

Modern slavery in Türkiye

Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Study



KEY STATS

Population (2021) 84,339,000

GDP per capita, PPP (Current intl \$) \$27,235

15.6

PREVALENCE OF
MODERN SLAVERY
per 1,000 people

1,320,000

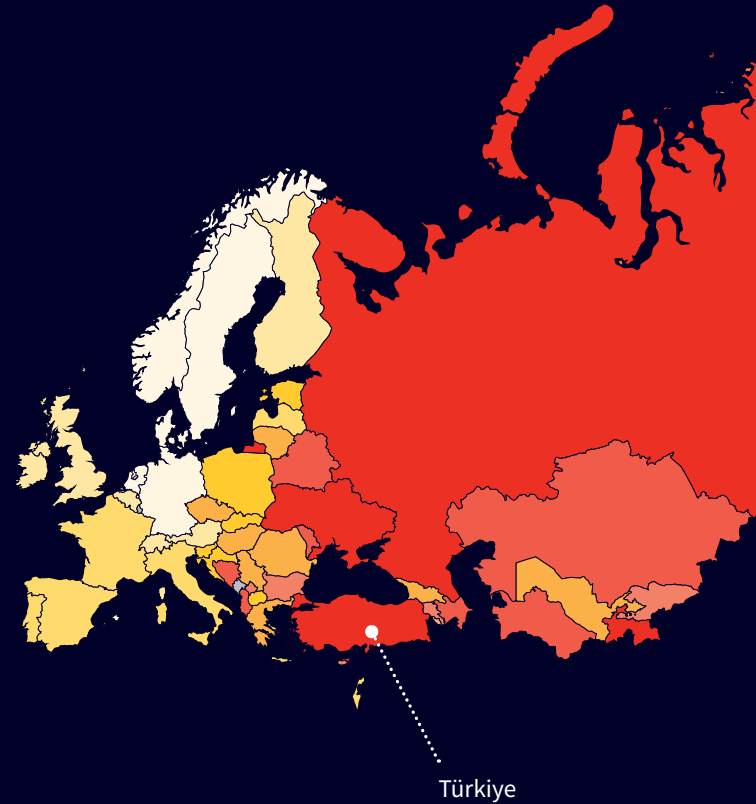
ESTIMATED NUMBER
OF PEOPLE LIVING IN
MODERN SLAVERY

51/100

VULNERABILITY TO
MODERN SLAVERY

49/100

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE
TO MODERN SLAVERY



Estimated prevalence
of modern slavery across
Europe and Central Asia



Overview

Türkiye has the highest prevalence of modern slavery in Europe and Central Asia. It is also among countries taking the least action to respond to modern slavery in the region. The government has taken some positive steps since the 2018 Global Slavery Index, including by assigning the Human Rights and Equality Institution (HREI) to independently monitor its response to human trafficking. However, significant gaps in the response remain: the national action plan has not been updated since 2009, and efforts to identify victims among vulnerable populations such as refugees and the LGBTQI+ community are insufficient, resulting in some foreign victims being detained and deported. Vulnerability to modern slavery is primarily driven by discrimination towards these minority groups, as well as the effects of conflicts (particularly in Syria), the deterioration of women's rights and protections amid growing political polarisation, and the repression of human rights defenders and political opponents.

Prevalence

The 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI) estimates that on any given day in 2021, there were 1.3 million individuals living in modern slavery in Türkiye. This equates to a prevalence of 15.6 people in modern slavery for every thousand people in the country. Türkiye has the highest prevalence of modern slavery out of 47 countries assessed in Europe and Central Asia, and is among countries with the highest prevalence globally (5 out of 160). It also has the second highest estimated total number of people living in modern slavery in the region, and falls within the top ten globally. This estimate does not include figures on the use of children in armed conflict, or human trafficking for the purpose of organ removal, which evidence indicates does occur in Türkiye.¹

