

Modern slavery in Saudi Arabia

Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Study



KEY STATS

Population (2021) 34,814,000

GDP per capita, PPP (Current intl \$) \$46,778

21.3

PREVALENCE OF
MODERN SLAVERY
per 1,000 people

740,000

ESTIMATED NUMBER
OF PEOPLE LIVING IN
MODERN SLAVERY

53/100

VULNERABILITY TO
MODERN SLAVERY

49/100

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE
TO MODERN SLAVERY



Saudi Arabia

Estimated prevalence
of modern slavery across
the Arab States



Overview

Saudi Arabia has the highest prevalence of modern slavery of all countries in the Arab States region. Migrant workers, who comprise the majority of the workforce,¹ are particularly vulnerable under the kafala system, a restrictive work permit system that ties migrant workers to their employer.² The system embeds a steep power imbalance between employers and employees by granting employers substantial control over workers' lives,³ with risks exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Despite this, Saudi Arabia is also among countries taking the most action to address modern slavery in the region. Since the 2018 Global Slavery Index, the government has improved efforts to support survivors, including by launching a National Referral Mechanism,⁵ and address risk factors, by implementing reforms to the kafala system,⁶ although these reforms have been insufficient to dismantle the system entirely. Opportunities for further action include strengthening protections for migrant workers and eradicating modern slavery from the economy.

Prevalence

The 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI) estimates that on any given day in 2021, there were 740,000 individuals living in modern slavery in Saudi Arabia. This equates to a prevalence of 21.3 people in modern slavery for every thousand people in the country. Saudi Arabia has the highest prevalence of 11 countries in the Arab States region, and has the fourth highest prevalence out of 160 countries globally.

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**Riyadh, Saudi Arabia,
June 2022.**

Foreign labourers work at a construction site amid scorching heat in the Saudi capital. In this part of the world, the high summer temperatures are unbearable even in the shade. Across the globe, rising temperatures are putting more and more workers at risk of harm via heat stress. For employers with their eyes on the bottom line, heat stress usually means lower labour productivity. Photo credit: FAYEZ NURELDINE/AFP via Getty Images

Forced labour

Forced labour exploitation

In 2021, the government identified 505 potential victims of trafficking related to forced labour cases, and 616 related to forced begging and slavery-like practices.⁷ Migrant workers comprise three quarters of the employed population in Saudi Arabia,⁸ and are particularly vulnerable to forced labour under the kafala system, a restrictive work permit system present in Gulf countries, Jordan, and Lebanon that ties migrant workers to their employer.⁹ Exploitation under the system in Saudi Arabia has been reported in domestic work,¹⁰ hospitality,¹¹ agriculture,¹² and construction,¹³ for example.

Migrant domestic workers employed in Saudi Arabia have experienced physical, mental, and sexual abuse, excessive hours, withholding of wages, passport retention, and denial of food, rest, and medical care by employers in private homes and by recruitment agencies.¹⁴ In 2021, reports emerged of Vietnamese migrant workers being exploited in domestic servitude by recruiters, Saudi Arabian employers, and Vietnamese embassy officials; a labour attaché in Saudi Arabia allegedly removed a number of Vietnamese migrants who had been exploited from a shelter, on promises of repatriation, but instead forced them into work with a new employer.¹⁵ Further, a 2019 investigation found that migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia were bought and sold via Instagram and other social media applications.¹⁶

Migrant workers are often irregularly recruited into the agricultural sector, facing harsh working conditions in farm work and shepherding.¹⁷ Some migrate to Saudi Arabia on promises of work in other sectors, only to have their passports confiscated and be forced to work on Saudi farms without pay.¹⁸ Exploitation in the form of forced begging has also been noted to occur in Saudi Arabia, with women and children (particularly unaccompanied migrant children) most vulnerable.¹⁹

