I object to this marriage, my father beats me very hard," she said in an interview.

"My mother can't help me either because she herself got married at the age of 14," added Rukhsar, whose wedding is set for June. "I don't really know anything about marriage, I still play with my dolls. I have no way out of this situation."

Even before the Taliban's takeover, child marriage was prevalent in Afghanistan. According to the latest national data[1] from 2017, about 28 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 were married before turning 18, and 4 per cent before reaching 15. The former Afghan government set the minimum age for marriage at 16 for girls, but even this was rarely enforced. But the Taliban's crackdown on women's and girls' freedoms, such as the right to work and attend school, as well as the worsening economic and humanitarian outlook, are fuelling an increase in early and forced marriage rates across the country.

"The Taliban's draconian policies on women and girls are only increasing in number and severity, and this means that prospects are extremely dim for any improvements in terms of child, early and forced marriage in Afghanistan," Nicolette Waldman, senior crisis advisor for Amnesty, said in an interview.

UNICEF Afghanistan spokesman Salam Al-Janabi said there is a growing number of reports of "destitute parents being forced into heart-breaking measures to keep their families alive" — from exchanging daughters for a dowry to selling infants to strangers.

Shaharzad Akbar, the former chairperson of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission, said the laws and structures meant to protect women and children "no longer exist."

"The economic conditions of poor families and tolerance of child marriage have led to increase of forced and child marriage for girls in Afghanistan," said Akbar, who is now executive director of Rawadari, an organisation that monitors and reports on human rights violations in the country.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid dismissed reports of an increase in early marriage and said people were not forcing their children to wed.

"We don't have a number for it, but propaganda about this is not true," he said in a phone interview.

"The level of awareness about [child marriage and forced marriage] is high among people and they don't give their children into marriage … forced marriage is not possible at all."

The Taliban issued a decree on women's rights which said, "no one can force women to marry by coercion or pressure."[2] However, last May a spokesman for the Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice told Voice of America that girls "can be given to marriage" upon reaching puberty.[3]

It is not just the Taliban's policies but its members themselves who are also fuelling forced marriage, according to rights groups and some of the girls interviewed for this story. Cases of Taliban members forcing women and girls to wed them has even led some families to marry off their daughters urgently as a preventative measure.

Fatima, 14, lives in a village in Kang district in southwestern Nimroz province where gossip spread last year that the Taliban would force girls under the age of 18 into marriage. "My father engaged me because of these rumours," she said in an interview.

She was married off in February 2022 and moved to Zaranj city, the capital of Nimroz, to live with her husband and his family. There, she faced abuse and violence. "I was very young. I did not understand anything about being a housewife and doing chores," she said. "My mother-in-law used to torture me because I couldn't do housework."

The situation grew even worse, with Fatima recalling how her husband would beat her repeatedly, even when she was seven months pregnant. Although her husband moved to Iran several months ago to make money as a labourer, Fatima said she is still trapped with his family as she raises her baby.

"I would wish no one else to experience the pain and suffering that I am going through," she said.

Girls who are forced into marriage face a greater risk of domestic servitude and other forms of forced labour both inside and outside the home. They experience domestic abuse and violence, marital rape, complications during pregnancy and childbirth, and disproportionately suffer from mental health conditions.

"The consequences will be devastating not only for the physical and mental health of these girls, but for generations to come." said Akbar of Rawadari.

An Afghan doctor in a mental health ward in Herat province, who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals from the Taliban, said more women and girls were arriving with extreme mental health conditions, in many cases as a result of being forced into marriage.

"This unfortunate situation has increased the number of our visitors," he said in a phone interview, referring to a rise in forced and early marriages.

"The Taliban's restrictions have left women in a vulnerable position … (they) are paying the price," he said.

Having been married off by her uncle last November to avoid a Taliban wedding, 17-year-old Arzu said she is treated like "a slave" and is now suffering from severe depression. "I am married to someone with whom I cannot live and I have no escape from it," she said in an interview from northern Samangan province.

