

Modern slavery in the Philippines

Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Study



KEY STATS

Population (2021) 109,581,000

GDP per capita, PPP (Current intl \$) \$8,394

7.8

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

859,000

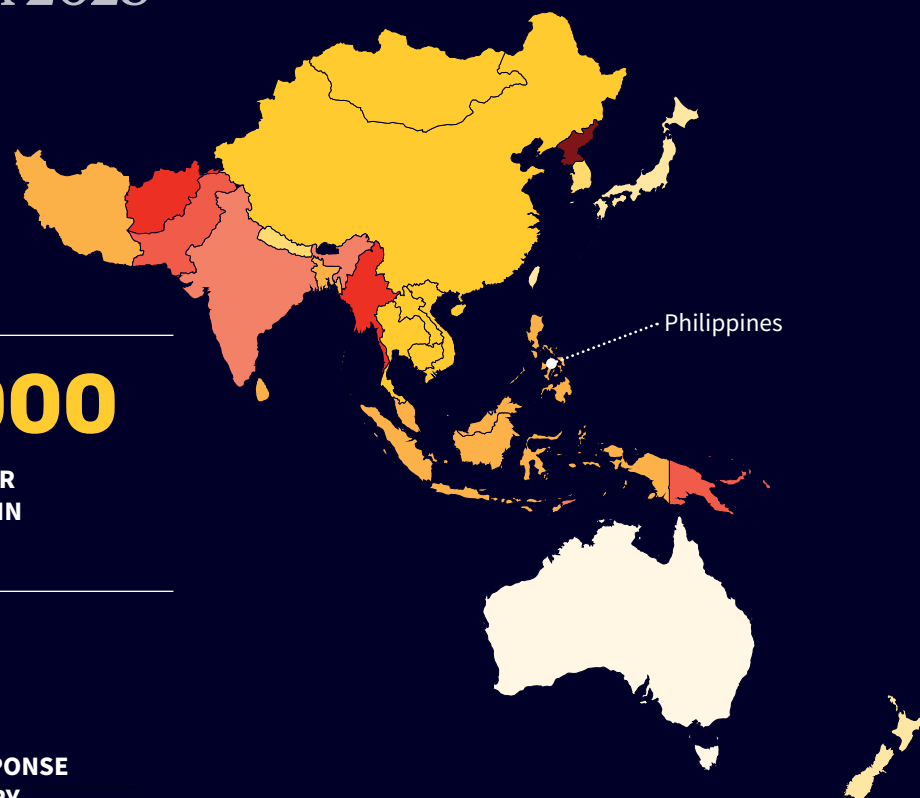
**ESTIMATED NUMBER
OF PEOPLE LIVING IN
MODERN SLAVERY**

66/100

**VULNERABILITY TO
MODERN SLAVERY**

59/100

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE
TO MODERN SLAVERY**



**Estimated prevalence
of modern slavery across
Asia and the Pacific**



Overview

Relative to its wealth, the Philippines is outperforming its neighbours in its efforts to address modern slavery. The government had the second strongest response to modern slavery in the Asia Pacific region, reflecting robust measures to coordinate the response and other improvements since 2018, including raising the minimum age of marriage to 18.¹ However, there are opportunities for further action, including amending legislation to require all recruitment-related fees to be paid by the employer, dedicating greater resources to address commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), and protecting rights to freedom of association. Despite its comparatively strong response, the Philippines is among the most vulnerable countries to modern slavery in the region and has the seventh highest prevalence, with risk largely driven by conflict- and climate-related displacement, inequality, and discrimination.

