

# Modern slavery in Turkmenistan

## Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Study



### KEY STATS

Population (2021) 6,031,000

GDP per capita, PPP (Current intl \$) \$15,628

# 11.9

PREVALENCE OF MODERN SLAVERY per 1,000 people

# 72,000

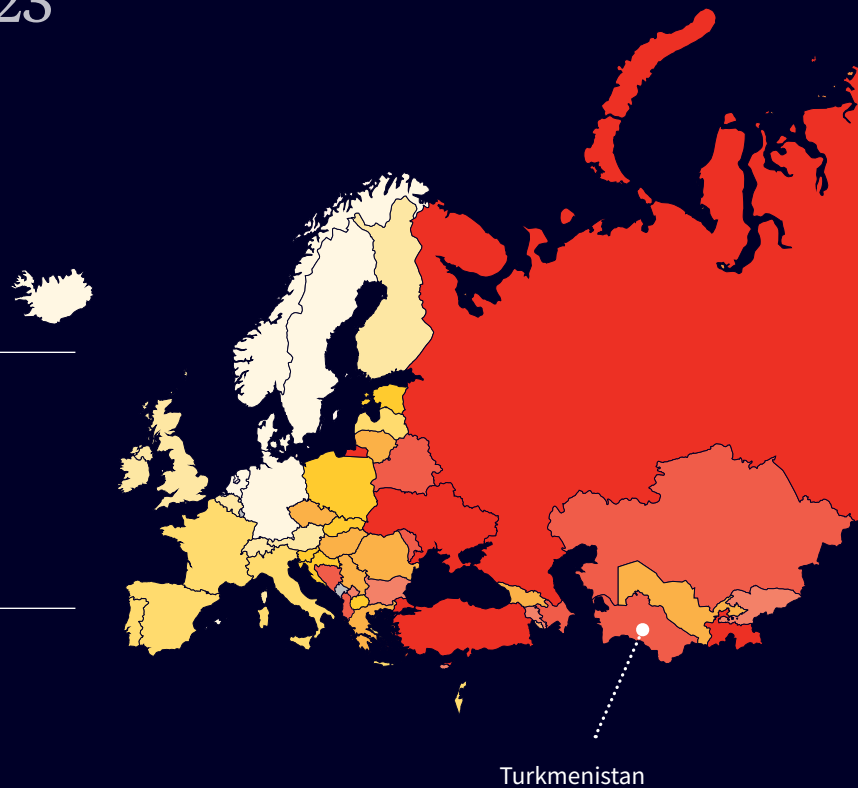
ESTIMATED NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN MODERN SLAVERY

# 47/100

VULNERABILITY TO MODERN SLAVERY

# 26/100

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO MODERN SLAVERY



Turkmenistan

Estimated prevalence of modern slavery across Europe and Central Asia



### Overview

The Turkmen government denies the occurrence of human trafficking and other rights abuses in Turkmenistan.<sup>1</sup> Human rights groups cannot operate within the country, and to report on human rights abuses constitutes an offence punishable by fine, property confiscation, or detention.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, information on modern slavery in Turkmenistan is scarce. However, limited legal mechanisms to combat modern slavery, combined with the active use of state-imposed forced labour and a lack of political will, means that risks of modern slavery are pervasive. Turkmenistan is among countries taking the least action to respond to modern slavery – it had the second weakest response to modern slavery out of 52 countries assessed within Europe and Central Asia, and has the sixth highest prevalence of modern slavery in the region.

### Prevalence

The 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI) estimates that on any given day in 2021, there were an estimated 72,000 people living in modern slavery in Turkmenistan. This equates to a prevalence of 11.9 people in modern slavery for every thousand people in the country. Turkmenistan has the one of the highest prevalence rates of modern slavery among countries assessed in Europe and Central Asia (6 out of 47) and globally (14 out of 160). A lack of transparency under the Turkmen regime, combined with widespread corruption, makes official data unreliable,<sup>3</sup> however there is evidence of extensive forced labour exacted by the state, in addition to forced labour in the private economy, and forced marriage in Turkmenistan.

