

# Modern slavery in China

## Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Study



### KEY STATS

Population (2021) 1,439,324,000

GDP per capita, PPP (Current intl \$) \$17,189

# 4.0

PREVALENCE OF  
MODERN SLAVERY  
per 1,000 people

# 5,771,000

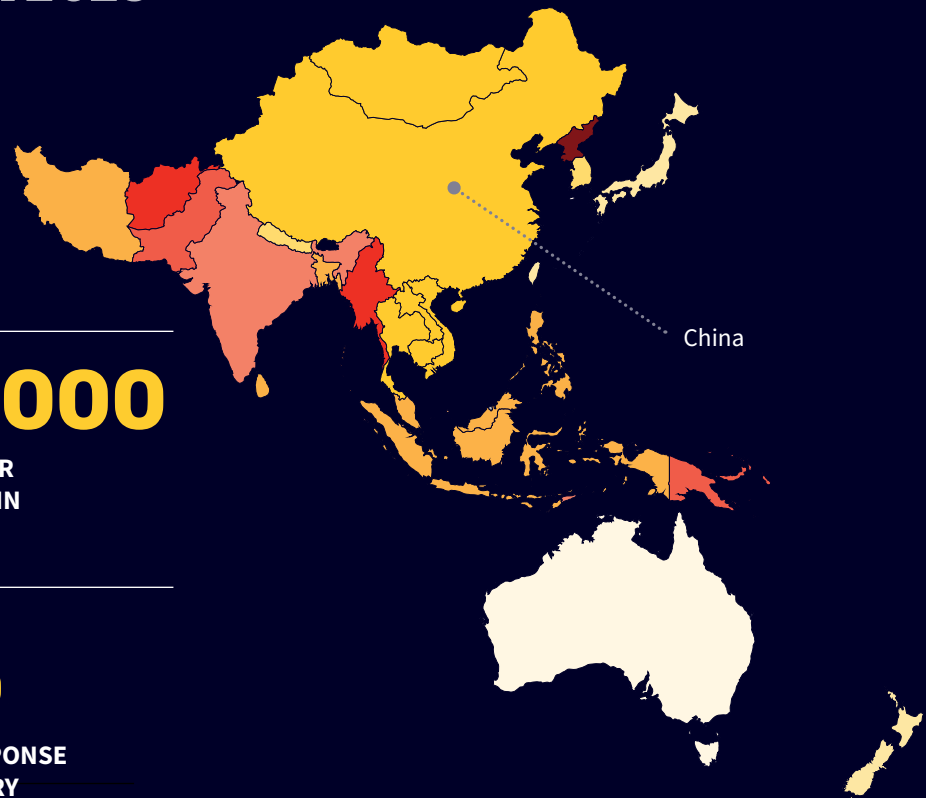
ESTIMATED NUMBER  
OF PEOPLE LIVING IN  
MODERN SLAVERY

# 46/100

VULNERABILITY TO  
MODERN SLAVERY

# 40/100

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE  
TO MODERN SLAVERY



Estimated prevalence  
of modern slavery across  
Asia and the Pacific



### Overview

China's central role in global production – it is the world's largest exporter of goods<sup>1</sup> – is a cause for concern as exports from China are increasingly at risk of being tainted by state-imposed forced labour. Since 2018, evidence of forced labour of Uyghur and other Turkic and Muslim majority peoples has emerged in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Uyghur Region).<sup>2</sup> Forced labour imposed by private actors is also reported, in addition to forced marriage and organ trafficking, with vulnerability primarily driven by discriminatory government practices. While China demonstrated some efforts to tackle modern slavery through sustained coordination at the national and regional levels – including by adopting a new national action plan for 2021 to 2030<sup>3</sup> – its overall response is critically undermined by the use of state-imposed forced labour.

### Prevalence

The 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI) estimates that 5.8 million people were living in modern slavery in China on any given day in 2021. This equates to four in every thousand people in the country, which places China at 19 out of 27 countries in the region. It is second only to India when the estimated number of people living in modern slavery is considered. This estimate does not include figures on organ trafficking, which evidence indicates does occur in China.

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Akto, Xinjiang Province, China, June 2019.

Vehicles pass through a checkpoint on a road near a facility believed to be a government re-education camp detaining Uyghur peoples. Various reports allege that Uyghurs, and other Muslim ethnic groups, are forcibly held in a network of internment camps in the province, where they reportedly face abuses including forced labour. The government claims the facilities are simply “vocational education centres” to steer people away from extremism. Photo credit: Greg Baker/AFP via Getty Images.

