

Modern slavery in the United Arab Emirates

Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Study



KEY STATS

Population (2021) 9,890,000

GDP per capita, PPP (Current intl \$) \$66,766

13.4

PREVALENCE OF MODERN SLAVERY per 1,000 people

132,000

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN MODERN SLAVERY

40/100

VULNERABILITY TO MODERN SLAVERY

50/100

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO MODERN SLAVERY



Estimated prevalence of modern slavery across the Arab States



Overview

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has the second highest prevalence in the Arab States region, and the seventh highest prevalence in the Global Slavery Index. Migrant workers in the UAE are particularly vulnerable under the kafala (sponsorship) system, a restrictive work permit system that ties migrant workers to their employer.¹ The system embeds a steep power imbalance by granting employers control over their employees' lives.² However, the UAE is among countries taking the most action to address modern slavery in comparison to other countries in the region. Since the 2018 Global Slavery Index, the government has implemented reforms to increase labour protections and remove elements of the kafala system,³ although these reforms have been insufficient to dismantle the system entirely. Opportunities for further action include strengthening protections for migrant workers, addressing forced and child marriage, and eradicating modern slavery from the economy.

Prevalence

The 2023 Global Slavery Index estimates that on any given day in 2021, there were 132,000 individuals living in modern slavery in the UAE. This equates to a prevalence of 13.⁴ people in modern slavery for every thousand people in the country. The UAE has the second highest prevalence of people in modern slavery of 11 countries in the Arab States region, and the seventh highest prevalence out of 160 countries globally.

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Forced labour

Forced labour exploitation

The kafala system is 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.⁴ Migrant workers cannot access legal protections or leave their employment without facing legal and financial consequences.⁵ The system exacerbates the employer-worker power imbalance and prevents migrant workers from reporting abuse or exploitation.⁶

Migrant workers face risks of forced labour particularly in the construction, domestic work, and service industries under the kafala system.⁷ Allegations of forced labour occurred in the construction of, and during, the Dubai Expo 2020, with indications that workers from Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Nepal, and Pakistan had their passports confiscated, wages withheld, were forced to work long hours, and lived in poor conditions.⁸ There is evidence that migrant domestic workers are forced to work in exploitative conditions, without rest and for limited pay,⁹ and face sexual abuse by their employers.¹⁰ Migrant women are promised decent work and pay in the UAE by recruitment agents, but are then “sold” and forced into domestic work.¹¹

For the first time since 2016, the UAE government identified one person in forced labour in 2021.¹² However, no further information on this case was reported. Forced begging also occurs in the UAE.¹³ In 2021, three Egyptian women were arrested for travelling to UAE on multiple occasions to force children to beg in Dubai.¹⁴

Forced commercial sexual exploitation of adults and children

Women and children from Central Asia, South and Southeast and West Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe have been trafficked into forced sexual exploitation in the UAE.¹⁵ Although the government did not report official statistics of forced sexual exploitation or any other form of modern slavery, in 2021, 18 of the 23 convicted traffickers were convicted for trafficking for sexual exploitation.¹⁶

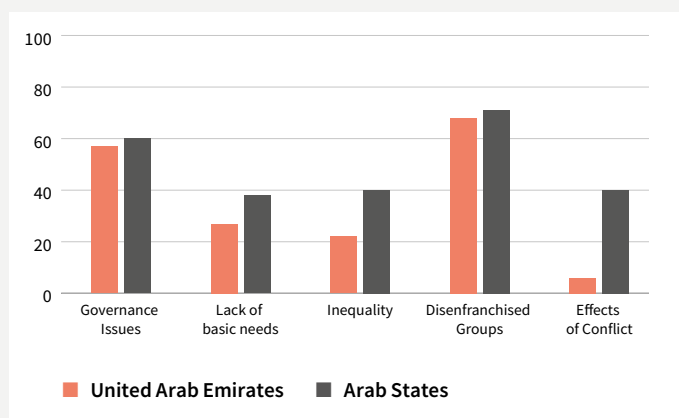
Migrant women and girls deceived by criminals promising employment opportunities are forced into sex work in the UAE. For example, in 2021, UAE courts convicted six offenders for trafficking a teenage girl. The traffickers forged a false passport for the teenager, and, on her arrival, forced her into domestic work and commercial sexual exploitation.¹⁷ They received jail sentences between six months and 10 years. Similar cases emerged among Thai men and women who were promised jobs as massage therapists in the UAE, only to be forced into sex work on arrival.¹⁸