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## Forced labour

### State-imposed forced labour

The full picture of forced labour in Turkmenistan is unclear: state surveillance limits monitoring<sup>4</sup> and anyone who attempts to report on the situation can face intimidation, arrest, and imprisonment.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, the systematic use of state-imposed forced labour for the purpose of economic development has been widely documented in Turkmenistan, particularly within the cotton industry.<sup>6</sup> Cotton represents a key financial resource for Turkmenistan: an estimated 198,000 metric tonnes are produced per year, making it the government's fourth most valuable export,<sup>7</sup> and a major contributor to the central state budget.<sup>8</sup> The cotton – and the state-imposed forced labour through which it is harvested – enters the global market through complex supply chains.<sup>9</sup>

The government reportedly owns nearly all the land in the country. State-imposed forced labour is facilitated through the leasing of this land to farmers<sup>10</sup> on the condition that they use it to grow cotton.<sup>11</sup> During the harvest, which occurs yearly from September to November,<sup>12</sup> authorities force individuals to leave their jobs to pick cotton, including teachers, healthcare, and public sector workers,<sup>13</sup> with penalties including public censure, docked pay, and termination of employment for those who refuse.<sup>14</sup> Investigations have found that exemptions are not given: those who are elderly, unwell, pregnant, or on childcare leave, and those with disabilities are all obliged to pick cotton. These individuals are forced to pay others to take their place if they cannot perform the physical labour.<sup>15</sup> The private sector may also be required to supply workers, in addition to vulnerable groups such as internal migrants and students being forced to work.<sup>16</sup>

While the use of child labour to pick cotton is officially forbidden in Turkmenistan, evidence from the 2021 cotton harvest highlights the use of forced child labour.<sup>17</sup> To meet steep state-imposed harvest production quotas,<sup>18</sup> some public sector employees who were forced to pick cotton and/or pay for cotton pickers, reportedly sent their children instead.<sup>19</sup> In some instances, children volunteered as replacement pickers, seeking to earn extra money for their families.<sup>20</sup> The use of children during the cotton harvest not only exposes them to serious health risks,<sup>21</sup> constituting hazardous child labour, but also limits access to education,<sup>22</sup> which is compounded by the mobilisation of schoolteachers in the harvest.<sup>23</sup> Those who fail to meet the quota face retribution from authorities, including the threat of unemployment.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, farmers face threats of losing their land<sup>25</sup> and fines to repay the government for the cost of undersupply.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to forced labour exacted by the state for economic development, evidence of state-imposed forced labour has been documented within the prison system, including abuse of prison labour for private interests, and as punishment for expressing religious views.<sup>27</sup> The Turkmen government has denied that state-imposed forced labour is used in the country and has highlighted their commitment to constructive dialogue and continued cooperation with the International Labour Organisation.<sup>28</sup>

### Forced labour exploitation

Information on forced labour outside of state-imposed labour exploitation is scarce, however reports indicate that construction sector workers and residents of rural areas are particularly vulnerable to forced labour.<sup>29</sup> Turkmen citizens are also vulnerable to forced labour abroad. The oppressive national system and government-imposed restrictions on freedom of movement drives some citizens to seek irregular migration routes to find employment overseas, often in countries such as Turkey, Russia, or India.<sup>30</sup> Pursuing these routes make citizens highly vulnerable to trafficking, and reports highlight that Turkmen citizens have experienced forced labour in the textile, agricultural, construction, and domestic service sectors abroad.<sup>31</sup>