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Forced labour

Forced labour exploitation

In 2021, 133 victims of forced labour were identified in Türkiye.² Forced labour has been reported in several sectors, including agriculture, domestic service, garments, textiles, and construction, with migrant workers and refugees particularly at risk.³ For example, a 2022 report that interviewed 68 Afghans who fled their homes after the Taliban seized control in August 2021, found that some subsequently experienced exploitation in Türkiye, including underpayment and abuse in textile factories and dishwashing work.⁴ A 2018–2020 survey of 43 irregular Afghan migrants across five cities found that workers commonly experienced wage withholding in construction, hospitality and shepherding.⁵ One respondent living in Ankara reported working without pay for seven months in a supermarket.⁶

Syrian refugees in Türkiye are also at particular risk of exploitation, including in the garments sector, which is the third largest in the EU and sixth largest in the world in terms of its share of exports.⁷ The sector relies heavily on low-paid labour, much of which is outsourced to sub-contracting factories that operate with limited oversight.⁸ At least 3,000 Syrian refugees who have been granted work permits in Türkiye are formally employed in the sector, however up to 400,000 more are estimated to be informally employed, alongside migrants from other countries such as Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.⁹ These workers are exposed to underpayment, discrimination, excessive hours, and threat of termination for non-compliance.¹⁰ Instances of forced criminality, including drug trafficking, have also been reported among young Syrian refugees.¹¹

Forced commercial sexual exploitation of adults

Syrian women and girls are reportedly targeted by criminal groups for forced commercial sexual exploitation in Şanlıurfa, which shares a border with Syria. Widows, in particular, are targeted due to perceptions that they are less protected. This occurs alongside recruitment for other illicit activities such as drug trafficking across the border.¹² Trafficking of women from within refugee camps in Şanlıurfa for sexual exploitation by local men has also been reported, and is facilitated by camp authorities.¹³ Further, anecdotal reports note that some Yazidi women and children – among the estimated 3,000 who remain missing after being abducted by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in 2014¹⁴ – are still enslaved in Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq.¹⁵

Beyond risks and experiences of forced commercial sexual exploitation among the Syrian refugee population, information is limited, although the LGBTQI+ community in Türkiye are also reported to be at greater risk.¹⁶ In 2021, the government identified 201 victims of sex trafficking in Türkiye.¹⁷

Commercial sexual exploitation of children

NGOs suggest that the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Türkiye is likely to be underreported.¹⁸ In 2021, the government identified 120 child victims of trafficking, although the form of exploitation was not specified.¹⁹ Staff have been reported to facilitate commercial sexual exploitation of Syrian children within refugee camps in Şanlıurfa.²⁰ A lack of awareness of risks of sexual exploitation among boys, and an associated absence of protection mechanisms, reportedly places them at risk of exploitation in the camps, as well as in the workplace and public settings.²¹

Forced marriage

There is no official data on the prevalence of forced marriage in Türkiye, however according to the 2018 Demographic and Health Survey, 15 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 were married as children.²² This rate is significantly higher among Syrian women in this age bracket, with 45 per cent married under the age of 18, including 9 per cent under the age of 15.²³ Refugee families who arrive in Türkiye, often in situations of poverty after fleeing conflict in Syria, may force their daughters into marriage with Turkish men as a means of protection and easing financial strain.²⁴ Some child marriages, particularly in lower-income and rural regions, take place in unofficial religious ceremonies (imam nikahı), which are not recognised by the government and do not afford women equal rights in divorce, increasing their risk of abuse and mistreatment within the marriage.²⁵