Forced marriage

While there are no current national estimates of the prevalence of forced and child marriage in the UAE,¹⁹ the Forced Marriage Unit in the United Kingdom registered 14 cases of British nationals who were forced into marriage in the UAE since 2018. Seven individuals were identified in 2020 alone, despite COVID-19 travel restrictions being in place.²⁰ Unregistered forced and child marriages are also of concern.²¹

Vulnerability

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



While the UAE has relatively low vulnerability to modern slavery in comparison to other countries in the Arab States, modern slavery persists as a result of systemic discrimination against migrants and minority groups. The UAE is home to eight million migrant workers,²² largely from Africa, Asia, and other countries in the Arab States.²³

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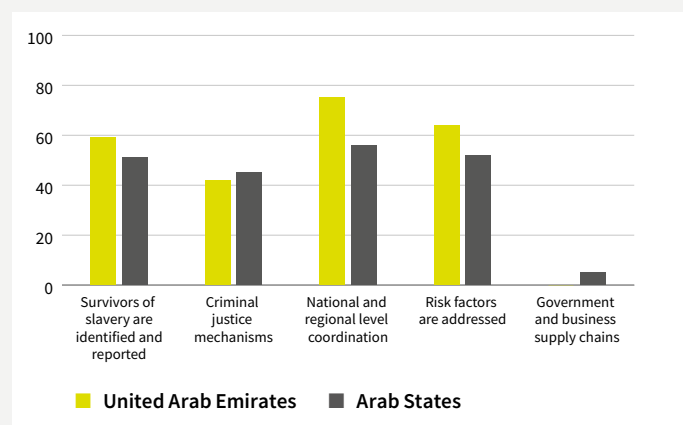
Under the kafala system, employers and recruiters threaten migrant workers with the potential loss of their visa to prevent them reporting poor working conditions.²⁴ Workers who do leave risk being reported for the crime of absconding,²⁵ leaving them undocumented and vulnerable to arrest, detention, and deportation. In 2020, the government launched an initiative to encourage employers to report absconded domestic workers to authorities.²⁶ There are concerns that this policy further exacerbates the vulnerability of domestic workers trying to leave exploitative or abusive situations and increases the risk of punishing potential trafficking victims.²⁷

Women, particularly migrant women, are vulnerable to exploitation and gender-based violence in the UAE.²⁸ In 2020, the majority of people seeking help for domestic violence, human trafficking, and other abuses were migrant women.²⁹ Emirati women are vulnerable to forced marriage and abuse under male guardianship laws, which require female adults to obtain permission from a male guardian to consent to their marriage³⁰ unless a judge otherwise approves it.³¹ This framework enables male guardians to control the marriage choices of women and potentially force them into unwanted marriages.³² Further, there are no provisions in Emirati legislation allowing women to annul a forced marriage.³³

Vulnerability to modern slavery also increased in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. A lack of employment opportunities in the UAE pushed many migrant workers to return to their home countries, in some cases without having received their owed wages.³⁴ In March 2020, the UAE government passed a resolution which allowed employers to reduce the wages of migrant workers, leaving migrants vulnerable to wage theft and other exploitative practices.³⁵ Migrants who worked on projects at the Expo 2020 Dubai reported that non-payment of wages and salary reductions became a widespread issue following the onset of the pandemic. Crowded accommodation also meant that migrant workers were at high risk of contracting COVID-19.³⁶

Government response

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



The UAE is among countries taking the most action to respond to modern slavery in the Arab States region, but has an average response in comparison to the rest of the world. When correlated against GDP PPP per capita, the UAE has taken limited action to address modern slavery despite having larger resources at its disposal. Further, the government has not made efforts to eradicate modern slavery from government and business supply chains.