### Forced commercial sexual exploitation of adults and commercial sexual exploitation of children

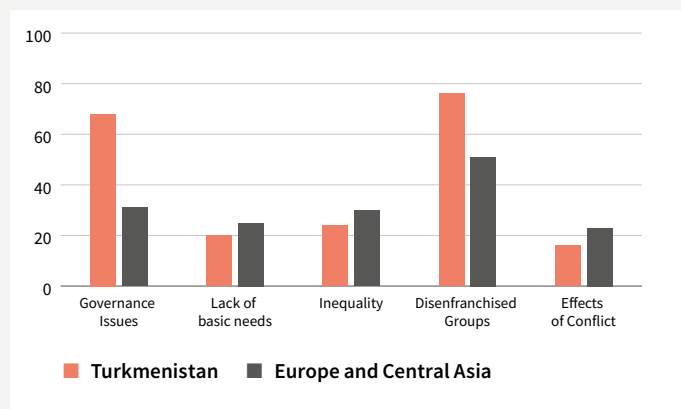
Little is known about the perpetration and experience of forced sexual exploitation of adults in Turkmenistan. However, some reports highlight the specific vulnerability of Turkmen women to trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, both domestically and abroad.<sup>32</sup> Information on the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is similarly scarce. In their 2018 concluding observations on Turkmenistan, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women recommended that the government conduct research to understand the scale and drivers of trafficking and forced sexual exploitation in the country to address the vulnerability of women and girls.<sup>33</sup>

## Forced marriage

Although the government denies the practice exists, forced marriage, including child marriage, is reported in Turkmenistan.<sup>34</sup> A United Nations study published in 2019 found that six per cent of 20 to 24-year-olds in Turkmenistan were married before the age of 18.<sup>35</sup> Turkmen girls and boys from lower income households and lower levels of education were the most likely to be married as children with a prevalence of eight per cent, compared to two per cent of those who had received secondary or higher education.<sup>36</sup> The practice is driven by gender inequality and reinforced by wider socioeconomic factors such as poverty and access to education.<sup>37</sup> While data regarding the prevalence of forced marriage among LGBTQIA+ communities in Turkmenistan is limited, anecdotal reports of homosexual Turkmen men being forced into 'corrective' marriages with women to protect familial honour exist.<sup>38</sup>

## Vulnerability

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



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Turkmenistan is among the most vulnerable countries in the region to modern slavery. Vulnerability is largely driven by discrimination and governance issues, as well as the systematic forced labour of citizens exacted by the state. The Turkmen government tightly controls all aspects of public life, and routinely denies freedoms of association, expression, and religion.<sup>39</sup> Crucially, the government's use of forced labour renders all citizens highly vulnerable to modern slavery, particularly in the cotton sector.<sup>40</sup> Vulnerability is compounded for women, who face greater inequality, are more likely to be employed in low-paid work, and are therefore less likely to be able to pay others to take their place in the cotton harvest.<sup>41</sup> Women also face greater risk of gender-based violence; a 2021 study found that nearly half of all female respondents would tolerate or condone violence against women, with this rate rising to two thirds among women with children living in rural areas.<sup>42</sup>

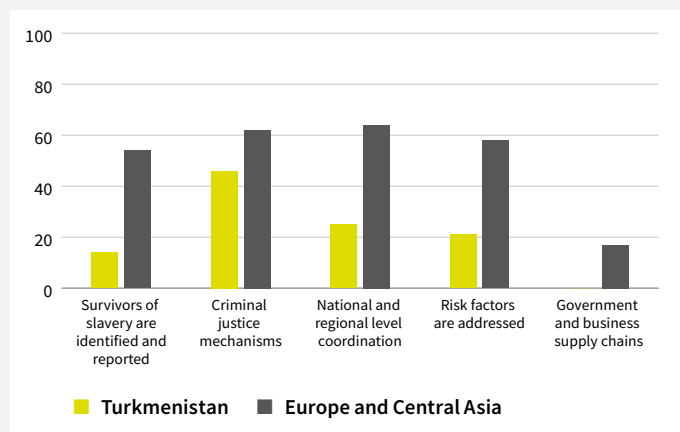
Both the COVID-19 pandemic and climate factors have impacted the situation of state-imposed forced labour in Turkmenistan since the 2018 GSI. The risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus meant that older people were more likely to send children as pickers in their place.<sup>43</sup> Worsening poverty resulting from the pandemic also drove many children to the cotton fields to supplement family income.<sup>44</sup> Further, a review of the 2021 cotton harvest revealed that droughts impeded on cotton production nationally, meaning farmers could not grow enough to meet mandated quotas, resulting in increased poverty.<sup>45</sup>