Organ trafficking

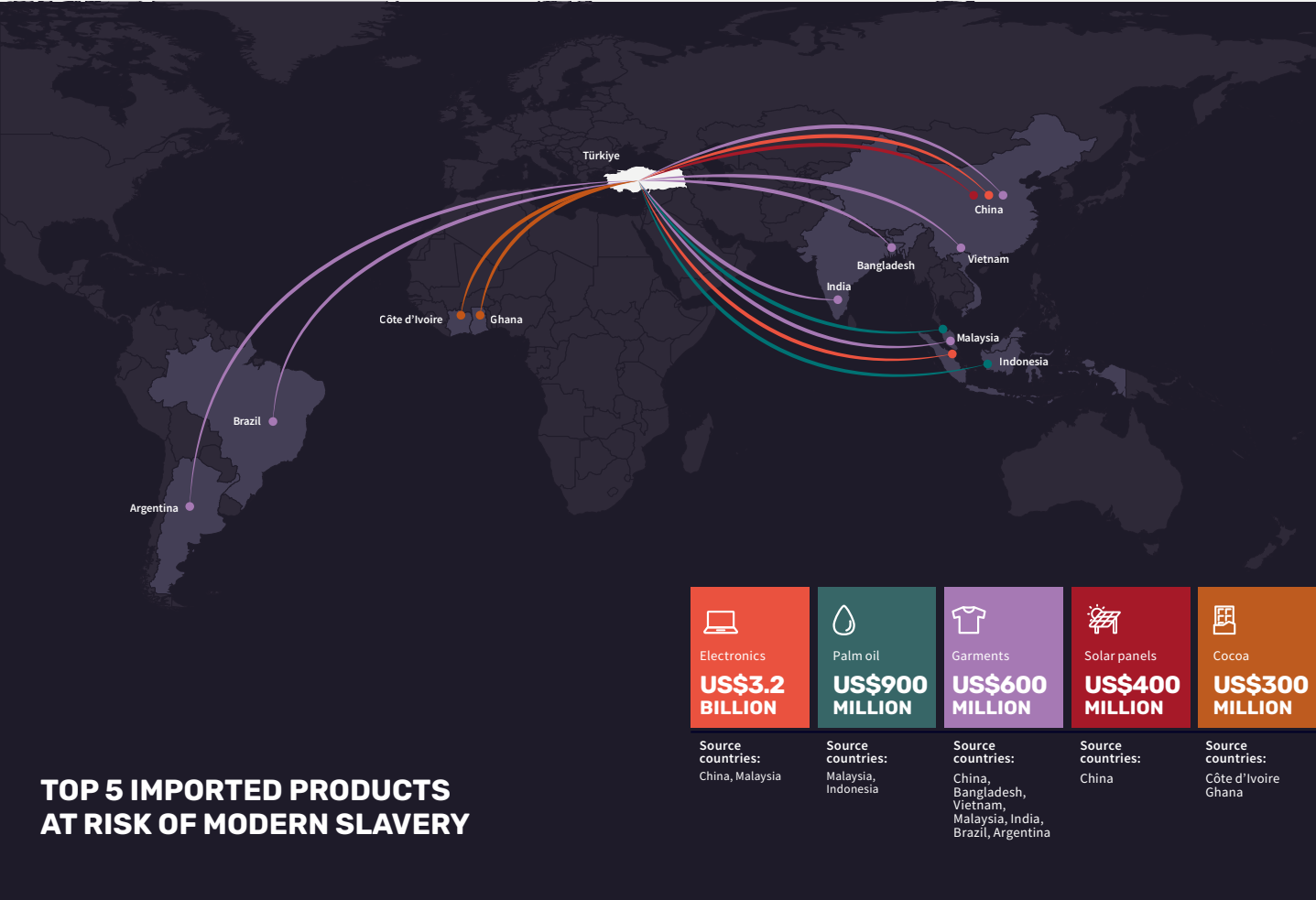
While no official statistics on organ trafficking in Türkiye are available, anecdotal evidence suggests that trafficking for organ removal occurs, targeting refugees and migrants. In 2022, Interpol dismantled a suspected organ trafficking ring involving Indonesian victims exploited in Türkiye.²⁶ Syrians in Türkiye have also reportedly resorted to selling their organs to survive after being contacted through a Facebook group and offered up to US\$10,000. This represented up to 30 times the monthly wage of one victim interviewed, but in reality, he was only paid US\$500.²⁷