"I hate him more everyday. My life will be ruined by this man."

Arzu said she endures constant beatings, rape and death threats, and that her husband's family refuse to take her to a doctor despite her poor mental health.

"From the day I got married, my body melts like a candle."

"My memory is weakening. I have become forgetful. I don't remember anything. I don't talk to anyone — it's no use."

Recognition of the intersection between conflict and modern slavery risks in Afghanistan is vital. In the face of an uncertain future, Afghanistan needs continued and sustained advocacy and action from the international community, towards the goal of establishing stability and rule of law. In the immediate term, there is an urgent need to reopen secondary schools and universities for women and girls, and for a humanitarian response to ensure support to all at-risk persons and to enhance monitoring and reporting mechanisms throughout the country.

See page 58 "Modern slavery: A weapon and consequence of war" for a wider discussion on this intersection, including recommendations for government action.

Orphanages:
Modern slavery hubs

Despite overwhelming evidence cataloguing the harms of institutional care for children, an estimated 5.4 million children worldwide live in orphanages and other institutions.[1] While many assume that orphanages are home to children who have no living parents, research consistently demonstrates that this is not the case for over 80 per cent of children living in orphanages globally.[2]

In many countries, only a small proportion of children's institutions are registered with the government, which leaves many children invisible to necessary oversight and protections, and hinders data collection efforts.[3] The institutionalised population, including children in orphanages, are underrepresented in the prevalence estimates within this Global Slavery Index for this reason.

While the case for global care reform is not new, more recent evidence from governments and civil society organisations highlights the multifaceted relationship between children's institutions and human trafficking — revealing a complex web of factors that position orphanages as both a driver and an outcome of exploitation.[4] In 2019, the links between institutions and child trafficking were recognised by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). For the first time, member states collectively expressed their concern over the harm that institutions can cause to children and called for them to be progressively phased out. In its historic Resolution on the Rights of the Child, the UNGA set out the political and human rights case for transforming care systems and made some ground-breaking recommendations. Governments and civil society now have an opportunity to implement these recommendations.

A residential care institution is any residential setting where children are isolated from the wider community and are compelled to live with other children to whom they are not related. These children, and their families, do not have control over their lives or involvement in the decisions that affect them. Crucially, an institutional culture prevails, meaning that the requirements of the organisation tend to take precedence over the children's individual needs.[5] This Spotlight uses the terms "institution" and "orphanage" interchangeably.

Deoria, India, August 2018.

A bungalow which served as an old age facility and orphanage for girls living with mental disabilities was investigated for allegations of forced sexual exploitation of residents by shelter staff. Police raided the shelter after a 10-year old girl escaped and reported that many young girls, who were usually locked inside rooms, were taken away for short periods of time by strangers in cars parked outside. Photo credit: Deepak Gupta/Hindustan via Getty Images.

Trafficking into orphanages

Child trafficking into institutions, also referred to as orphanage trafficking, is described as "the recruitment of children into residential care institutions for the purpose of profit and exploitation."[6] This practice is linked to the funding of orphanages through private donations, volunteer tourism, mission trips, and other forms of fundraising.[7] It is estimated that US Christian organisations alone donate approximately US$3.3 billion to residential care each year.[8] The popular practice of orphanage volunteering — people from high-income countries traveling abroad to help children living in orphanages — also serves to provide a continual income for the orphanage, as well as reduced labour costs for the care of the children.[9] However, there is a grim downside to all of this.