## Forced labour

### State-imposed forced labour

Since the 2018 GSI, evidence of systematic oppression and pervasive state-imposed forced labour of Uyghurs and other Turkic and Muslim majority peoples has emerged.<sup>4</sup> Forced labour is exacted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a means of racial and religious discrimination; political coercion and education; and as punishment for holding views ideologically opposed to the state.<sup>5</sup> It is reported alongside mass surveillance, political indoctrination, religious oppression,<sup>6</sup> forced separation of families,<sup>7</sup> forced sterilisation,<sup>8</sup> torture, sexual violence,<sup>9</sup> and arbitrary detention in so-called “re-education camps” within the Uyghur Region.<sup>10</sup>

Forced labour is exacted under the guise of vocational training and poverty alleviation – a scheme promulgated by the CCP to raise living standards in “ethnic areas.”<sup>11</sup> It is primarily facilitated through the transfer of rural populations to work in farms and factories, and the involuntary placement of detainees and ex-detainees in factories located inside or near “re-education camps” in the Uyghur Region and factories across China.<sup>12</sup> Several global supply chains are tainted by this exploitation, including cotton,<sup>13</sup> garments,<sup>14</sup> electronics,<sup>15</sup> polyvinyl chloride (PVC),<sup>16</sup> solar-grade

polysilicon (used in solar panels),<sup>17</sup> and personal protective equipment (PPE).<sup>18</sup> Similar patterns of abuse are evident in the Tibet Autonomous Region, with reports of labour transfers occurring in construction, textiles, security, and agriculture both as a means of religious discrimination and political indoctrination of Tibetans.<sup>19</sup>

Forced labour is also reported in the prison system administered by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) – the Chinese government’s state-run paramilitary corporate conglomerate in the Uyghur Region.<sup>20</sup> The XPCC operates several farms, factories, and enterprises out of its prisons that produce coal, cotton, textiles, bricks, plastics, agricultural and other products using forced labour of Uyghur peoples.<sup>21</sup> Han Chinese imprisoned within the XPCC system are also reportedly subject to forced labour.<sup>22</sup> Further, there are reports of forced labour within the general prison system of those convicted of a political offence,<sup>23</sup> of those suffering drug addictions in rehabilitation centres, and of women charged with sex work who are forced to work in “education centres.”<sup>24</sup> State-imposed forced labour of North Koreans is also documented in China,<sup>25</sup> with workers’ wages reportedly stripped by the North Korean government.<sup>26</sup>

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### Forced labour exploitation

Forced labour exploitation of citizens and foreign migrants is also imposed by the private economy, including in factories, brick kilns, coal mines, fishing, domestic servitude, and forced begging.<sup>27</sup> Since the 2018, reports of forced labour of students placed into production line jobs masked as internships have continued, with cases recorded in automobile<sup>28</sup> and electronics factories.<sup>29</sup> Forced labour and abuse is also well-documented in the fishing sector,<sup>30</sup> including on distant water longline fleets,<sup>31</sup> Ghanaian flagged industrial trawl fleets operated by Chinese corporations,<sup>32</sup> and Chinese vessels fishing illegally in Somali waters.<sup>33</sup> Fishers have reported experiencing wage withholding, food deprivation, physical and sexual violence, restricted movement, and debt bondage, and other abuses at sea.<sup>34</sup>

Forced labour of Chinese workers is not confined within the country's borders. Reports indicate that Chinese migrants are trafficked into Chinese cyber-scam schemes operating out of Cambodia.<sup>35</sup> Chinese citizens are also deceived into exploitative jobs along China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>36</sup> – a major infrastructure project seeking to expand China-linked trade and investment across Asia, Africa, and Europe.<sup>37</sup> A 2021 report found that Chinese employers on BRI projects in Algeria, Indonesia, Jordan, Pakistan, Serbia, Singapore, and other countries forced Chinese citizens to work through threats, violence, withholding of passports and wages, debt bondage, and other abuses.<sup>38</sup> The workers were typically recruited from rural areas under deceptive conditions, made to pay exorbitant fees and sign false contracts, and were issued incorrect visas, limiting their ability to seek help once overseas. This abuse continued through the pandemic, with workers forced to work at high risk of infection, or made to isolate with no means to return home.<sup>39</sup>