Use of children in armed conflict

Although not included in our prevalence estimate, the recruitment of children by non-state armed groups has been documented in Türkiye. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – a group that has been designated as a terrorist organisation by both the United States and the European Union – has reportedly engaged in the recruitment of child soldiers, including by forcibly abducting them.²⁸ Some Turkish women have protested since 2019 for the return of their children who were abducted by the PKK.²⁹ In 2021, the government supported reintegration of 14 children recruited by the group.³⁰

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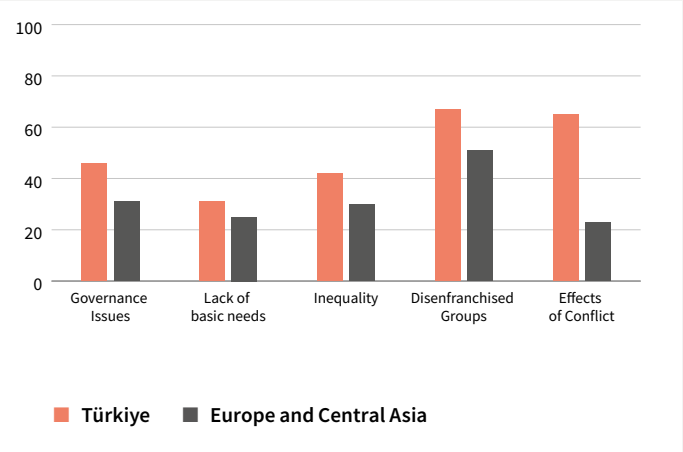


Imported products at risk of modern slavery

Türkiye is not only affected by modern slavery within its borders: as one of the world’s largest economies, Türkiye – 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.³¹ 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. Türkiye imports US\$5.3 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 Türkiye that are at risk of being produced under conditions of modern slavery.

Vulnerability

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



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Duzce, Türkiye, April 2019.
Heavy rains and landslides cause significant damage to homes and community infrastructure, and have even led to the disappearance of three adults and four children. Upheaval caused by increasingly erratic and volatile weather events leads some to seek employment opportunities elsewhere, increasing their risk of modern slavery. Photo credit: Ibrahim Yozoglu/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

Türkiye is among the most vulnerable countries to modern slavery in Europe and Central Asia. Vulnerability is largely driven by the flow-on effects of conflict, including the ongoing Syrian conflict, and is compounded by poverty, discrimination towards migrants and minority groups, and a deterioration of women's rights and protections in recent years.

For nine consecutive years, Türkiye has hosted the largest refugee population in the world.³² Nearly four million refugees and asylum seekers reside in the country,³³ primarily from Syria (3.65 million), of whom nearly half are children,³⁴ as well as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran.³⁵ Around 50 per cent of Syrian refugees in Türkiye are living in poverty,³⁶ increasing their vulnerability to modern slavery. For example, child marriage may be used as a means to gain protection, ease financial strain on families, and receive payment of bride price, and women and children may be coerced into forced sexual exploitation by criminal groups.³⁷

Syrians are eligible for a permit to work in Türkiye under the Temporary Protection Regulation,³⁸ however, the application process is lengthy and challenging as the job location must match the worker's registered city of residence.³⁹ Permit holders also lose formal financial benefits,⁴⁰ and awareness of the permit is reportedly low, as indicated by interviews with informal workers in the garments sector. According to respondents, some employers also refused permits due to quotas imposed for Syrian workers.⁴¹ In a survey of more than 300 private sector employers, 37 per cent

responded that they refused to employ Syrians at all.⁴² Lower levels of literacy and education due to disruptions to formal learning in Syria, barriers to education in Türkiye, and limited local language skills may further limit access to permits and expose Syrians to risk of exploitation in the informal workforce.⁴³

