Modern slavery in Ukraine
Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Study

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KEY STATS

Population (2021) 43,734,000
GDP per capita, PPP (Current intl $) $13,087

12.8
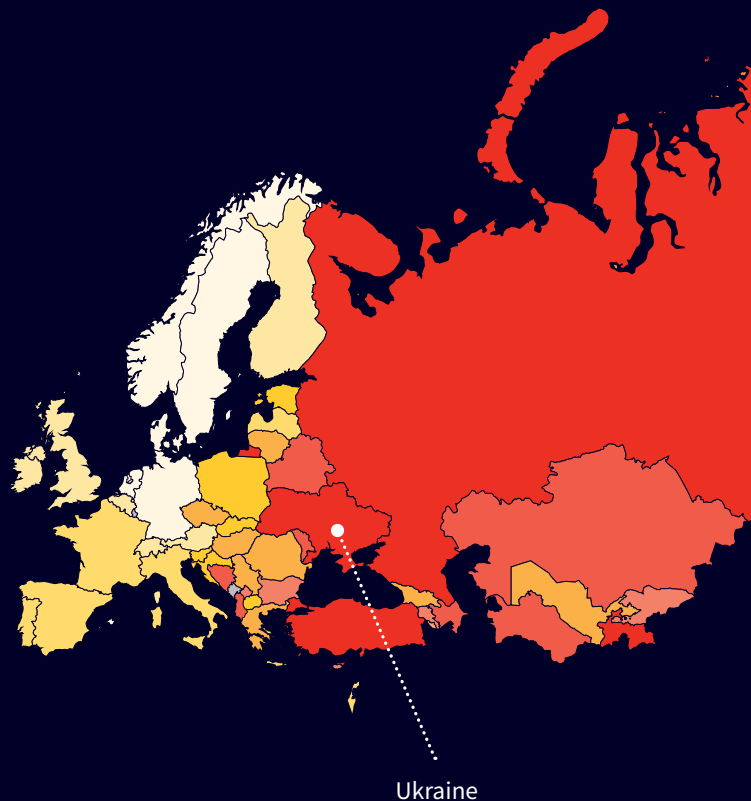**PREVALENCE OF MODERN SLAVERY** per 1,000 people

559,000
ESTIMATED NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN MODERN SLAVERY

48/100
VULNERABILITY TO MODERN SLAVERY

51/100
GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO MODERN SLAVERY

Ukraine

Estimated prevalence of modern slavery across Europe and Central Asia

Low — High

Overview

Ukraine ranks fourth for prevalence and third in terms of the total estimated number of people in modern slavery in the Europe and Central Asia region. Our estimate does not capture any impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022,[1] which has generated new risks through mass displacement, and exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities, including among children in institutionalised care. Since the 2018 Global Slavery Index, the government has taken some action to improve its response to modern slavery, including by establishing a hotline to receive reports of human trafficking in 2020.[2] However the conflict has amplified gaps in the response, while also hampering the government's ability to address them. The government should: prioritise efforts to strengthen access to information and screening for indicators of trafficking among vulnerable populations; address the issue of discrimination against minority groups, including non-Ukrainian nationals and Roma, and improve their access to rights and services; and strengthen oversight of care and accommodation of unaccompanied or separated children.

Prevalence

The 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI) estimates that on any given day in 2021, there were 559,000 people living in modern slavery in Ukraine. This equates to a prevalence of 12.8 people in modern slavery for every thousand people in the country, and places Ukraine among countries with the highest prevalence of modern slavery in Europe and Central Asia (4 out of 47) and globally (11 out of 160). Ukraine also has the third highest total estimated number of people living in modern slavery in the region. Notably, this estimate does not capture any impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine launched in 2022,[3] or the recruitment of child soldiers.[4] This figure is a conservative estimate of people living in modern slavery in Ukraine.

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Irpin, Ukraine, March 2022.