The government largely focuses its response on forced sexual exploitation,³⁷ and most support services are for female survivors of modern slavery.³⁸ The government publicises human trafficking hotlines in awareness campaigns, including posting information on human trafficking at airport terminals.³⁹ Further, apart from Saudi Arabia, the UAE is the only other country in the Arab States region to provide regular training for frontline responders to identify and respond to modern slavery cases.⁴⁰ Despite significant evidence of forced labour, there are no support services for males or for survivors of forced labour who are not victims of human trafficking.⁴¹

Gaps in protections for modern slavery crimes exist in UAE legislation. Forced marriage is not criminalised and significant exceptions undermine the minimum age of marriage set at 18 years.⁴² In effect, Emirati girls can marry if they have reached “maturity” earlier than the age of 18, and if a judge consents to the marriage.⁴³ Although the UAE is one of three countries in the region to have fully criminalised forced labour,⁴⁴ in practice, forced labour allegations are often considered regulatory violations for which businesses receive fines or lose their licences instead of imprisonment.⁴⁵ Further, while Article 11 of the anti-trafficking law does stipulate that survivors of exploitation should not be liable for criminal conduct that occurred while under the control of traffickers, there are exceptions to this provision, including cases where migrants have violated their work contract.⁴⁶

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Although recent reforms to UAE labour laws prohibit asking migrant workers for recruitment fees⁴⁷ and allow workers to change workplaces without the need for authorisation from their employer,⁴⁸ many migrant workers are still vulnerable to being charged exorbitant recruitment fees, increasing their risk of debt bondage.⁴⁹ Workers in the UAE must complete their contract or provide advance notice to avoid an employment ban, and may be required to compensate their employer if they change jobs.⁵⁰ Further, there is a lack of punishment for sponsors who confiscate employees' passports and withhold their wages, leaving migrant workers vulnerable to forced labour.⁵¹ While the government passed a new law on domestic workers in 2022,⁵² including prohibitions on wage deductions, domestic workers continue to be excluded from key labour protections, such as a minimum wage.⁵³

The UAE government took the most action to coordinate the response to modern slavery at the national and regional levels compared to any other country in the Arab States region. The National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (NCCHT), comprised of government and NGO representatives, meets regularly to coordinate the UAE's response.⁵⁴ In July 2020, the NCCHT reviewed its implementation of the anti-trafficking program and the impact of COVID-19 on human rights issues in the UAE. The findings of the report included recommendations around labour rights and protections in the face of increased risk of exploitation due to the impacts of the pandemic.⁵⁵ The NCCHT also drives the implementation of the country's anti-trafficking national action plan⁵⁶ and produces annual reports on combatting trafficking in the UAE.⁵⁷



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Recommendations

- 1 Survivors identified and supported**
 - Address gaps in support services available for people who have experienced modern slavery, ensuring all groups including migrant workers, survivors of forced labour, and men and boys can access specialised services.
- 2 Criminal justice mechanisms**
 - Ensure that survivors of exploitation are not punished or detained for crimes committed while under the control of criminals.
 - Introduce a suite of legal protections to tackle forced marriage, including by criminalising all forms of modern slavery in line with international law, eliminating the need of a guardian to sign marriage certificates on behalf of Emirati brides, and raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 with no exceptions.
- 3 National and regional level coordination**
 - Allocate dedicated funds to the full implementation of the national action plan on human trafficking.
- 4 Risk factors are addresses**
 - 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.
 - Tackle underlying gender inequality by affording women equal rights in matters of divorce, inheritance, citizenship, and employment.
- 5 Government and business supply chains**
 - Enact legislation to tackle modern slavery in supply chains, including mandatory human rights due diligence.

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