Prevalence

The 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI) estimates that on any given day in 2021, there were 859,000 people living in modern slavery in the Philippines. This equates to a prevalence of 7.8 people in modern slavery for every thousand people in the country. The Philippines has the seventh highest prevalence and seventh highest total number of people living in modern slavery out of 27 countries in the Asia Pacific region, and also has among the highest prevalence rates globally (36th out of 160). Notably, this estimate does not cover all forms of modern slavery, such as the use of children in armed conflict, which reportedly occurs in the Philippines.²

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Tacloban, Philippines

A giant ship lies alongside homes in Anibong, a suburb in Tacloban City, after it was cast adrift during Super Typhoon Haiyan, which struck the Philippines on 8 November 2013. The disaster, one of the most powerful typhoons to ever hit land, left thousands dead and displaced more than four million people. The immense destruction of homes and livelihoods made many people more susceptible to human trafficking and labour exploitation.

Photo credit: Mark Fredesjed R. Cristina/Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images

Forced labour

Forced labour exploitation

The government reported identifying 537 victims of trafficking for labour exploitation in 2022.³ Forced labour is reported in several sectors, including agriculture, construction, fishing, begging, and domestic work.⁴ A 2019 survey found that almost 50,000 children were employed in domestic work in the Philippines, including nearly 5,000 under the age of 15,⁵ with these children highly vulnerable to exploitation. Further, reports of trafficking for labour exploitation in online scam centres have increased across the region.⁶ In May 2023, Philippine authorities reported assisting more than 1,000 people who were forced to operate online scams out of a gambling establishment in Pampanga Province.⁷ Nearly half of the individuals had been trafficked from Vietnam and were forced to work 18-hour days while their passports were withheld.⁸

In the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), women are reportedly forced to work in the homes of wealthier families, often to repay family debts accumulated in exchange for land.⁹ These women face additional risks from traffickers seeking to capitalise on their desire to migrate for better opportunities.¹⁰ Meanwhile, debts may be used to coerce men to join extremist and armed groups operating in BARMM.¹¹ Indigenous populations are also particularly vulnerable to exploitation. In 2019, the National Commission on Human Rights began an investigation after lumad people reported

being trafficked from Mindanao to Pangasinan for forced labour in fish pens,¹² with similar cases documented in La Union.¹³

Many Filipinos work abroad,¹⁴ and despite mechanisms in place to facilitate safe migration, deceptive recruitment practices continue to expose overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) to risks of forced labour. For example, a Filipino fisherman reported being forced to work on a Taiwanese vessel during the COVID-19 pandemic after being illegally recruited by an unregistered agency in Manila¹⁵ – a common experience among OFWs in the fishing industry.¹⁶ Officials are also reportedly complicit in trafficking OFWs. In 2021, the Philippines Bureau of Immigration launched an investigation into at least 28 immigration officials who were allegedly involved in trafficking 44 women to Syria.¹⁷ The women were offered jobs in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where they first travelled on tourist visas, before being transported to Damascus and sold to employers for up to US\$10,000.¹⁸

Forced commercial sexual exploitation of adults and children

The government reported identifying 740 victims of sex trafficking in 2022, primarily women (66 per cent) and girls (20 per cent).¹⁹ CSEC is widely documented, including child trafficking,²⁰ child sex tourism,²¹ and online CSEC.²² The pervasiveness of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA), including CSEC, is of particular concern in the Philippines.²³ According to a 2021 survey, one fifth of Internet-using children aged 12 to 17 (approximately two million children) experienced online sexual exploitation in 2021.²⁴