Evacuees cross a destroyed bridge as they flee Ukraine following the invasion by Russia. While there has not been a spike in identified cases of modern slavery, there are several reasons that risks of modern slavery could be higher than currently detected. Photo credit: Dimitar Dilkoff/ AFP via Getty Images.

In 2021, prior to the invasion, the government reported formally identifying 64 victims of trafficking, of whom 45 were men.[5] The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported identifying and assisting 1,000 victims in the same year,[6] while a survey commissioned by the IOM estimated that 17,000 Ukrainians experienced human trafficking in the country from 2019 to 2021.[7] Since the launch of Russia's invasion, concerns over an increase in the risk of modern slavery in Ukraine have been raised.[8] Yet despite the scale of the crisis, and conflict and displacement being known drivers of modern slavery,[9] one year on an increase in the number of victims identified has not been observed.[10] This may be positively attributed to factors such as early awareness raising on the risks of trafficking, and activation of the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD),[11] leading to mitigation of some risks.[12]

However, several factors may be contributing to a rise in modern slavery cases going undetected and underreported.[13] Those in conflict zones or moving along dangerous irregular migration routes are particularly vulnerable to labour exploitation, yet remain largely inaccessible to humanitarian responders. Further, four million refugees have not formally registered for protection under the TPD, and many unaccompanied children including those previously in institutions remain unmonitored,[14] limiting our understanding of potential exploitation among these highly vulnerable groups.

Forced labour

Forced labour exploitation

Forced labour exploitation has been reported in several sectors in Ukraine, including prior to the events of February 2022. Law enforcement investigated 137 cases of trafficking for labour exploitation in 2021, including 54 cases of forced criminality.[15] Individuals are also exploited in forced begging, construction, manufacturing, and agriculture.[16] For example, in 2019, the IOM reported assisting more than 80 Ukrainians from the Odessa and Dnipropetrovsk regions who were forced to work in harsh conditions at a farm, after being lured with the offer of all-paid accommodation, meals, and attractive salaries. Workers' movements were monitored, and those who attempted to leave were physically abused.[17] Vietnamese migrants have reportedly been forced to work in textile factories in Kharkiv and Odessa.[18]

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, reports have emerged of individuals being forced to work by Russian forces, including being forced to clear debris in Mariupol.[19] Those fleeing the country have reported exploitation along the migration route,[20] and at their destination.[21]

Modern slavery in Ukraine

Children are exploited in forced criminality and forced begging in Ukraine, including those in institutions.[22] Ukraine had the largest population of children in institutions in Europe prior to Russia's invasion, and the displacement brought on by the conflict has caused those numbers to rise.[23] These children face increased risk of exploitation and abuse, with concerns over traffickers targeting Ukrainian orphanages.[24]

Forced commercial sexual exploitation of adults

Most identified victims of human trafficking in Ukraine prior to the 2022 invasion experienced labour exploitation,[25] but trafficking for sexual exploitation does occur. In 2021, for example, a criminal network operating in Ukraine recruited women and trafficked them to Norway for sexual exploitation in commercial sex establishments.[26] Criminal networks in Kyiv lured women in the beauty industry with false offers of work and trafficked them overseas for sexual exploitation.[27]

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, civil society reported an increased risk of trafficking for sexual exploitation, particularly among young women and girls.[28] Traffickers have reportedly targeted displaced Ukrainian women fleeing the conflict in border towns,[29] offering them false promises of work abroad resulting in sexual exploitation.[30] This has occurred alongside a rise in reports of conflict-related sexual violence, including cases perpetrated by Russian forces,[31] and a rise in transactional sex as a means of survival, primarily impacting women and girls.[32]

While limited information exists, forced surrogacy and illegal adoption of babies born to surrogates have also been documented in Ukraine,[33] with these children vulnerable to exploitation. Ukraine's commercial surrogacy industry dominates the global surrogacy market, and is prone to trafficking risks due to limited regulation and the involvement of financially vulnerable women who become surrogates as a means of income.[34]