Forced commercial sexual exploitation of adults and children

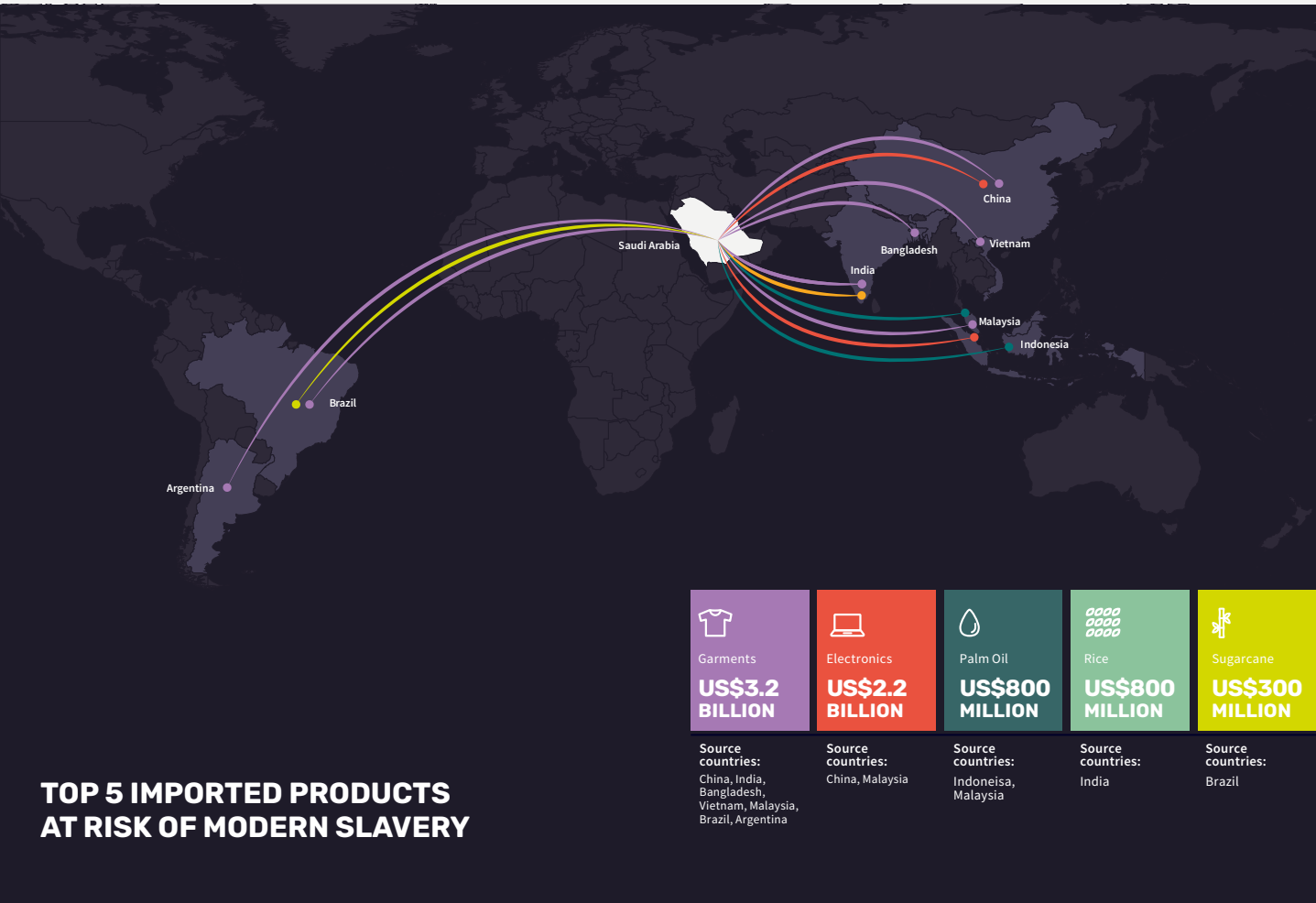
Although recent information on the forced sexual exploitation of adults and children in Saudi Arabia is limited, in 2021, the government identified 54 potential victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation.²⁰ In this same period, the government investigated 18 trafficking cases related to sexual exploitation, prosecuted six individuals, and convicted 19 offenders for trafficking for sexual exploitation.²¹ Demographic information of victims and offenders was not reported. In the past, reports have emerged of Saudi citizens engaging in temporary marriages abroad, which involved sexual relations with children before abandoning them.²²

Forced marriage

Recent information on forced and child marriage in Saudi Arabia is also limited, however a 2017 population survey indicated that over 16,000 children aged 15 to 19 in Saudi Arabia were first married under the age of 18.²³ According to local media, over 400 cases of child marriage were referred by the Ministry of Justice to family protection centres in the Eastern Region in the first quarter of 2021 alone.²⁴ Prior information suggests that women living in forced marriages in Saudi Arabia have faced legal difficulties in annulling the marriage due to the high burden of proof required to show that they did not consent to the marriage.²⁵