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Forced marriage

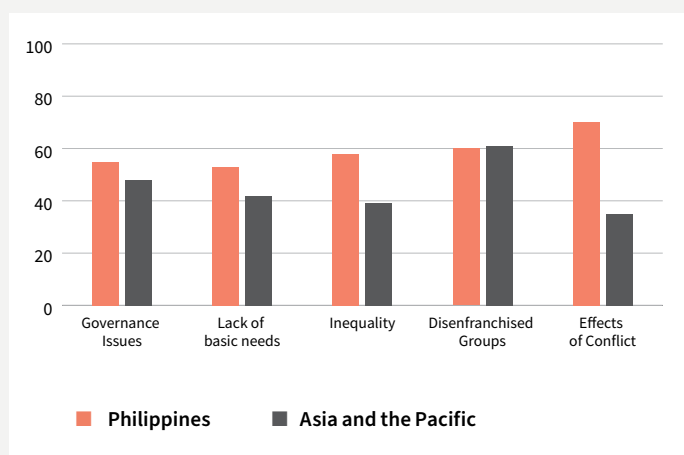
There is no publicly available official data on the prevalence of forced marriage in the Philippines, and recent data on the nature of forced marriages are limited, however child marriage – a form of forced marriage – has been documented. According to a 2017 national survey, 17 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 years in the Philippines were first married before the age of 18.²⁵ Meanwhile, a 2020 survey conducted across the five BARMM areas of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi found that almost a quarter of the 1,058 respondents were married before the age of 18.²⁶ In some cases, parents considered child marriage an appropriate response to ‘immoral’ pre-marital sexual activity or pregnancy.²⁷

Use of children in armed conflict

Multiple non-state armed groups operating in BARMM recruit children for use in combat and support roles.²⁸ In 2022, the United Nations confirmed the recruitment and use of nine boys and one girl by the New People’s Army (NPA), Abu Sayyaf Group, and Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group, in addition to other grave violations of children’s rights by state and non-state armed forces, including killing, maiming, and detention.²⁹ This was a reduction from 38 recorded cases of recruitment and use of children in armed conflict in 2021, which was split evenly by gender. Most cases of child recruitment were linked to the NPA, while two cases were attributed to the Armed Forces of the Philippines.³⁰ Unaccompanied or orphaned children are particularly at risk of recruitment into armed combat or related roles.³¹

Vulnerability

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



The Philippines is among the most vulnerable countries to modern slavery in the Asia Pacific region. Conflict-related displacement shapes risk in the country: as of 2022, there were 102,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Philippines due to conflict.³² The largest population of IDPs are in BARMM,³³ where years of conflict and violent extremism has destabilised livelihoods, exacerbated poverty, and forced people from their homes.³⁴ Climate change and disaster-related displacement also drive vulnerability,³⁵ impacting over half a million people in 2022.³⁶ Super Typhoon Rai – which hit the Philippines in December 2021 – displaced hundreds of thousands of people³⁷ and caused widespread damage in the agricultural sector, decimating the livelihoods that depended on it. This dramatically increased modern slavery risks, particularly for indigenous populations,³⁸ and women and girls.³⁹

In BARMM, several studies have highlighted that displacement amplifies existing drivers of child marriage, including poverty, lack of access to education, limited decision-making power among girls, adolescent pregnancy, and the impact of family honour codes.⁴⁰ For example, child marriage may be used to prevent stigma associated with sexual harassment that occurs in displacement shelters.⁴¹ Vulnerability in BARMM is also driven by the cultural practice of rido (clan feuding), which is reportedly leveraged by extremist groups to recruit male members, while violence and insecurity increase risks of trafficking among women and girls.⁴²

Several factors have been attributed to the Philippines’ emergence as a global hub for OCSEA, including social norms and beliefs, ease of access to technology, existing infrastructure for financial transactions, and a large English-speaking population,⁴³ with evidence indicating OCSEA offenders are often foreign nationals from Western countries such as the United States, Sweden, and Australia.⁴⁴ The idea that children are not harmed if no physical contact is involved, or that children should contribute to economic activities are among social norms and beliefs driving risk.⁴⁵ In many cases, exploitation of children is facilitated by relatives.⁴⁶ Risk compounded during the COVID-19 pandemic, with greater Internet usage during lockdowns linked to a rise in reports of online sexual exploitation.⁴⁷

