

Modern slavery in Afghanistan

Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Study



KEY STATS

Population (2021) 43,734,000

GDP per capita, PPP (Current intl \$) \$2,078

13

PREVALENCE OF MODERN SLAVERY per 1,000 people

505,000

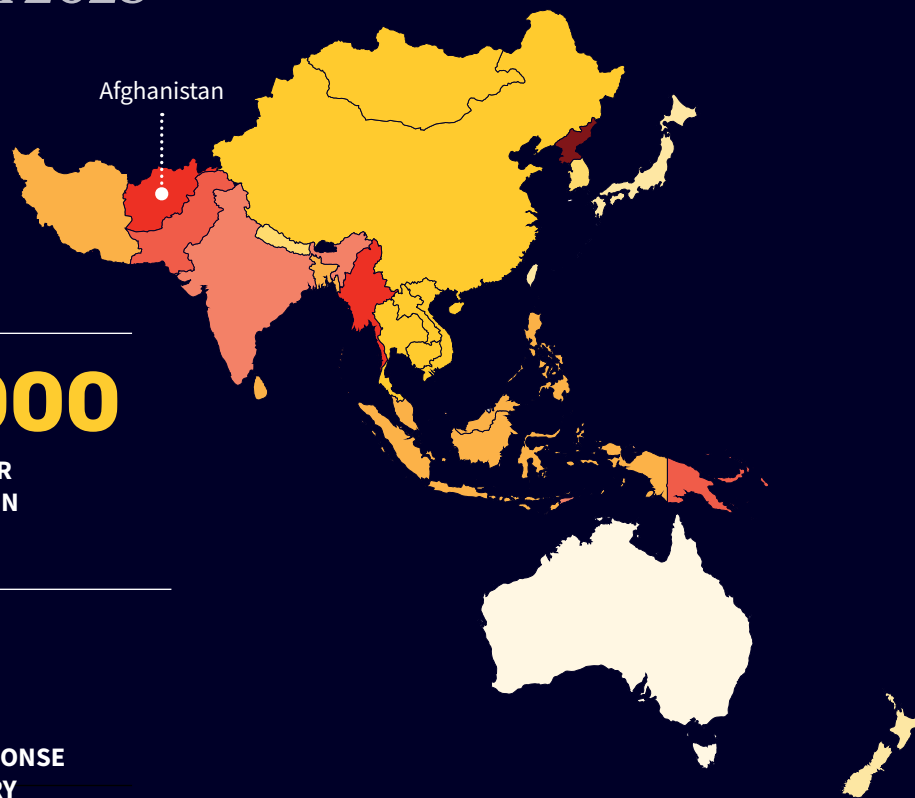
ESTIMATED NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN MODERN SLAVERY

86/100

VULNERABILITY TO MODERN SLAVERY

N/A

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO MODERN SLAVERY



Overview

Afghanistan is the most vulnerable country to modern slavery within Asia and the Pacific and has the second highest prevalence of modern slavery in the region. In August 2021, the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group, seized power from the former government.¹ Since then, vulnerability to modern slavery has increased due to Taliban-imposed human rights restrictions and a country-wide humanitarian crisis.² The Taliban has imposed a strict interpretation of Islamic law throughout Afghanistan, increasing violence toward and severely restricting the rights of vulnerable groups, including women, girls, and LGBTQ+ people.³ Already high rates of poverty, food insecurity, and displacement have intensified since the takeover, exposing many more Afghans to modern slavery risks. Due to ongoing conflict and extreme disruption to government, Afghanistan was not included in our assessment of government responses to modern slavery, yet anecdotal evidence suggests the Taliban have not taken action to combat modern slavery. In fact, some reports indicate that officials from the interim government controlled by the Taliban actively perpetuate some forms of modern slavery, for example, forced marriages and the recruitment of child soldiers.⁴

Estimated prevalence of modern slavery across Asia and the Pacific



Prevalence

The 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI) estimates that 505,000 people were living in modern slavery in Afghanistan on any given day in 2021. This equates to a prevalence of 13 people in modern slavery for every thousand people living in the country, resulting in Afghanistan having some of the highest prevalence rates in Asia and the Pacific (two out of 27) and globally (nine out of 160). This estimate does not include the use of children in armed conflict, which other reports indicate occurs in Afghanistan.⁵ It is important to note that this estimate does not capture the impact of the Taliban's seizure of power in August 2021 and is a conservative estimate of people living in modern slavery in Afghanistan.