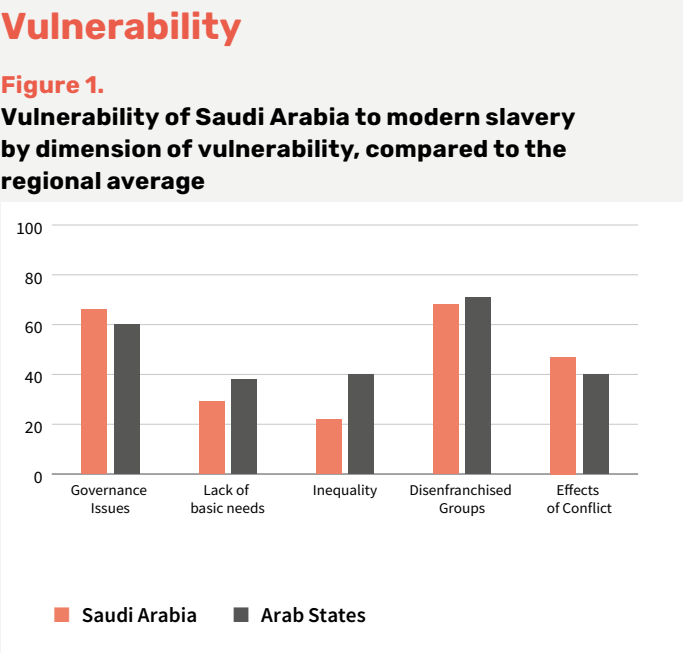
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Imported products at risk of modern slavery

Saudi Arabia is not only affected by modern slavery within its borders: as one of the world’s largest economies, Saudi Arabia – 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.²⁶ 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. Saudi Arabia imports US\$7.4 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 Saudi Arabia that are at risk of being produced under conditions of modern slavery.



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Saudi Arabia received an overall vulnerability score of 53 per cent, on par with the regional average for the Arab States (56 per cent). Modern slavery persists in the country as a result of systemic discrimination towards migrants and minority groups. Saudi Arabia is home to 11 million migrant workers,²⁷ largely from South and Southeast Asia and East Africa, who migrate for jobs in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and domestic services. These workers are vulnerable to forced labour under the kafala system:²⁸ a set of laws and policies that delegate responsibility for migrant workers to employers, including control over their ability to reside in, work, and exit the country.²⁹ The system exacerbates the employer-worker power imbalance and prevents migrant workers from reporting abuse or exploitation.³⁰

Under the kafala system, employers and recruiters threaten migrant workers with the potential loss of their visa to keep them in poor working conditions.³¹ Some migrant workers in Saudi Arabia are forced to continue working past the end of their contracts when their employers refuse to grant exit permission or pay the exit fee.³² Workers who do leave risk being reported for the crime of absconding,³³ leaving them undocumented and vulnerable to arrest, detention – often for extended periods of time in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions³⁴ – and deportation from Saudi Arabia.³⁵

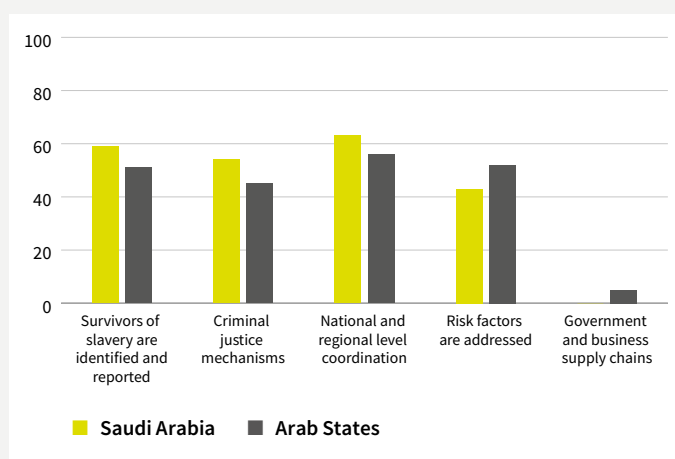
Vulnerability of migrants is compounded by workforce nationalisation efforts – that is, efforts to increase the proportion of nationals employed – in line with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.³⁶ The Nitaqat programme, for example, limits the number of foreign workers that can be employed in certain sectors.³⁷ The recent introduction of a 25 per cent cap on the proportion of Yemeni nationals that could be employed by businesses led to widespread terminations.³⁸ Laid-off Yemeni workers were left in precarious situations and had to find another employer to sponsor their stay, or risk deportation.³⁹

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated vulnerability. Migrant workers were excluded from financial support measures introduced by the government following the onset of the pandemic.⁴⁰ In April 2020, the government issued a Ministerial Resolution that enabled employers to reduce an employees' working hours and salary.⁴¹ Companies allegedly used the impacts of the pandemic and associated regulatory changes to justify non-payment of wages to migrant workers. Migrants have faced physical abuse when asking for their wages, longer hours imposed, delays in payment of wages or only receiving part of their salaries, or being made to sign contracts they didn't understand.⁴² The vulnerability faced by female domestic workers due to the isolated nature of work was also magnified by the pandemic, as curfews created barriers to accessing assistance from police stations, hospitals, and NGOs.⁴³

Government response

Figure 2.

