



Modern slavery

An issue of global governance

Modern slavery is a human rights issue requiring global governance. This article looks at what is meant by slavery, the numbers and global distribution of those affected by it, and what the international community is doing to tackle this human exploitation



A demonstration against modern slavery in London last year

people from one country or area to another, typically for the purposes of forced labour or commercial sexual exploitation.

What are we doing about it?

In the UK the Modern Slavery Act 2015 is designed to combat slavery and trafficking of people. The international community addresses these issues of global governance and human rights through the United Nations (UN) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

- The UN Sustainable Development Goal 8, target 7, aims to end child labour by 2025 and end forced labour, human trafficking and slavery by 2030.

- The ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, adopted in 1998, commits signatories to freedom of association, elimination of forced labour, abolition of child labour and elimination of discrimination in work.

These global initiatives are ambitious and powerful, but modern slavery is associated with deeply hidden criminal activity, and estimates of the numbers of people involved vary widely.

Why does it happen?

The Global Slavery Index estimates that 45.8 million people were subject to various forms of slavery in 2016. Types of modern slavery are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. Trafficking for sexual exploitation has the highest profile but in fact most people are trafficked for their labour.

Box 1 President Obama on human slavery

'It ought to concern every person, because it is a debasement of our common humanity. It ought to concern every community, because it tears at our social fabric. It ought to concern every business, because it distorts markets. It ought to concern every nation, because it endangers public health and fuels violence and organized crime. I'm talking about the injustice, the outrage, of human trafficking, which must be called by its true name — modern slavery.'

President Barack Obama, 25 September 2012

In 2012 President Obama made a powerful speech about modern slavery as an issue that should concern all of us (Box 1). Almost 46 million people in the world are subject to human trafficking or are living in slavery. According to Anti-Slavery International, a person is in slavery if they are:

- forced to work, by coercion or mental or physical threat
- owned or controlled by an 'employer', who uses abuse or the threat of abuse
- dehumanised, treated as a commodity or bought and sold as 'property'
- physically constrained or not allowed freedom of movement

Human trafficking is defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime as the action or practice of illegally transporting

Table 1 Forms of modern slavery

Type of slavery	Numbers and definition
Forced labour	Total 24.9 million
Bonded labour	16.9 million. Any work where there is the threat of punishment
Debt bondage	People borrow money (e.g. US\$500–10,000) to pay in advance for travel costs towards a promised job far from their home. They become trapped because they are forced to work for months or years to repay the loan
Human trafficking	Recruiting, transporting and exploiting people using violence, threats, coercion. Includes forced prostitution, labour, mining, illicit begging, criminality, domestic servants, marriage, organ removal. Not necessarily across international borders
State-sponsored forced labour	1.7 million. Includes military and prison labour camps, compulsory labour on public works
Forced sexual exploitation, forced and early marriage	15.4 million. Someone forced into prostitution or married against their will. Early marriage occurs below the age of consent
Child slavery	Children exploited for someone else's gain. Includes child trafficking, child soldiers, child marriage, child domestic slavery

Data: ILO 2016

The Global Slavery Index has three components:

- the prevalence of modern slavery in a society
- vulnerability
- government responses to slavery

Vulnerability to slavery is assessed based on:

- the presence or absence of protection and respect for rights, physical safety and security, access to basic needs
- civil and political protection
- social, health and economic rights
- refugee populations and conflict

People in poverty with limited opportunities for work are often desperate to improve the lives and prospects of their families, and this makes them vulnerable to exploitation. For instance, child labour (forced labour under 18) often begins when families

experience a shock — illness, unemployment, the effects of conflict — and the head of household cannot support everyone. Child labour is then forced on them as a way of gaining some meagre income.

Vulnerable people experience discrimination as well as intense competition for jobs, and lack of employment rights. Global trade and our demand for cheap goods reduce the profit margins for producers and manufacturers. The consequent squeeze on labour costs can easily be hidden within the complex web of outsourcing by global companies. Vested interests, corruption and weak government legislation continue to allow human rights violations.