### Forced commercial sexual exploitation of adults

Sex work is criminalised in China,<sup>40</sup> yet Chinese and foreign women and children are reportedly trafficked for sexual exploitation within the sex industry.<sup>41</sup> In 2020, for example, Colombian police arrested seven people who allegedly recruited women via social media with false promises of modelling work, and trafficked them to China for sexual exploitation.<sup>42</sup> A 2019 report based on interviews with 45 North Korean victims and survivors of sex trafficking in China found that the majority were targeted by traffickers after arriving in the country, and were either coerced, abducted, or sold into the sex industry.<sup>43</sup> Another investigation found that North Korean women and girls were forced into sexual exploitation online while trapped in apartments.<sup>44</sup>

### Commercial sexual exploitation of children

Perpetrators similarly subject children to commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC) in China. North Korean girls as young as nine are reportedly forced into online commercial sexual exploitation in China.<sup>45</sup> Girls from other neighbouring countries such as Lao PDR<sup>46</sup> and Vietnam<sup>47</sup> are also trafficked to China for sexual exploitation. While less is known about the experiences of boys, Mongolian boys are reportedly vulnerable to being trafficked across the Chinese border for forced labour and sexual exploitation.<sup>48</sup>

### Forced marriage

Forced marriage in China is fuelled by the skewed ratio of men to women – a result of the controversial one-child policy implemented between 1979 and 2015 that led to nearly 21 million “missing women.”<sup>49</sup> This generated a demand for brides and a surge in the marriage brokering profession – a trade that has drawn human traffickers: women are trafficked from neighbouring countries such as Myanmar,<sup>50</sup> Vietnam,<sup>51</sup> Pakistan,<sup>52</sup> Lao PDR,<sup>53</sup> and Cambodia<sup>54</sup> to fulfil the bride shortage. Forced marriage may lead to other forms of exploitation, including domestic servitude, forced labour,<sup>55</sup> and forced sexual exploitation.<sup>56</sup> Forced surrogacy and trafficking of pregnant women to China to sell their babies has also been observed.<sup>57</sup>

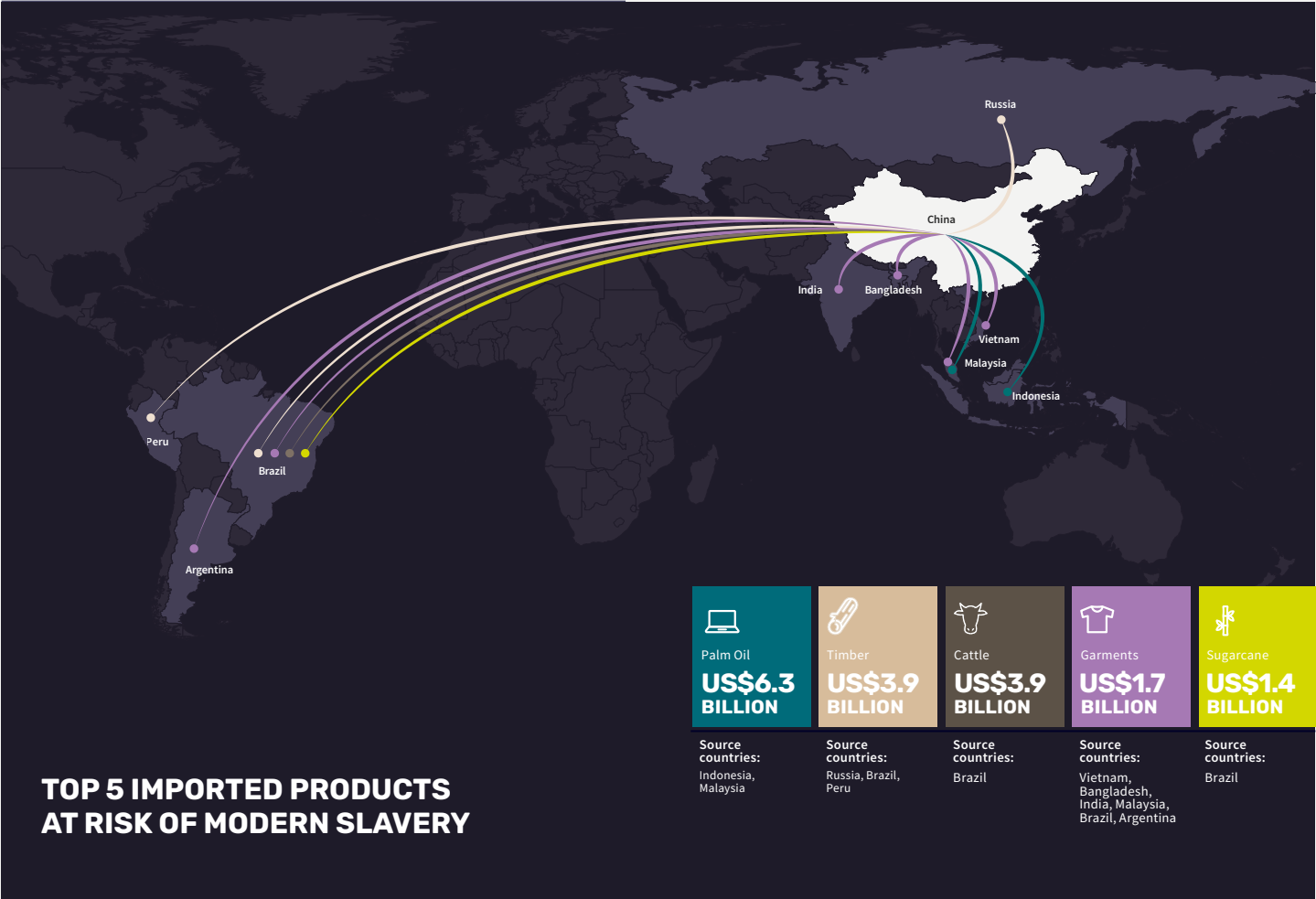
Further, a growing body of evidence suggests Uyghur women are coerced by the government into marriages with Han Chinese.<sup>58</sup> Since 2014, the CCP has offered economic incentives, and more recently, circulated films to encourage Uyghur-Han marriages, proclaiming the need for greater unity an “ethnic fusion.”<sup>59</sup> In reality, Uyghurs reportedly have no choice; they may be offered the release of a family member from detention if they marry, or face detention themselves if they refuse.<sup>60</sup>