Response of the government of Saudi Arabia to modern slavery by government response milestone, compared with the regional average



Saudi Arabia is among countries taking the most action to respond to modern slavery in the Arab States region, however this performance did not translate at the global level, with no Arab States countries demonstrating among the strongest responses globally.

Since the 2018 GSI, Saudi Arabia has made notable improvements in its efforts to support survivors to exit and remain out of slavery. For example, Saudi Arabia launched an awareness campaign on how to identify and report modern slavery,⁴⁴ and in March 2020, launched a new National Referral Mechanism to handle and refer trafficking cases.⁴⁵ Saudi Arabia also joined Bahrain as the only other country in the region to distribute national victim identification guidelines to all first responders.⁴⁶ However, government shelters to support survivors reportedly only accept female domestic workers, and trafficking victims may be left at embassies rather than referred to shelters.⁴⁷ In 2021, all 105 victims identified and referred to services by NGOs were female.⁴⁸ Reports indicate some victims were detained and deported for immigration violations, rather than being identified and supported.⁴⁹

Saudi Arabia has effectively criminalised human trafficking under the 2009 anti-trafficking law. However, under Article 3 of the law, offenders may receive only a fine for trafficking crimes,⁵⁰ which is an insufficient penalty to deter future offenders. In May 2021, Saudi Arabia ratified the ILO Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930⁵¹ – the only country in the region to do so. However, the government has not effectively criminalised other forms of modern slavery in line with international standards, including slavery, forced labour, commercial sexual exploitation of children, and forced marriage. In 2019, Saudi Arabia moved to establish a minimum age of marriage at 18, however loopholes in the law mean girls between ages 15 and 17 can still marry under certain circumstances.⁵² Personal Status Law in Saudi Arabia also enables children even younger to marry, authorising courts to let children marry if they have reached puberty.⁵³

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Saudi Arabia performed relatively well in terms of coordinating the response at the national and regional level. The National Committee to Combat Trafficking in Persons is responsible for coordinating the country's anti-trafficking response,⁵⁴ and a national action plan on human trafficking has been adopted for the period 2021-2023,⁵⁵ however there is no evidence to suggest the implementation of the plan is fully funded. The government also made efforts to coordinate the response to modern slavery across the region, hosting the third Government Forum against Trafficking in Persons in the Middle East in November 2021. The forum focused on national and international coordination efforts to respond to trafficking crimes throughout the pandemic.⁵⁶

Despite these efforts, significant risk factors remain unaddressed. Since the 2018 GSI, Saudi Arabia adopted reforms to the kafala system, yet these were insufficient to dismantle the system entirely. The 2021 Labour Reform Initiative allows workers to change jobs or leave the country without employer consent,⁵⁷ however workers must complete one year of their contract and migrant domestic workers, among others, are excluded from this protection.⁵⁸ Domestic workers can transfer jobs in some cases such as abuse,⁵⁹ yet even in such cases, employers may file absconding reports, leaving workers vulnerable to arrest and deportation.⁶⁰ Domestic workers continue to be excluded from most labour law protections under Saudi legislation.⁶¹

Further, despite importing US\$7.4 billion worth of at-risk products per annum, and having significant influence in the global economy as part of the G20, Saudi Arabia has not made efforts to eradicate modern slavery from government and business supply chains, for example, through introducing laws or policies that require businesses to report on their actions to implement risk minimisation policies or put in place mandatory human rights due diligence legislation.



THE GLOBAL SLAVERY INDEX 2023

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

 WALK FREE



Recommendations

1

Survivors identified and supported

- Ensure support services are available for all survivors of modern slavery — women, men, and children — and that these support services are appropriately resourced.

2

Criminal justice mechanisms

- Criminalise slavery, forced labour, and commercial sexual exploitation of children in line with international standards, and ensure proportionate penalties for all modern slavery crimes, including human trafficking.
- Enshrine a suite of trauma-informed and survivor-centered measures in legislation to strengthen protections against forced and child marriage, including criminalising the act of marrying someone who does not consent, regardless of their age, and establishing civil protections that protect the individual from marriage without having to penalise the perpetrators, who are often family members.

3

National and regional level coordination

- Allocate dedicated funds to the implementation of the national action plan on human trafficking.

4

Risk factors are addressed

- Dismantle kafala by expanding coverage of national labour laws to include domestic workers and ensure migrant workers can freely enter, reside, and exit the country, and leave or transfer jobs without employer consent. Abolish provisions in the law that criminalise absconding and enforce measures to discourage employers from filing false allegations against workers.
- Address underlying discriminatory and xenophobic attitudes towards migrant workers that increase their vulnerability to modern slavery across all sectors.
- Ensure the minimum legal age of marriage is set at 18 years of age without exception, including in customary and religious laws.

5

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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