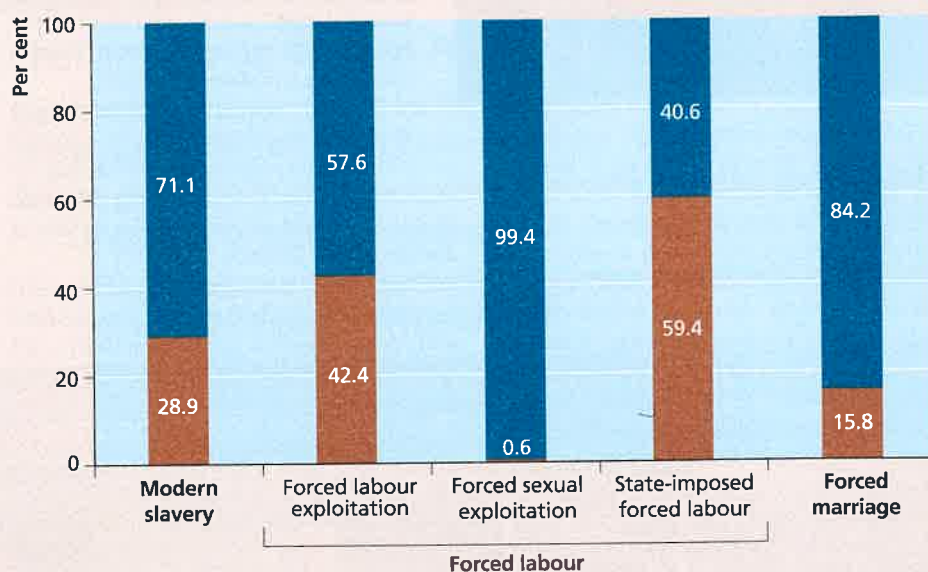
Global pattern of modern slavery

Of the 45.8 million people living in slavery in 2016, 58% of them were in India, China,

Pakistan, Bangladesh and Uzbekistan. These large countries have the highest absolute numbers of people in slavery, but the countries with the highest estimated prevalence of modern slavery by the proportion of their population are North Korea, Uzbekistan, Cambodia, India and Qatar (see Tables 2 and 3).

Some national governments are trying to address modern slavery by improving their migration surveillance to expose illegal human trafficking.

- 124 countries have criminalised such activity and support the UN Trafficking Protocol.
- 96 countries have National Action Plans to coordinate a government response to slavery.
- 150 nations provide a service to help victims.



Source: ILO and Walk Free Foundation (2017) *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage*.

Figure 1 Modern slavery by category and gender of victims

Box 2 Forced labour in Uzbekistan

Over 1 million Uzbek citizens — teachers, doctors, students and other public and private employees — are forced by the state to leave their jobs each autumn to pick the cotton harvest. If they refuse they may be fined or lose their jobs. Wealthy elite groups earn £783 million from selling cotton on the global market. This ends up in the clothing supply chain. The Uzbek government claims that since 2012 child labour has ended, although there appears to be an increase in forced labour of teenagers and young adults.

In 2017 the World Bank was accused of funding projects linked to state-sponsored child and forced labour. In 2015–16 the World Bank invested US\$519 million in irrigation and agricultural projects. The World Bank and ILO dispute these claims.

Source: Anti-Slavery International

Table 2 Countries with the highest proportion of their populations in modern slavery

Rank	Country	Estimated per cent of population in slavery	Estimated number in slavery	Population
1	North Korea	4.373	1,100,000	25,155,000
2	Uzbekistan	3.973	1,236,600	31,125,000
3	Cambodia	1.648	256,800	15,578,000
4	India	1.400	18,354,700	1,311,051,000
5	Qatar	1.356	30,300	2,235,000
6	Pakistan	1.130	2,134,900	188,925,000
6	Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)	1.130	873,100	77,267,000

Source: Global Slavery Index 2016

Table 3 Regional patterns of slavery

Region	Millions	Per cent
Asia-Pacific	15.4	62
Africa	5.7	23
Europe and central Asia	2.2	9
Americas	1.2	5
Arab states	0.3	1

The strongest responses come from the Netherlands, USA, UK, Sweden, Australia, Portugal and Spain, all countries where there are political will, resources and a strong civil society to push governments into action. Least action is taken by countries where there are high levels of conflict, political instability and low political will, including North Korea, Iran, Eritrea, DRC and South Sudan. Some wealthy countries have also taken very little action, notably Qatar, Kuwait, Brunei, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea.