Commercial sexual exploitation of children

Children have experienced increased vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.[35] In December 2022, an investigation revealed the sexual exploitation of financially vulnerable girls across 17 rented properties in Kyiv.[36] Parents have also reportedly exploited their children for commercial gain during the conflict.[37] Further, social media apps used by those fleeing the conflict to access support networks have been abused by traffickers to recruit victims for sexual exploitation online.[38] There has been a surge in online searches for sexual services from Ukrainian women and girls since the start of the war.[39]
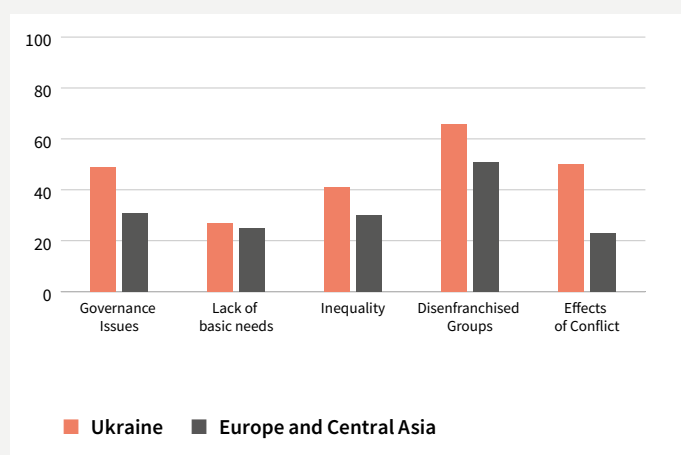
Forced marriage

Recent research on forced marriage in Ukraine is scarce, however the latest data available indicates that the rate of child marriage – a form of forced marriage – is nine per cent among girls, and four per cent among boys.[40] Concluding observations made by the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 2022 noted that the practice of child marriage is still a concern among the Roma community in Ukraine, as well as cases of women with disabilities being harassed into marriage.[41]

Use of children in armed conflict

Unverified accounts of children being recruited by Russian-led forces in areas controlled by Russia, including as soldiers, informants, guards, and mailpersons, have emerged.[42] Children have reportedly been recruited and used as "human shields"[43] and "spotters" to monitor Ukraine's military operations.[44]

Vulnerability

Figure 1.

Vulnerability of Ukraine to modern slavery by dimension of vulnerability, compared to the regional average

Ukraine is rated among the most vulnerable countries to modern slavery in Europe and Central Asia. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, launched in 2022 after annexing Crimea in 2014,[45] has increased the risk of modern slavery with mass displacement in Ukraine and across the region.

Notably, unlike many other global conflicts, where modern slavery is a neglected protection risk, the response to prevent exploitation was swift and coordinated. For the first time in a humanitarian response, an anti-trafficking response was embedded from the outset in the work of the humanitarian Protection Cluster. By May 2022, the Cluster's Anti-Trafficking Task Force, consisting of over 30 local and international organisations,[46] was disseminating modern slavery risk information, ensuring that modern slavery was put on the agenda of humanitarian responders, mapping available services, operating hotlines, and establishing referral pathways.[47]

However, there are many reasons that the Ukrainian population both in Ukraine and those overseas remain vulnerable to exploitation. Prior to the invasion, an estimated 1.4 million people were already internally displaced due to the Russian-backed occupation of the Donbas and Crimea regions.[48] The recent conflict has triggered the largest movement of refugees since World War II, with the United Nations Refugee Agency recording more than eight