Although often well-intentioned, these sources of financial and in-kind support undermine national efforts to support broader child protection and social welfare systems by creating a parallel system without official oversight and accountability. They also create a marketplace that can incentivise the expansion of existing orphanages and the establishment of new ones, with the *supply* of funding and resources into orphanages increasing the *demand* for children to be in them.[10] There is evidence of children being deliberately recruited from vulnerable families to fill spaces in orphanages, under the guise of better care and access to education.[11] Once trafficked into orphanages, children are vulnerable to neglect, abuse, and exploitation. Orphanages that are run for profit have been found to operate under extremely poor conditions to drive down care costs, with evidence also pointing to children being kept deliberately malnourished to encourage further donations,[12] forced to interact with and perform for visitors, or forced to beg for financial donations.[13]

The popularity of orphanage "volunteering" has seen a rise in orphanages built in tourist hotspots to fulfil demand and capitalise on the financial potential.[14] In Cambodia, for example, there was a 75 per cent increase in the number of residential care institutions in a five-year period, despite no correlating increase in the number of children losing both parents.[15] In Uganda, the number of children in institutions increased from just over one thousand in the late 1990s to 55,000 in 2018, despite large

decreases in the number of orphans.[16] The presence of volunteers also places children at increased risk of sexual abuse. There have been numerous documented cases of perpetrators posing as well-intentioned orphanage volunteers to gain access to vulnerable children, taking advantage of often unregulated, unvetted, and unsupervised access.[17]

Australian Modern Slavery Act addressing orphanage trafficking

The Australian Modern Slavery Act (2018) defines and recognises orphanage trafficking as a form of modern slavery under the Act's definition.[18] As such, reporting entities with orphanages in their structures, supply chains, funding models, or operations must assess for and report on risks of modern slavery in these contexts. Additionally, the Commonwealth Modern Slavery Act Guidance Material[19] includes information on orphanage trafficking and the exploitation of children in orphanages, identifying orphanage volunteering and tourism as a related risk factor. Guidance has been developed by civil society organisations to assist entities reporting under the Australian legislation to understand its implications.[20]

Trafficking out of orphanages

Traffickers and organised criminal groups are known to target institutions where they can exploit weak or absent child protection mechanisms.[21] Evidence shows children in orphanages are groomed, coerced, and deceived into leaving facilities and are trafficked into sexual exploitation, forced labour, forced criminality, and other forms of modern slavery.[22] In some cases, orphanages have been complicit or directly involved in the trafficking and exploitation of children within their care.[23]

Demand for adoption among childless families — often from high-income countries — also drives trafficking and kidnapping of children into and out of orphanages. [24] This is particularly evident in countries where private and international adoptions are common, for example in China, where it is estimated that more than 200,000 children are sold for the purposes of international adoptions per year.[25] In Nigeria, some orphanages have been linked to "baby factories," where traffickers hold women against their will, rape them, and force them to carry and deliver a child for the purpose of selling.[26]

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Child survivors of modern slavery and unaccompanied migrant children being placed in orphanages

Children who have been trafficked are often placed in institutions, either as a mechanism intended to provide them with protection and support or as a law enforcement response because the child is not being treated as a victim of crime. Government responses fall short of providing child-centric safeguards; for example, only 55 per cent of governments assessed in the Global Slavery Index were found to have special support for child victims of modern slavery. In some cases, children identified as victims are returned to the same institutions from which they were trafficked and are re-exposed to the risks that led to their initial exploitation.[27]

Without the protection provided by parents and guardians, unaccompanied migrant and refugee children are at greater risk of trafficking and exploitation, both in transit and on arrival in their destination country.[28] Often, these children are either placed in reception facilities akin to orphanages or they enter the institutional care system.[29] The institutionalisation of trafficked children and unaccompanied migrant and refugee children increases their vulnerability to exploitation on account of entering a high-risk and insecure system.[30]

Modern slavery risks experienced by care leavers

Children who have grown up in institutional settings are more vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation once they have aged out of the system or if they have run away from the facilities.[31] This is linked to the impact of having had fewer opportunities to develop the social skills and networks needed to live successfully and independently in the community.[32]

This vulnerability is increased where there are limited services and support available for reintegration into society.[33] Further, care leavers are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Girls in Moldova who grew up in institutions, for example, were found to be 10 times more likely to be trafficked for sexual exploitation than their peers raised in families.[34] International analysis highlights similar disadvantages among care leaver populations globally, including higher rates of homelessness, unemployment, isolation, poverty, and mental health issues compared to peers raised in families.[35]

Globally, orphanages and other institutional settings for children are hubs where child exploitation and modern slavery can thrive, as they are often hidden from official oversight, operate with weak child protection systems, attract a continuous flow of large and unmonitored donations, and are home to children who are already vulnerable. Addressing this requires a multi-faceted response.