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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.

Forced labour

Forced labour exploitation

Decades-long conflict, political instability, and economic downturn have resulted in the widespread prevalence of debt bondage and forced labour in Afghanistan, both before and after the Taliban's seizure of power.⁶ In 2018, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission found that over 90 per cent of children worked more than 35 hours per week,⁷ often in hazardous and life-threatening conditions.⁸ A 2023 report found that since the Taliban's takeover, over a third of Afghan children have been forced into work to support their families through soaring poverty levels,⁹ primarily in sectors such as domestic work,¹⁰ carpet weaving,¹¹ salt mining,¹² and brickmaking.¹³ Entire families are reportedly held in bonded labour in brick kilns throughout eastern Afghanistan.¹⁴ Forced labour of children and adults has also been documented in the illicit production and transport of opium,¹⁵ of which Afghanistan is the world's largest producer.¹⁶

Forced commercial sexual exploitation of adults

Information on forced commercial sexual exploitation in Afghanistan is limited, in part due to widespread stigma linked to pre-marital sex, the treatment of victims of sexual assaults as criminals for acts coerced by traffickers, and in some cases, and evidence that some victims who reported abuses were sexually assaulted by authorities.¹⁷ Anecdotal evidence indicates that women who experienced forced marriage were also subjected to sex trafficking by their husbands, both within Afghanistan and to neighbouring countries.¹⁸

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC)

Unlike the global trend, boys face greater risks of commercial sexual exploitation in Afghanistan than girls.¹⁹ The commercial sexual exploitation of boys in bacha bazi ("boy play")²⁰ has been widely documented.²¹ The practice involves the sexual exploitation of boys as young as nine – who are typically from lower-income households – by wealthy men, and often occurs in settings such as weddings and other celebrations, where boys dance for entertainment.²² In 2019, 165 boys in Logar province alleged sexual abuses by authorities, including bacha bazi, and some boys alleged they were sexually assaulted by police upon reporting the abuse.²³ In 2020, the latest year for which figures were disclosed, the government investigated 185 cases of bacha bazi.²⁴ The involvement of officials in bacha bazi has also been reported: in 2021, before the Taliban seized control, pro-government militias and security forces reportedly recruited children for bacha bazi,²⁵ and several police officers were arrested in relation to such cases but were charged with separate offences.²⁶ The Taliban ostensibly opposes the practice and since seizing control, the use of dancing boys at weddings and other celebrations has reportedly ceased, however sexual exploitation continues.²⁷

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Forced marriage

While there is limited publicly available official data on the prevalence of forced marriage in Afghanistan, anecdotal evidence suggests the practice is widespread, both before and after the Taliban's takeover. A 2018 contextual analysis of child marriages in Afghanistan found there was little difference between child marriage rates in rural, semi-rural, and urban settings, however rates varied significantly between provinces, with child marriages present in 66 per cent of households in Paktia as compared to 21 per cent in Ghor.²⁸