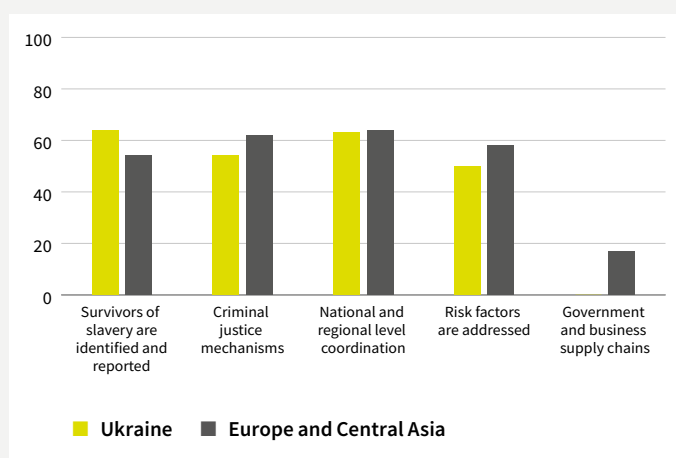# Modern slavery in Ukraine

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million refugees and five million internally displaced persons as of May 2023.[49] This population are at increased risk of modern slavery, including trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation.[50] For example, instances of exploitation have been reported among women and girls crossing the Russian border and of those in refugee camps.[51]

Many of those who remain in Ukraine face heightened risk, with the conflict exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities. Before the invasion, the COVID-19 pandemic led to reduced income and greater unemployment, particularly among informal and seasonal workers.[52] In the initial months following the invasion, an estimated 4.8 million jobs were lost,[53] and almost 18 million people (40 per cent of the population) are now in need of humanitarian assistance.[54] Despite sustained efforts to provide assistance to those in need, support is stretched. Women and girls in active fighting zones are largely inaccessible to humanitarian responders,[55] and the decision to bar Ukrainian men from leaving the country may be forcing some into irregular and dangerous routes, which could reduce their likelihood of coming forward to receive assistance.[56] The population are also at risk of being targeted by existing criminal networks who, in the wake of conflict and reduced law enforcement activity, are able to operate more freely.[57] Unaccompanied children fleeing the conflict and the significant population of children in institutions (estimated to be at 100,000 before the invasion) also face heightened risk of exploitation.[58] Many remain unregistered and unmonitored,[59] impacting our understanding of what exploitation is occurring. In addition, the UN has expressed concern over the risk of forced adoption of Ukrainian children, warning that children in institutions cannot be assumed to be orphans.[60] In March 2023, the International Criminal Court (ICC) indicted the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, and children's commissioner, Maria Lvova-Belova on war crimes for the mass abduction of Ukrainian children. The children are allegedly being taken to Russia and adopted by Russian families, under the guise of a humanitarian mission to save the children from the war.[61]

Certain groups, including the LGBTQI+ community, people with disabilities, Roma, non-Ukrainian nationals, and stateless persons face increased vulnerability to modern slavery due to discrimination, which has been magnified in the wake of the conflict.[62] Prior to Russia's invasion, members of the Roma community were particularly vulnerable due to lack of identification documents, for example.[63] Following the invasion, an assessment by the Freedom Fund noted that Roma may face difficulties applying for temporary protection status due to lack of documentation, limiting their access to support.[64] Prior to, and amid the conflict, women have faced greater risk of gender-based violence.[65] The surrogacy market has also been severely disrupted by the conflict, leaving surrogates vulnerable and less able to leave Ukraine, with legal restrictions on surrogacy in surrounding countries posing further complications.[66] Babies born to surrogates who are not united with their parents are at risk of abduction or forced adoption.[67]

Government response

Figure 2.

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

Ukraine ranks in the bottom half of countries assessed in Europe and Central Asia in terms of government responses to modern slavery. Our assessment captures Ukraine's actions to respond to modern slavery for the period February 2019 to August 2022, covering both before and after Russia's invasion. Prior to the February 2022 invasion, Ukraine demonstrated efforts to improve aspects of its response, including survivor support and identification, yet significant gaps persisted, and have been amplified by the conflict. It is important to note that the conflict has limited the government's capacity and resources to respond to modern slavery, with over one quarter of their GDP going towards security and defence in the latest budget.[68]

Ukraine took the most action to identify and support survivors compared to other aspects of its response to modern slavery. The government established a free 24 hour hotline to receive reports of trafficking, gender-based violence, and violence against children in 2020, and has run regular national campaigns to educate the public on how to identify and report modern slavery.[69] Regular training on how to identify victims has also been provided for police[70] and first responders including border guards[71] and social workers.[72] However, there is no evidence national guidelines on how to identify victims have been distributed to all first responders. A national referral mechanism (NRM) exists to ensure victims are referred to support services,[73] including access to government-funded shelters, and mental and physical health services.[74] While the anti-trafficking community responded swiftly to alert communities to the increased risk of trafficking as conflict broke out, already under-resourced civil society organisations have been overwhelmed.[75]