### Organ trafficking

In 2019, an Independent Tribunal into Forced Organ Harvesting from Prisoners of Conscience in China concluded that practitioners of Falun Gong – a persecuted traditional spiritual practice – were used for forced organ harvesting in China and there is no evidence the practice has ceased.<sup>61</sup> A considerable amount of direct evidence was considered in the judgement, including witness accounts of live organ harvesting following lethal injection.<sup>62</sup> Motivations are thought to include financial profit, development of organ transplant skills, and the suppression of Falun Gong.<sup>63</sup>

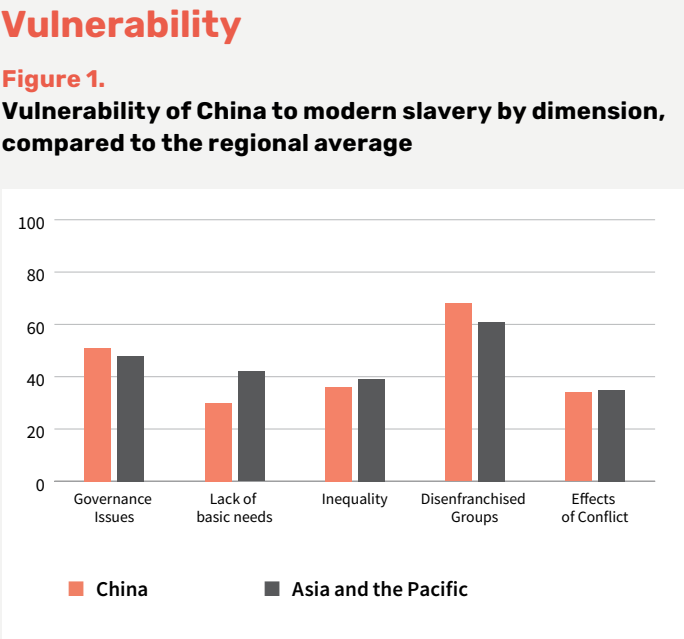
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**Imported products at risk of modern slavery**

China is not only affected by modern slavery within its borders: as one of the world’s largest economies, China – like other G20 countries – is exposed to the risk of modern slavery through the products it imports. Nearly two-thirds of all forced labour cases are linked to global supply chains, with workers exploited across a wide range of sectors and at every stage of the supply chain. Most forced labour occurs in the lowest tiers of supply chains; that is, in the extraction of raw materials and in production stages. Given the G20’s level of influence in the global economy, it is critical to examine their imports at risk of forced labour and efforts to address this risk. China imports US\$17.2 billion products at-risk of being made using forced labour annually. Table 1 below highlights the top five most valuable products (according to US\$ value per annum) imported by China that are at risk of being produced under conditions of modern slavery.