The vast majority of Syrians are employed informally,⁴⁴ including many children (mostly boys),⁴⁵ and are likely to be paid less than the minimum wage and their Turkish counterparts, while being subject to constant threat of termination and deportation.⁴⁶ Syrian women have less access to the labour market, and are paid even less than Syrian men.⁴⁷ In the garments sector, the purchasing practices of international brands – including pricing pressures, unpredictability, and unrealistic turnaround times – drive further risk, leading to excessive overtime and wage cuts.⁴⁸ The situation reportedly worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, with reports of job and income loss as well as increased household debt.⁴⁹ Refugees have faced rising xenophobia and violence in recent years.⁵⁰

Women and girls and marginalised groups, including migrants and the LGBTQI+ community, have also experienced heightened vulnerability due to discrimination, which has manifested in the curtailing of women's rights, use of force by authorities, and a deterioration in democratic processes.⁵¹ In 2022, the government operated with minimal transparency and continued to persecute human rights defenders, media, and political opponents, often using unfounded terrorism claims to perform arrests.⁵²

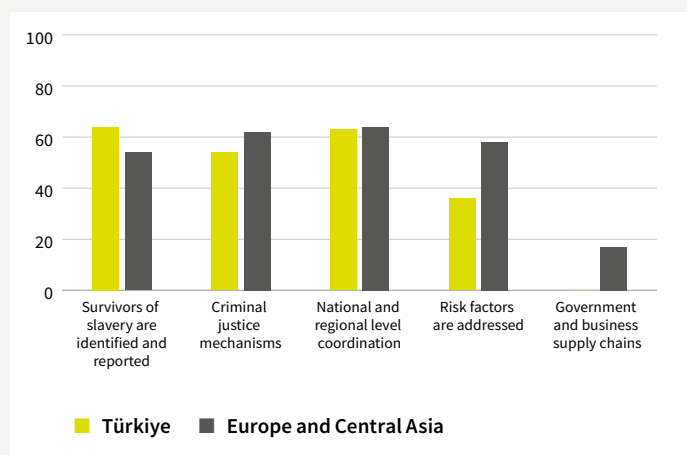
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The government also detained hundreds of participants in Pride marches,⁵³ and pursued arrests and legal action against LGBTQI+ activists, with state-run media boycotting LGBTQI+ friendly brands.⁵⁴ In 2022, Türkiye withdrew from the Istanbul Convention – a Council of Europe treaty to combat violence against women⁵⁵ – citing that it was being used to “normalise homosexuality” in contravention with Türkiye’s “social and family values.”⁵⁶ The social and economic exclusion experienced by the LGBTQI+ community may drive increased vulnerability. The worsening situation reportedly led LGBTQI+ people impacted by a February 2023 earthquake to avoid accessing services due to fears for their safety and the higher priority assigned to “traditional” families by government agencies and emergency responders.⁵⁷ Around 40 per cent of women in Türkiye have experienced domestic violence, and a 65 and 14 per cent increase in domestic violence cases and femicides respectively were reported between 2020 and 2021.⁵⁸ Attempts have also been made in recent years to weaken protections against forced marriage, for example, through proposing amnesty for perpetrators of rape who marry their victims.⁵⁹

Government response

Figure 2.
Response of the government of Türkiye to modern slavery by government response milestone, compared with the regional average



Türkiye is among countries taking the least action to respond to modern slavery in Europe and Central Asia, ranking within the bottom quarter of 52 countries assessed. The government has taken steps to improve coordination and monitoring of its response to modern slavery, however no action has been taken to address modern slavery in supply chains, and several risk factors remain unaddressed. While Türkiye has taken on great responsibility in hosting the largest refugee population,⁶⁰ this population faces significant risk.