The government has ratified several international conventions related to the elimination of modern slavery, including 2000 UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol, and the ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957. However there are several critical gaps in the government's criminal justice response. Most forms of modern slavery – including forced labour, forced marriage, CSEC, and the use of children in armed conflict – are not criminalised in line with international law, with the exception of human trafficking, which is criminalised under article 149 of the Criminal Code.[76] However, lenient punishments of fines and probation, which are insufficient to deter future offenders, were awarded to traffickers during the reporting period. While a specialised police counter-trafficking unit exists, it is insufficiently resourced.[77]

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Ukraine has taken positive action to coordinate the response to modern slavery at the national level. The government had a fully funded national action plan for 2016 to 2020 and approved a draft plan for 2021 to 2025,[78] and the Ministry of Social Policy published a report on the implementation of the government's response.[79] However, there is no independent entity tasked with monitoring the government's response to modern slavery. The government also takes some action to coordinate the response at the international level: it has established agreements that include cooperation on modern slavery issues with several countries including Germany,[80] Türkiye,[81] and Slovakia.[82]

The government has made efforts to address specific risks, including through awareness raising on forced begging and forced criminality.[83] All workers are also protected under labour laws, with no groups excluded.[84] However, several risk factors are unaddressed, and have intensified in the wake of the conflict. For example, the government does not conduct labour inspections to identify modern slavery, and labour laws do not provide for freedom of association and collective bargaining. Not all of the population had access to health care even prior to the conflict,[85] and while the health system remains functioning and resilient, it has become increasingly unaffordable during the conflict, and physical travel to health facilities is now more difficult.[86] There were also insufficient policies in place to facilitate safe and orderly migration for those seeking employment prior to the conflict;[87] an issue now exacerbated in the wake of mass displacement. Insufficient government action to address discrimination towards minority groups, including Roma, non-Ukrainian nationals, and the LGBTQI+ community, as well as lack of protections for children in institutions, has resulted in even greater risks for these groups amid conflict. There have also been reports of official complicity in modern slavery cases.[88]

The Ukrainian government has not taken any action to combat modern slavery in government or business supply chains.

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

Recommendations

1

Survivors identified and supported
- Distribute victim identification guidelines to all first responders and provide training to ensure effective use of the national referral mechanism.
- Target resources to ensure continued implementation of the NRM and delivery of services to victims and survivors.
- Ensure access to information and strengthen screening of potential victims with the support of UN agencies and specialised NGOs to ensure that vulnerabilities and risks are identified and addressed.

2

Criminal justice mechanisms
- Criminalise all forms of modern slavery, including slavery, forced labour, forced marriage, commercial sexual exploitation of children, and the use of children in armed conflict, in line with international standards, and ensure sufficient penalties for offences.
- Ensure specialised police counter-trafficking units are sufficiently resourced to investigate and respond to modern slavery crimes.

3

National and regional level coordination
- Adopt and fully fund the implementation of the national action plan for 2021 to 2025.

4

Risk factors are addressed
- Extend social assistance and benefits to vulnerable populations, including those who are displaced, without conditions, especially to those who are unable to secure employment, to help minimise risks of modern slavery.
- Address the issue of discrimination against non-Ukrainian nationals and Roma people fleeing Ukraine and improve their access to rights and services, including access to registration and safe and suitable accommodation.
- Strengthen oversight over care and accommodation of unaccompanied or separated children (UASC), particularly children coming from institutions, and strengthen best interest assessments where return is being considered. Strengthen support to guardians and carers of UASC to ensure adequate care and support is provided.

5

Government and business supply chains
- Support businesses to conduct heightened human rights due diligence to prevent the sourcing goods or services linked to modern slavery.

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