Discrimination towards minority groups also drives significant vulnerability in Turkmenistan. Members of the LGBTQI+ community face widespread homophobia and transphobia, and are vulnerable to abuse, torture, and extortion.<sup>46</sup> Consensual same sex relations between men are a criminal offence and punishable with a two-year prison sentence.<sup>47</sup> The widespread social stigma and discrimination against the LGBTQI+ community leads to increased risk of "corrective" forced marriages, which can result in subsequent vulnerability to sexual exploitation and forced labour.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, lack of access to basic needs creates modern slavery risks. Amid declining food security in Turkmenistan,<sup>49</sup> low wages and poor living standards drive many to shop at government-operated stores with subsidised prices, creating regular and lengthy queues for necessities.<sup>50</sup> Supplies of subsidised foods have also faltered due to a contracting state budget and pandemic-related border closures, leaving more citizens unable to meet their basic needs.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, the government denies the existence of poverty in the country and has failed to provide relief to economically vulnerable groups, even while unemployment increased during the pandemic,<sup>52</sup> leaving such groups at greater risk of exploitation.

## Government response

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



Overall, Turkmenistan is among countries taking the least action to respond to modern slavery – it had the second weakest response of <sup>52</sup> countries assessed in Europe and Central Asia, scoring above only the Russian Federation. Turkmenistan took the least action to identify and support survivors and to prevent modern slavery in government and business supply chains. These limited actions were undermined by the denial of human rights abuses and the active use of state-imposed forced labour. While Turkmenistan received a comparatively higher score for its criminal justice response, reflecting ratification of a range of international conventions, this translated to weak enforcement across the board.

Turkmenistan is a signatory to some international conventions relating to modern slavery, including the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children.<sup>53</sup> However, implementation is uneven, with priorities defined by political interests.<sup>54</sup> Further, several significant legislative gaps remain. Turkmenistan has not criminalised slavery or forced labour, and has not ratified the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention.<sup>55</sup> While forced marriage is criminalised,<sup>56</sup> the government has not ratified the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages,<sup>57</sup> nor set a minimum age of marriage at 18 without exceptions.

The government has made some attempt to provide access to free legal assistance and temporary residency for official victims of trafficking.<sup>58</sup> Yet access to these services is limited by the government's failure to adopt formal victim identification, reporting, and referral procedures,<sup>59</sup> and is further undermined by policies that treat victims as criminals.<sup>60</sup> For example, as there are no screening procedures in place to identify potential victims among women arrested for engaging in sex work, it is possible that sex trafficking victims have been treated as criminals by Turkmen authorities.<sup>61</sup> Inconsistent application of the Trafficking in Persons Act 2016, which requires a range of services from the government for victims of human trafficking, is also evident; for the fifth consecutive year there were no comprehensive state-run services provided to victims, and the government neglected to deliver funding or support to civil society groups providing assistance.<sup>62</sup>

While overall efforts to identify and support survivors were limited, the government has shown some willingness to address human rights issues in the country. In April 2021, the National Action Plan on Human Rights for 2021-2025 was adopted,<sup>63</sup> which included a focus on the prevention of forced labour. Yet, there are no reports