The pandemic has also exacerbated poverty, inequality, and vulnerability among already at-risk populations, such as informal workers and those living in informal settlements.⁴⁸ In the capital region of Metro Manila, an estimated three million individuals live in informal settlements⁴⁹ and are engaged in precarious work such as street-vending, construction, and informal transport.⁵⁰ Lockdowns and other measures imposed by the government to contain the pandemic (including site demolitions and arrests)⁵¹ severely impacted their livelihoods.⁵² Workers are additionally vulnerable due to a lack of rights to freedom of association in the Philippines. While independent trade unions exist, less than 10 per cent of the workforce is unionised and anti-union discrimination has been widely-documented, as well as extrajudicial killings of labour rights defenders.⁵³ Workers are particularly vulnerable in Special Economic Zones (SEZs), where companies are attracted to operate due to government subsidies and low-paid labour.⁵⁴ This has occurred against the wider backdrop of Duterte’s

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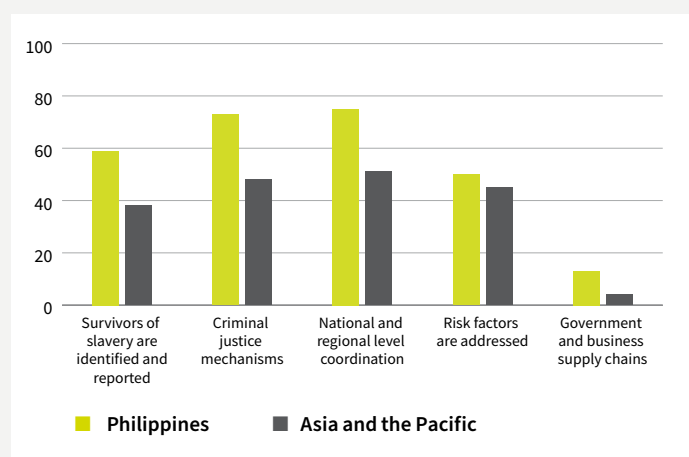
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war on drugs and impunity of law enforcement for human rights violations.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, many Filipinos migrating overseas for employment are vulnerable to forced labour as a result of deceptive recruitment practices.⁵⁶ For example, unlicensed sub-agents operating in the Philippines may charge workers excessive fees, increasing their risk of debt bondage.⁵⁷ A 2021 survey of 961 current and former OFWs found that 80 per cent of respondents took on debt to finance their migration journey, and for almost one-third, this debt amounted to more than their annual household income.⁵⁸ Some workers were also referred to training centres for costly non-mandatory training, which they believed was required.⁵⁹

Government response

Figure 2.
Government of Thailand's responses to modern slavery by milestone, compared with the regional average



The Philippines had the second strongest government response to modern slavery in the Asia Pacific region. This reflects effective coordination of the response to modern slavery and robust criminal justice mechanisms. The Philippines is also one of six countries assessed in the region taking action to address forced labour in supply chains, however actions to address risk factors are limited.

The Philippines has the strongest criminal justice response in the region. With the exception of the 2014 Forced Labour Protocol, the Philippines has ratified all international conventions related to the elimination of modern slavery. The legal framework also establishes various protections for victims, including that they should not be punished for crimes committed while in a situation of modern slavery,⁶⁰ children shall be interviewed in a child-friendly manner,⁶¹ and victims have the right to enter a witness protection program,⁶² which was accessed by 61 people in 2022.⁶³ However, several critical gaps in the legal framework exist: although the government has criminalised some forms of modern slavery – including human trafficking⁶⁴ and slavery⁶⁵ – forced marriage and forced labour⁶⁶ are not criminalised in line with international

standards. Further, only victims of violent crime are entitled to compensation, and this is rarely received in practice.⁶⁷ Reports also suggest that anti-trafficking units lack sufficient resources to respond to the large number of CSEC reports received.⁶⁸

The Philippines is among countries taking the most action to identify and support survivors. It is one of only five countries to operate a national referral mechanism to ensure victims are referred to services,⁶⁹ and has established several mechanisms to allow the public to report cases of modern slavery to authorities, including the 1343 Actionline run by the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT).⁷⁰ Yet despite the government's relatively strong response compared to other countries in the region, persistent gaps meant it received a score of only 59 per cent for its efforts to identify and support survivors. For example, there is a lack of systematic and regular training for frontline responders, including immigration and labour officials, on how to identify indicators of modern slavery.