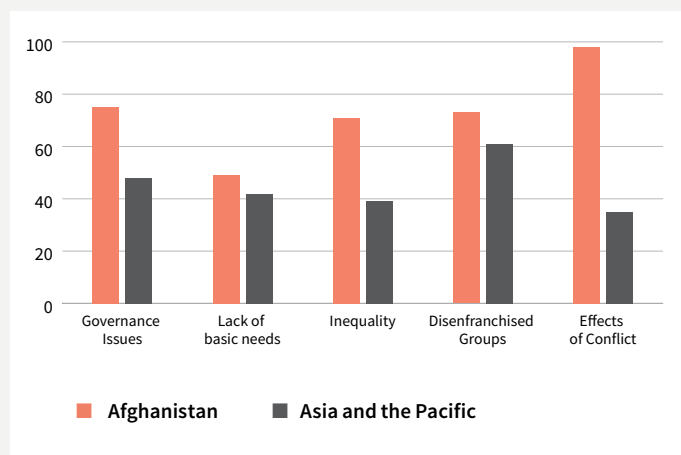
The Taliban's seizure of power in 2021 has been linked to an increase in forced and child marriage across the country.²⁹ The winding back of girls' access to education,³⁰ coupled with the deepening humanitarian crisis, reportedly led more parents to marry off their daughters to ease economic strain on struggling households.³¹ The lack of future opportunities for women and girls resulting from the restrictions imposed by the Taliban also drove some families to forcibly marry off female relatives.³² Forced and child marriages have also been used as a perceived protective measure: for example, parents have reportedly forced daughters to marry early to avoid having to marry them to a Taliban member,³³ while others have sought to marry their daughters to Taliban members in exchange for greater protection for the family and a large amount of money.³⁴

Use of children in armed conflict

Children were recruited and used as soldiers in the period before and after the Taliban's seizure of power in 2021: in 2020, 260 boys in armed conflict with the majority (88 per cent) recruited by the Taliban in combat roles, while US-backed Afghan security forces and pro-government militias recruited 22 and eight boys respectively for combat and support roles, including cooking and cleaning, as well as bacha bazi.³⁵ While the verified number of child soldiers reduced in 2021, this was due to monitoring being suspended as the Taliban's takeover reduced access for humanitarian workers.³⁶ However, at least 34 boys were recruited by the Taliban and 24 boys by Afghan security forces and pro-government militias in 2021.³⁷ Children are reportedly recruited while in school and lured with false promises of rewards by the Taliban.³⁸

Vulnerability

Figure 1.
Vulnerability of Afghanistan to modern slavery by dimension, compared to the regional average



Afghanistan is the most vulnerable country to modern slavery within Asia and the Pacific, and is among the most vulnerable countries globally. Vulnerability in Afghanistan is overwhelmingly driven by conflict: it has been rated the least peaceful country in the world since 2019.³⁹ Afghanistan has experienced successive conflicts spanning four decades, including two decades of military intervention since the 2001 invasion by United States (US) armed forces.⁴⁰ While some progress in women's rights was made between 2001 and 2021, particularly regarding female employment and political participation rates,⁴¹ the period was largely characterised by political and economic insecurity,⁴² violence,⁴³ and human rights abuses⁴⁴ – including by US forces.⁴⁵

Following the US military withdrawal in August 2021,⁴⁶ the Taliban seized control of Kabul, which worsened the already severe humanitarian situation.⁴⁷ While millions of Afghans were already displaced as a result of the ongoing conflict in addition to climate-related disasters, many more were at risk of displacement in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban's takeover and resulting social, political, and economic shocks.⁴⁸ Afghanistan has among the largest displaced populations in the world, with 5.2 million refugees and 3.25 million internally displaced people as of 31 December 2022.⁴⁹ Over 1.6 million people became refugees since August 2021.⁵⁰ Natural disasters also spur displacement for Afghans, with an additional 25,000 people displaced due to natural disasters in 2021.⁵¹ Displaced Afghans face severe food and housing insecurity⁵² and are vulnerable to conflict-related violence and forms of modern slavery, including forced sexual exploitation and recruitment into armed forces.⁵³ Those fleeing face a dangerous journey in search of safety, exposing them to risks of exploitation by traffickers and potential unjust repatriation.⁵⁴