Some states officially sanction forced labour, such as Uzbekistan (Box 2). Modern slavery can exist in the most unexpected institutions in a society, such as religious schools in Senegal (Box 3).

Slavery in the UK

There are estimated to be 11,700 people in slavery in Britain, and the UK ranks 52 out of 167 in the global prevalence index of slavery. Despite this, the UK government is leading the way towards good governance of working practices and recruitment of labour. The Modern Slavery Act of 2015 reflects the political will to reduce the number living in this country in slavery.

Most forced labour in the UK comes from Albania, Vietnam, Nigeria, Romania and Poland. It is concentrated in the

agricultural, construction, manufacturing and hospitality sectors (Figure 2). There are also considerable numbers of people forced to work in car-wash businesses, domestic slavery, or the sex industry.

The Modern Slavery Act requires firms with an annual turnover of more than £36 million to make an annual statement about their efforts to reduce the risk of slavery. Some large companies support the Ethical Trading Initiative because the problem is too big for one firm to solve on its own. The UK has established the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) with powers to investigate modern slavery across the whole labour market.

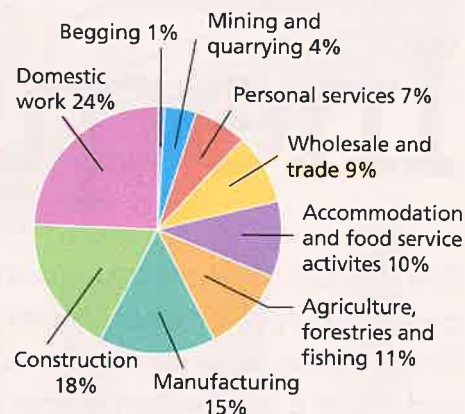
What more can be done?

Major companies and their investors and shareholders are beginning to take an interest in the labour practices within their own supply chains in sectors such as cocoa, cotton, clothing and mobile phone production. Some firms are prepared to take a strong stand but others are reluctant to draw attention to poor employment, forced or bonded labour among their suppliers. Joint action within particular sectors can increase the influence on suppliers.

Box 3 Slavery in Senegal

In Senegal between 50,000 and 100,000 boys are sent by their parents to religious schools called *daaras*, often many kilometres from their homes. Some of these institutions force the boys into street begging to raise money, rather than teaching them the Qur'an. There is little political will to change the law or have proper inspections of the schools because of the influence of unscrupulous religious leaders.

Source: Anti-Slavery International



Note: Forced labour outside the commercial sex industry

Source: ILO and Walk Free Foundation (2017)

Figure 2 Global distribution of forced labour by sector

Businesses, governments, international institutions and NGOs can all contribute to more reliable data collection and to improvements in measuring the amount of forced labour. Modern technology helps to bring greater transparency and traceability of workers and can ensure they have legitimate papers. Workers can be educated about their rights and support services via smartphones, and can report illegal activity confidentially.

The Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative is a global hub which gathers information from counter-trafficking organisations around the world. Collaborations between stakeholders are essential to enable a coordinated strategy to deal with the causes, consequences and impacts of modern slavery.

Question for discussion

1 Are you prepared to pay more for goods and services if it means reducing modern slavery? What about the rest of UK society?

Further reading

Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC) interactive map:

www.ctdatacollaborative.org/map

Global Slavery Index:

www.globalsslaveryindex.org

Anti-Slavery International:

www.antislavery.org

Gill Miller is a visiting fellow and senior lecturer emerita in the Department of Geography and International Development at the University of Chester.