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Vulnerability to modern slavery in China largely derives from harmful and discriminatory government practices including state-imposed forced labour, organ harvesting, and forced marriage, which predominantly affect religious and ethnic groups. This is reflected by higher vulnerability scores for disenfranchised groups and governance issues.

Forced labour of Uyghur peoples has been aided by a steady campaign to amass control in the Uyghur Region, involving mass surveillance,<sup>64</sup> leveraging global terrorist threats to justify indoctrination on the grounds of religious extremism,<sup>65</sup> and the use of economic incentives to shift the demography of the Uyghur Region in favour of Han Chinese.<sup>66</sup> A 2020 investigation found that forced birth control has become systematic in the far west of the Uyghur Region.<sup>67</sup> The US government and several parliaments have stated that China's treatment of Uyghur peoples amounts to genocide.<sup>68</sup>

Mass surveillance and internment of Uyghurs is facilitated in several ways, including the assignment of Chinese cadres to live in Uyghur households,<sup>69</sup> and a mobile app used by authorities to detect behaviour that allegedly deviates from the norm, such as a person using a mobile phone other than their own.<sup>70</sup> Punishment varies from confinement in one's registered residence, to re-education or prison detention.<sup>71</sup> After a period of internment, detainees may be transferred into forced labour.<sup>72</sup> Uyghur children, according to reports, are forcibly removed from their homes and placed in government-run institutions,<sup>73</sup> in contravention with international standards,<sup>74</sup> and may experience increased vulnerability to modern slavery due to family separation.<sup>75</sup>

Internal migrant workers are also particularly vulnerable to exploitation in China. Unable to find work in their hometowns, rural populations migrate to urban areas such as Guangdong and Shanghai to take up low-paid jobs,<sup>76</sup> becoming part of China's "floating population" of around 376 million.<sup>77</sup> Compared to urban residents, internal migrants typically lack equal access to social benefits under the hukou (household registration) system, which restricts the provision of social benefits to citizens' registered residence.<sup>78</sup> Despite some reforms to the system, rural migrants without local registration are denied access to public services, making it more difficult for them to make a decent living, particularly during the pandemic, widening social inequality.<sup>79</sup>

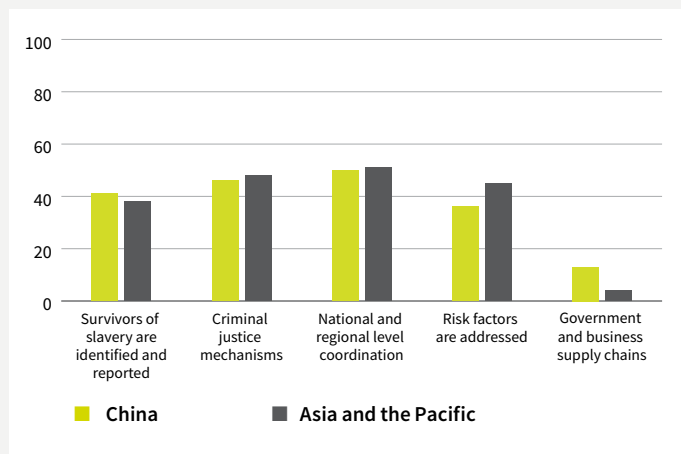
A flow-on effect of the large-scale migration of rural Chinese is the "left-behind" children, defined as those under 16 years of age whose parents are both migrant workers.<sup>80</sup> These children face barriers to education, increased risk of poverty, and psychological stress due to family separation.<sup>81</sup> Reports suggest these children may be at higher risk of trafficking for forced labour, forced begging, and CSEC.<sup>82</sup>

Gender inequality is also a significant driver of vulnerability; patriarchal attitudes have driven a pronounced gender imbalance in China under the country's historical one child policy,<sup>83</sup> with the resulting bride shortage fuelling forced marriages of foreign women to Chinese men. Women and girls from across the region are trafficked to China, often deceived with false promises of work and improved opportunity.<sup>84</sup>

## Government response

Figure 2.

**Government of China's responses to modern slavery by milestone, compared with the regional average**



China's government response to modern slavery received a rating of 42 per cent, ranking in the bottom half of 32 countries assessed in the region. While the government takes some measures to respond to modern slavery among the general population, its overall response is belied by the active use of state-imposed forced labour against certain groups, which it continues to deny.