Times of crisis and children in care

More than 5 million children have lost a parent or caregiver as a result of COVID-19[36] and the number of children being separated from their parents and at risk of subsequent exploitation is expected to increase.[37] In some parts of the world, COVID-19 has reportedly led to family reunification. For example, authorities in Nepal, India and Kenya instructed orphanages to reintegrate children with their family during the national lockdown[38] In Nepal, this resulted in nearly 10 per cent of the country's institutionalised children returning to their communities in the early stages of the pandemic.[39] While this shows that not all children in orphanages lack family-based alternatives, there are concerns that children may have been sent home without the necessary assessment, preparation, and support.[40] Additionally, experts warn that inadequate records of where children have been placed, as well as of those who remain institutionalised, could lead to more children falling through the gaps and becoming unaccounted for.[41] For many orphanages around the world, lockdown and social distancing measures mean that the child-to-caregiver ratio has decreased due to reductions in staff and access to facilities, raising concerns over declines in quality of care.[42]

Social distancing restrictions have hampered orphanage inspections in some countries.[43] Encouragingly, one study on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's institutions globally found that the vast majority of founders, funders, and directors of orphanages participating in the research (91 per cent) stated that to some degree the pandemic had catalysed reflection and created an opportunity to consider or implement changes or adaptations to the orphanage model of care. This included a greater focus on sustainability and a renewed belief in the ability for institutionalised children to be reunited with their families and communities.[44]

Much can be learned from the impact of previous international crises on children in institutional care. In the wake of disaster, support for orphanages is a popular response for overseas audiences wanting to contribute to relief efforts.[45] Following the devastating 2015 earthquake in Nepal, an increase in child trafficking and of children being placed in institutions led to immediate child safeguarding concerns.[46] Officials recorded cases of traffickers posing as either aid workers or religious representatives, coercing poor and vulnerable families to give up their children for placement into orphanages for the purposes of financial exploitation.[47] Similar conclusions have been drawn from post-disaster analysis in Haiti[48] and Indonesia.[49] It is vital that there be close monitoring of COVID-19's impact of on children in institutions and on those from families and communities whose vulnerabilities have increased due to the pandemic.

In addition, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had a devastating impact on children in institutions. Ukraine already had the largest population of institutionalised children in Europe, and the displacement brought on by the conflict has caused those numbers to rise.[50] Concerns continue to grow regarding living conditions in orphanages and the risk of child exploitation and abuse, with instances of traffickers targeting Ukrainian orphanages.[51] Additionally, the UN has expressed concern about the risk of forced adoption of Ukrainian children, warning that children in institutions cannot be assumed to be orphans.[52] In March 2023, the International Criminal Court (ICC) indicted the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, and children's commissioner, Maria Lvova-Belova on war crimes for the mass abduction of Ukrainian children. The children are allegedly being taken to Russia and adopted by Russian families, under the guise of a humanitarian mission to save the children from the war.[53]

Recommendations for governments

1. **Recognise the link between children in orphanages and modern slavery. Orphanage trafficking must be criminalised and children in these settings recognised and responded to as being highly vulnerable to exploitation.**
2. **Curb the proliferation of orphanages by prioritising family and community-based care in all policies relating to the care and protection of children. This includes ensuring adequate funding for family and community services and prioritising long-term, sustainable solutions that enable families and communities to thrive together.**
3. **Focus international aid on family and community strengthening initiatives, as opposed to being directed towards institutional care for children.**
4. **Monitor international donations and raise awareness among philanthropic communities of potential risks of funding orphanages.**