The government demonstrated the most action to identify and support survivors, compared to its efforts in other aspects of the response to modern slavery. The Directorate General for Migration Management (YIMER) operates a free, 24 hour, multilingual hotline to receive reports of human trafficking,⁶¹ and services are available for victims, including mental and physical health care, and specialised shelters operated by the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) and the Ministry of Family and Social Services (MOFSS).⁶² Yet, efforts to screen and identify victims among vulnerable populations are reportedly insufficient and under-resourced, and there is concerning evidence some victims were detained and deported during the reporting period.⁶³

There are also critical gaps in Türkiye’s criminal justice response to modern slavery: several forms of modern slavery are not criminalised in line with international standards, including slavery, CSEC, the use of children in armed conflict, and forced marriage, and exceptions to the minimum age of marriage at 18 exist, including with court approval or parental consent.⁶⁴ Further, there is no legislation to protect victims from being criminalised for illegal conduct that occurred while in conditions of modern slavery. However, foreign victims are entitled to a short-term visa to remain in the country, which is not dependent on participation in the court process.⁶⁵ The government has also ratified several international conventions related to the elimination of modern slavery, and criminalises human trafficking and forced labour under articles 80 and 177 of the Penal Code respectively.⁶⁶

Since the 2018 GSI, Türkiye has improved coordination of its response to modern slavery at the national level, including by designating the Human Rights and Equality Institution (HREI) to independently monitor its efforts.⁶⁷ The response is coordinated by the Coordination Board for Combating Trafficking, which includes civil society members,⁶⁸ however the national action plan to combat trafficking has not been updated since 2009.⁶⁹

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Gaps in international coordination led to some Syrians being forcibly repatriated without screening for signs of trafficking during the reporting period.⁷⁰ Several key risk factors also remain unaddressed: for example, labour inspectors are not specifically mandated to identify modern slavery and lack resources to operate effectively,⁷¹ which is concerning given risks present, particularly among the sizeable informal workforce. In addition, the out-of-school rate is higher among girls,⁷² limiting future prospects and entrenching their vulnerability to modern slavery.

Despite importing US\$5.3 billion worth of products at risk of being made with forced labour annually, and having significant influence in the global economy as part of the G20, Türkiye has not taken action to eliminate 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

WALK FREE

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



Recommendations

1

Survivors identified and supported

- Strengthen resources and capacity for all first responders to screen and identify victims of modern slavery among vulnerable populations, including the LGBTQI+ community, migrants, refugees, and children, to ensure that all victims are identified and supported, and none are detained or deported.

2

Criminal justice mechanisms

- Criminalise all forms of modern slavery in line with international standards, including slavery, commercial sexual exploitation of children, and use of children in armed conflict. Ensure that the right of survivors to not be treated as criminals for conduct that occurred while under the control of traffickers is enshrined in legislation.
- Remove all legal loopholes that allow marriage under the age of 18 to occur, criminalise forced marriage in line with international standards, and provide civil protections that allow survivors to choose which solution best suits their needs.

3

National and regional level coordination

- Update the 2009 national action plan against human trafficking and ensure all activities within the plan are fully funded and implemented.

4

Risk factors are addressed

- Increase access to education for girls and refugee children, and extend social assistance and benefits to refugees without conditions to help minimise risks of modern slavery. Such assistance may include facilitating accreditation of licenses for refugees, expanding employment opportunities, and providing free or subsidised childcare and free language classes to increase employability, foster integration, and reduce risks.
- Improve access to formal work by removing barriers to work permits for Syrians under temporary protection, including by raising awareness among employers and Syrians, and addressing pay disparities in the workforce.
- Cease forcible repatriation of refugees to countries where they face persecution.
- Regularly conduct labour inspections to identify modern slavery, including in high-risk sectors such as garments, agriculture, and construction.
- Address underlying discriminatory and xenophobic attitudes towards marginalised groups including migrants, refugees, women and girls, and the LGBTQI+ community that increase their vulnerability to modern slavery, and ensure that state policies serve to further integrate rather than target these communities.

5

Government and business supply chains

- Introduce legislation requiring the government and businesses to take steps to identify and address modern slavery in their supply chains, including mandatory human rights due diligence.

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Endnotes

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