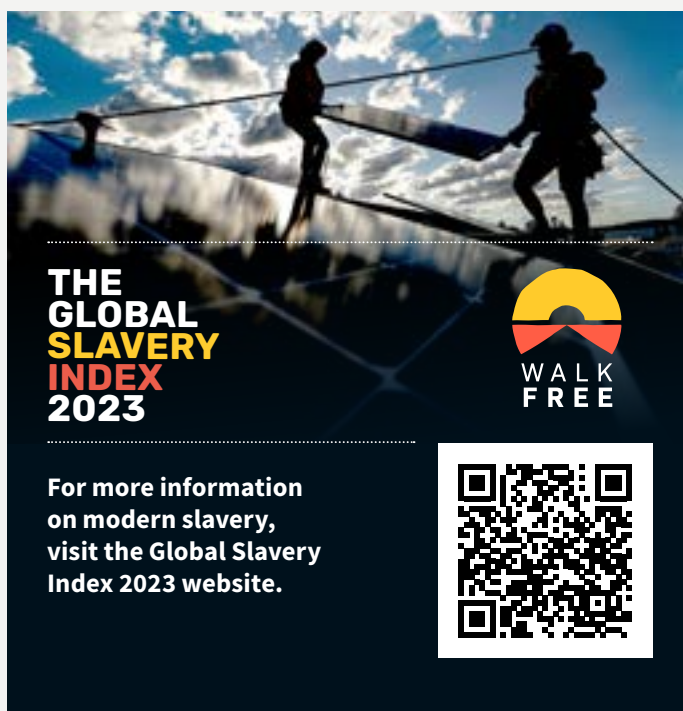
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of the allocation of financial resources to fund activities under the plan, raising questions about its ability to achieve impact. The Turkmen government has also taken positive steps towards international cooperation on key issues. For example, in March 2020, the Cooperation Framework between the Government of Turkmenistan and the United Nations on Sustainable Development (2021 – 2025) was signed, establishing an important legal basis to promote international labour norms and steps towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>64</sup> Further, in 2021 the government adopted a Plan of Cooperation with International Organisations for 2021-2023 to provide a basis for cooperation on issues of mutual interest.<sup>65</sup>

Despite these positive steps, corruption and official complicity in modern slavery crimes remained widespread and inhibited law enforcement activity.<sup>66</sup> From 2019 to 2020, the government did not report any investigations or extraditions of traffickers.<sup>67</sup> While the government has provided training to its diplomatic corps on human trafficking, no officials have been held accountable for their role or direct complicity in trafficking crimes.<sup>68</sup> Finally, the detection and referral to law enforcement of forced labour crimes were impeded by state-imposed restrictions, which prevented independent observers accessing the cotton harvest.<sup>69</sup>

Overall, the government's response to modern slavery is critically undermined by the active use of state-imposed forced labour in the annual cotton harvest,<sup>70</sup> public works projects,<sup>71</sup> and in the prison system.<sup>72</sup> While the government did not take any action to combat modern slavery in government and business supply chains, reports highlight that the government continues to expand the use of machinery for cotton picking and planting, supported by international industry partners, which could reduce dependency on human labour and related state-imposed forced labour practices.<sup>73</sup>



## Recommendations

- 1 Survivors identified and supported**
  - Provide support services for suspected victims of modern slavery, including family reunification, physical and mental health services, and specialised support services for children.
- 2 Criminal justice mechanisms**
  - Ratify the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention and the Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages 1964.
  - Comprehensively criminalise slavery and forced labour in line with international standards.
  - Strengthen and document efforts to investigate and prosecute cases of human trafficking and convict and punish traffickers.
- 3 National and regional level coordination**
  - Fully fund all activities in the National Action Plan on Human Rights for 2021-2015.
- 4 Risk factors are addressed**
  - Immediately end state-imposed forced labour by repealing legislation and criminalising practices that allow state-imposed forced labour to occur.
  - Continue to invest in the mechanisation of cotton harvesting to reduce manual harvesting.
- 5 Government and business supply chains**
  - Identify high-risk sectors in Turkmenistan and work with business and civil society to develop initiatives to eradicate forced labour, human trafficking, and other forms of labour exploitation.



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## Endnotes

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