The government's efforts to coordinate the response to modern slavery at the national level, led by IACAT, represent the strongest aspect of its response. The Philippines was also the only country in the region to consult survivors in its response during our assessment period.⁷¹ Beyond our assessment period, in December 2022, the government adopted the 2023 to 2027 National Strategic Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons.⁷² Further, legislation adopted in 2022 broadened IACAT's mandate to include OSEC cases and established a national centre to tackle OSEC.⁷³ Regional-level coordination efforts are also strong. The government has established bilateral labour agreements stipulating protections for labour migrants with several key destination countries, including Bahrain⁷⁴ and the UAE,⁷⁵ among others. Moreover, in February 2022, the Philippines government formed the Department of Migrant Workers to oversee law enforcement efforts against illegal recruitment agencies, create a database to track recruiters involved in trafficking, and raise awareness of trafficking among migrant workers.⁷⁶

Yet, several risks remain unaddressed. Under 2016 regulations, Filipino workers seeking employment overseas can still be charged certain costs, including documentation costs and placement fees up to the equivalent of one month's salary (excluding domestic workers who are exempt).⁷⁷ In practice, OFWs report being deceived during the recruitment process and paying excessive fees, increasing their risk of debt bondage,⁷⁸ and despite protections under bilateral agreements, OFWs continue to experience abuse and exploitation abroad.⁷⁹ Concerningly, there are also reports of trafficking in OFWs involving diplomatic staff.⁸⁰ Further, the government has not taken action to address targeted violence, 'red-tagging', intimidation, and discrimination against trade unionists in the Philippines,⁸¹ and certain workers (including temporary workers and some foreign workers) continue to be excluded from the right to organise.⁸²

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The government has made some notable efforts to address some risk factors since the 2018 GSI. In December 2021, the Republic Act No. 11596 was signed into law, making the Philippines one of only eight countries in the region to set the legal age of marriage at 18 without exception.⁸³ Further, in October 2020, the Department of Justice hosted a webinar for government officials on addressing human trafficking in public procurement and supply chains,⁸⁴ becoming one of only two countries in the region to provide training for public procurement officials. The government has not taken any other measures to address modern slavery in public and private supply chains.



**THE
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on modern slavery,
visit the Global Slavery
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Recommendations

1

Survivors identified and supported

- Deliver regular and systematic training on how to identify victims of modern slavery, and distribute victim identification guidelines to all frontline responders, including immigration, border patrol, labour inspectors, NGOs, teachers, social workers, doctors, nurses, and the tourism industry.

2

Criminal justice mechanisms

- Criminalise all forms of modern slavery in line with international standards, including forced labour and forced marriage.
- Strengthen resources for law enforcement units to respond to modern slavery crimes, including CSEC.
- Establish the right to compensation for all victims in legislation and ensure timely delivery of compensation in practice.

3

National and regional level coordination

- Allocate funding for the implementation of all activities within the national action plan.

4

Risk factors are addressed

- Amend legislation to require all recruitment fees and related costs to be paid by the employer, increase awareness of these requirements among prospective OFWs, and strengthen monitoring of recruitment agencies.
- Improve access to pre-departure training for OFWs ensuring mandatory pre-departure training is freely available. This includes education on workers' rights and how to maintain contact with Philippine government agencies abroad,⁸⁵ and should be extended to include OFWs' families and support networks.
- Investigate reports of anti-union discrimination and violence, and strengthen rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining including by expanding these rights to all including temporary and foreign workers.
- Investigate all reports of official complicity in modern slavery cases, including diplomatic staff.

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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Endnotes

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