The government has taken some steps to identify and assist survivors, for example, through supporting trafficking identification training for police, Ministry of Public Security officials,<sup>85</sup> social workers, and teachers.<sup>86</sup> Mechanisms for the public to report trafficking<sup>87</sup> and labour grievances<sup>88</sup> also exist, however it is unclear how operational these are. Further, there are no national guidelines available for first responders to identify modern slavery, and no national referral mechanism to ensure survivors receive services. While there are shelters, they do not offer specialised support and are reportedly difficult for males to access.<sup>89</sup> Victims may also be deterred from seeking help given the possibility that they might be punished for crimes they were forced to commit.<sup>90</sup> Protection from criminalisation is not enshrined in law, and information indicates that victims of sex trafficking were arrested during the reporting period.<sup>91</sup>

There are several other critical gaps in the legal framework that weaken China's criminal justice response. China has not criminalised slavery, CSEC, or human trafficking in line with international standards – trafficking of women and children up to the age of 14 is criminalised under Article 240 of the Criminal Law, however this does not extend to males over the age of 14.<sup>92</sup> Forced labour is a criminal offense under section 244 of the Criminal Law<sup>93</sup> and China is one of ten countries in the region to criminalise forced marriage.<sup>94</sup> Despite this, women who escaped and reported their situation to police were, in some cases, forcibly returned to their abuser.<sup>95</sup> The denial of modern slavery crimes in place of active enforcement of the law, allowing perpetrators to operate with impunity, remains a serious concern. During the reporting period,

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the government ratified the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 and Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957, which will enter into force in August 2023. Yet concerns have been raised over the unlikely implementation of the conventions.<sup>96</sup>

China demonstrated efforts to tackle modern slavery through coordination at the national and regional level, including by adopting a new national action plan for 2021 to 2030,<sup>97</sup> participating in joint anti-trafficking investigations with other countries,<sup>98</sup> and maintaining bilateral agreements to cooperate on modern slavery issues.<sup>99</sup> China has also taken action to eliminate forced labour from the economy: the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS) implements a grading system that measures employers' compliance with labour regulations. Employer misconduct (such as non-payment of wages or forced overtime) is publicised and offenders are subject to more frequent labour inspections.<sup>100</sup>

While a positive development, the system is insufficient to prevent modern slavery in the Chinese economy. Chinese law does not prohibit charging of recruitment fees to employees, nor does it explicitly govern collective bargaining procedures.<sup>101</sup> Freedom of assembly is heavily suppressed in practice, with only one legal labour union in existence,<sup>102</sup> meaning modern slavery is more likely to go unpunished. China has also continued to import coal from North Korea,<sup>103</sup> where the use of forced labour is widely known,<sup>104</sup> despite international sanctions against this trade.<sup>105</sup> Most critically, the CCP is actively perpetrating forced labour against Uyghur and other Turkic and Muslim majority peoples, Tibetans, and those in prison – the goods produced through this abuse enter global supply chains. State-imposed forced labour fundamentally undermines the government's response to modern slavery.



**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

- Finalise and distribute national identification guidelines for all first responders, and establish a national referral mechanism to ensure all victims are referred to services and no victims are detained or deported.
- Ensure survivor support services, including shelters, crisis support centres, and community-based protection, cover all populations – including males – and make specialised support available for children.

2

### Criminal justice mechanisms

- Amend article 240 of the Criminal Law to include men and boys over the age of 14 as possible victims of human trafficking, in line with international standards.
- 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.

3

### Risk factors are addressed

- Immediately end the forced marriage of Uyghurs and other Turkic majority peoples, and the state-imposed forced labour of Uyghurs and other Turkic and Muslim majority peoples, Tibetans, and prisoners by repealing legislation and criminalising practices that allow forced marriage and state-imposed forced labour to occur.
- Reform the hukou system to ensure all rural migrants are afforded equal access to social welfare including education, medical services, and social insurance.
- Introduce and enforce legislation to prohibit charging of recruitment fees to employees.
- Pass legislation stipulating collective bargaining procedures, strengthen protections for freedom of association and expression, and ensure that labour inspections are regularly conducted across all sectors, including the informal sector.
- Prosecute government officials for corruption and complicity in modern slavery cases.

4

### Government and business supply chains

- Introduce mandatory human rights due diligence to stop governments and businesses sourcing goods or services linked to modern slavery.

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### Endnotes

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