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Much of the wider population are also in need of assistance,⁵⁵ with the impacts of climate change, drought, and harsh winters, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict, and economic decline having spurred a largescale humanitarian crisis. As of 2023, an estimated 90 per cent of the population are living in poverty,⁵⁶ and 17.2 million people – accounting for 40 per cent of the population – are experiencing acute food insecurity.⁵⁷ However, the Taliban has imposed restrictions on humanitarian actors, limiting their ability to deliver aid,⁵⁸ and increasing risks for vulnerable Afghans. In the wake of severe droughts that have damaged arable land and threatened livelihoods, forced marriages are increasingly used to reduce economic strain on households.⁵⁹ Other negative coping mechanisms include the worst forms of child labour, where reports exist of children as young as five working in hazardous conditions in brick kilns.⁶⁰ Anecdotal reports note that organ trafficking has also increased in the wake of climate- and conflict-driven strains on household resources.⁶¹

Marginalised groups are particularly vulnerable to modern slavery in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's takeover, the country has been described as the 'most repressive in the world' for women and girls,⁶² following the regime's crackdown on women's rights and winding back hard-won progress towards gender equality.⁶³ The Taliban quickly reinstated a strict patriarchal interpretation of sharia, banning women's access to education, employment, and travel without a male chaperone, among other fundamental freedoms.⁶⁴ Subsequently, women have had fewer opportunities to earn a livelihood and participate in public and political life, and have been exposed to greater risks of forced marriage, domestic servitude,⁶⁵ and gender-based violence.⁶⁶ The LGBTQI+ community have also faced even greater rates of discrimination under the Taliban's rule, with reports of sexual assault, physical violence, and threats of capital punishment being used by the Taliban, building on the former government's criminalisation of homosexuality as a violation of Sharia.⁶⁷ Other persecuted minorities include ethnic and religious groups such as Sikhs, Hindus, and Hazaras, who face increased risks of displacement and exploitation by traffickers in their search for safety, due to non-conformity with the Taliban's social mandates.⁶⁸

However, some risks to modern slavery predated the Taliban's takeover. Anecdotal reports link longstanding cultural traditions to experiences of modern slavery for both men and women in Afghanistan: for example, through cultural practices such as *baad*,⁶⁹ which involves the forced marriage of daughters as compensation to resolve a dispute,⁷⁰ and *badal*, the exchange of pairs of blood relatives in marriages between families to resolve conflicts or to avoid paying a dowry if a family cannot afford it.⁷¹ Tribal customs such as 'Levirate' marriages can lead to the forced marriage of widows to male relatives of their deceased spouse.⁷² Further, the practice of *bacha bazi* is reportedly linked to traditions which prohibit women and girls from participating in public entertainment; exposing boys to greater risks of commercial sexual exploitation.⁷³

Government response

During our government response assessment period from 15 February 2019 to 31 August 2022, Afghanistan was governed by two different regimes – the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, a republic led by President Ashraf Ghani since 2014,⁷⁴ and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, a theocracy ruled by the Taliban since August 2021.⁷⁵ Notably, the Taliban have not been formally recognised by any foreign country to date.⁷⁶ Due to ongoing conflict and extreme disruption, Afghanistan was excluded from our assessment for the 2023 GSI, yet several actions undertaken by both the former government and the Taliban can be examined.

From 2019 to 2021, the former government took some action to combat modern slavery, particularly through improving victim identification and support. For example, the government launched a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and a Trafficking in Persons Online Database in 2018 to help officials identify and refer victims of trafficking to support services,⁷⁷ although there were reports police did not consistently refer victims to services.⁷⁸ In 2020, the government delivered training and developed a manual to support frontline responders – including NGOs, law enforcement, and religious leaders – to identify and report human trafficking.⁷⁹ Despite these steps, there were gaps in the government's efforts to identify and support survivors. No government shelters could accommodate adult male trafficking victims and the government offered little support for approximately 27 shelters operated by NGOs, only two of which across the country could accommodate male victims under 18.⁸⁰ Further, the government reportedly placed some child victims in orphanages or detention centres.⁸¹

Since the takeover, NGOs and other civil society groups have been unable to work in the prevention and reintegration of survivors of modern slavery under Taliban rule.⁸² Most shelters to support survivors have been closed after looting and appropriation by the Taliban, and staff working within the system have been subject to increasing violence, making support services unviable.⁸³

The former government also demonstrated efforts to coordinate the response to modern slavery at the national and regional levels. In 2019, Afghanistan joined the Global Action to Prevent and Address Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Migrants, an initiative of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to combat human trafficking and migrant smuggling,⁸⁴ and in 2021, the government adopted a National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling.⁸⁵ The legal framework under the former government also enshrined some protections: for example, forced labour was prohibited under articles 48 and 49 of the Constitution,⁸⁶ and sex and labour trafficking were criminalised under Articles 510, 511, and 512 of the 2017 Penal Code.⁸⁷ *Bacha bazi* was criminalised under several articles of the Penal Code, and over 300 prosecutors, judges and attorneys received training on preventing *bacha bazi* among former government officials was reported.⁸⁸ The use of child soldiers⁹⁰ and CSEC⁹¹ are not criminalised in line with international standards, and according to article 71(1) of the Civil Code, girls as young as 15 years may be married with judicial or paternal consent, while article 71(2) prohibits marrying of girls under the age of 15.⁹²

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Under the new Taliban regime, limited efforts to combat modern slavery exist but are symbolic at best and undermined by contradictory policies. While a special decree was issued in December 2021 to prohibit forced marriages,⁹³ this decree is reportedly not enforced,⁹⁴ and was contradicted by a Taliban spokesperson later confirming that girls can be given in marriage upon reaching puberty.⁹⁵ By and large, progress made by the former government in combating modern slavery has been lost since the Taliban's takeover.⁹⁶ Not only are victims now left without access to support services, they are also exposed to higher risks of criminalisation as the Taliban has expanded the arbitrary application of customary and religious law to penalise victims of modern slavery.⁹⁷ For example, female victims of sex trafficking have reportedly been treated as criminals for conduct while under the control of abusers and punished under morality laws, for which punishments reportedly included the death penalty in some cases.⁹⁸

Finally, reports that indicate the Taliban relies on some forms of modern slavery – from Taliban fighters recruiting and using child soldiers,⁹⁹ engaging in forced marriages,¹⁰⁰ and forcibly sexually exploiting women and girls,¹⁰¹ to using political prisoners for forced labour¹⁰² – highlight that the regime's response to modern slavery is not simply 'weak', but one that actively encourages exploitation.



THE GLOBAL SLAVERY INDEX 2023



WALK FREE

For more information on modern slavery, visit the Global Slavery Index 2023 website.



Recommendations

- 1 Survivors identified and supported**
 - Reopen and allocate adequate resources to survivor support services across the country, including shelters and crisis support centres, and ensure shelters cover all victims, including males and young people.
 - Allow civil society actors to resume survivor support activities and humanitarian aid services without fear of violence, punishment, or detention.
 - Strengthen implementation of the National Referral Mechanism and deliver regular and systematic training for Taliban police to identify victims of modern slavery and refer them to support services.

- 2 Criminal justice mechanisms**
 - Recognise and enforce the 2017 Law to Combat Crimes of Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants.
 - Ensure that survivors of exploitation are not punished or detained for crimes committed while under the control of criminals, including children recruited by armed groups.
 - Ensure victims of modern slavery, including women and girls, are not detained or punished for 'moral crimes.'

- 3 National and regional level coordination**
 - 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.

- 4 Risk factors are addressed**
 - Ensure women and girls have full access to their rights and freedoms, including the right to education, employment, and participation in public and political life. Reopen secondary schools and universities for women and girls.
 - Enforce laws that protect workers' rights in high-risk sectors, such as carpet-weaving, domestic work, and brick-making, and among informal workers, ethnic and religious minorities, and other vulnerable groups.
 - Challenge cultural norms, such as baad and badal, which allow harmful and exploitative practices to continue.
 - Enforce the ban on forced marriages announced in 2021 and amend articles 70 and 71 of the Civil Code to establish a minimum marriage age of 18 for boys and girls with no exceptions.
 - Investigate and prosecute all instances of official complicity in modern slavery, including forced marriage, the recruitment and use of child soldiers, and bacha bazi.

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