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Research report

Forum: GA 6

Issue: Combating forced labour and modern slavery in global supply chains

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Introduction

Forced labour refers to all work performed involuntarily, under control, violence, threats or lies. This form of labour is used to coerce someone into work, or restricting their freedom or ability to leave their job, with someone else controlling their movements and money. Workers' wages normally go to a third party who then decides how much they get, which is often little or nothing. Those being exploited are often subject to illegal deductions such as a work finding fee or excessive charges for accommodation. In some cases, they are controlled by a debt which in reality, is impossible to clear. Forced labour goes hand in hand with modern slavery, which is a broader term encompassing various forms of exploitation, such as human trafficking, debt bondage or child labour. Individuals who experience any form of modern slavery are deprived of their basic rights, freedom, and dignity. Both of these topics continue to be a widespread issue within global supply chains, driven by the demand for low-cost and fast production of commercial goods to ultimately increase profits.

According to data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) an estimated 50 million people are enslaved worldwide, more than at any other time in history. Of these people 27.8 million people are in forced labour and 22 million are recorded to be trapped in forced labour and 22 million in forced marriages. Freedom is a fundamental right, but without proper protections in place, it cannot be guaranteed for those in dire situations who need it the most. This is why solving issues like forced labour and modern slavery is critically important. Vulnerable populations often lack the legal safeguards, economic opportunities, and social support necessary to protect themselves from exploitation. Rates of forced labour have increased in recent years indicating a need for proactive change. Through dialogue, effective strategies can be developed to strengthen protections and ensure perpetrators of the exploitation are held accountable and justice is served.

Definitions of key terms

Modern Slavery

Modern slavery is an umbrella term used to describe various forms of exploitation where individuals are forced into labour of any type in exploitative conditions. The work can come in many forms such as forced and child labour, human trafficking and debt bondage.

Forced Labour

Forced Labour is any kind of work performed involuntary due to various factors including violence and debts.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

The principle that in addition to pursuing economic profits, the corporation is striving to act in a way that positively affects society and the world.

Vulnerable Populations

A group of people who are at higher risk of health impacts as well as exploitation due to their social or economic status.

Vulnerable Populations

Legal pluralism refers to the coexistence of multiple legal systems within a single society or geographical area. These can and will affect the labour rights of a population within a nation.

General overview

While different from the chattel slavery of past centuries, modern slavery is rooted in the concept of exploiting people for economic gain. Its origins can be traced back to the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the 19th century. While the ownership of people ended in most cases, this new form of exploitation surfaced driven by profit and the ill treatment of those vulnerable.

During the 20th century, industrial revolution and globalization as supply chains expanded across borders prompted the need for cheap labour globally. Companies would begin to offshore their production facilities in less developed regions with cheaper labour and weaker legal protections for those in work.

Today, forced labour and modern slavery still remain prevalent throughout supply chains of large companies, affecting millions across the globe. Despite legislation, modern slavery exists across many industries, including agriculture, manufacturing, fishing and construction. These exploitative practices exist largely due to the complex and unregulated global supply chains, weak enforcement of labour laws and the steep demand for cheap goods. According to the International Labour Organization, around 50 million people are currently trapped in modern slavery, with 28 million in forced labour. Of these, 85% occur in the private sector, generating an estimated US \$236 billion annually, with sexual exploitation alone accounting for roughly 75% of these profits. More than half of all forced labour victims are located in the Asia-Pacific region. Migrant workers face nearly three times the risk compared to non-migrant workers. Children make up around 12% of those in forced labour, often in the worst forms of exploitation.

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Major parties involved

The World Bank

The World Bank plays a crucial role in addressing forced labour through its funding and technical assistance programs in developing countries. Many of these projects involve sectors at risk of labour explorations, such as infrastructure, agriculture and manufacturing. The World Bank also promotes labor standard and poverty reduction , which help address the root causes of modern slavery.

International Monetary Fund (IMF)

The IMF influences economic policies in countries who borrow from it, they can shape their labour laws and regulations. While some IMF policies can encourage economic growth and social development. The IMF holds significant power to influence whether governments adopt policies that improve workers rights or create environments where forced labour is in practice.

India

With 11,050.000 people living in modern slavery, India has the highest number of people living in modern slavery globally. Following the 2018 Global Slavery Index (GSI), the government has implemented measures to enhance its response to modern slavery, such as bolstering the capabilities of Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) and working to improve collaboration among governmental, civil society, media, and other groups to tackle modern slavery. However, there are still considerable deficiencies in the response.

China

With 5,771,000 people living in modern slavery, China is the larger exporter of goods globally. Since 2018, proof of forced labour affecting Uyghur and other Turkic and Muslim majority groups has surfaced in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Uyghur Region). Instances of forced labour imposed by private entities are reported, alongside forced marriage and organ trafficking, with the primary vulnerability stemming from discriminatory government policies.

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USA

The United States, being one of the largest consumer markets worldwide, has implemented laws like the Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act and the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act to address forced labor in imports. Companies in the US are progressively obligated to perform due diligence to guarantee that supply chains are devoid of exploitation.

European Union (EU)

The European Union is proactively addressing modern slavery and forced labor through laws such as the EU Forced Labour Regulation (EUFLR), which bans products produced with forced labor from entering the EU market. This regulation, which takes full effect in December 2027, aims at the import, sale, and export of these products, affecting companies in all industries and regions. The EU tackles forced labor via additional directives and national regulations, striving for a unified and coherent strategy.

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Timeline of Key Events

1807 Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

The Abolition of the Slave Trade Act is passed by the British Parliament, representing a significant advance toward the termination of chattel slavery. This opened the door for subsequent global initiatives against slavery while also resulting in new, concealed types of exploitation.

1926 International Labour Organization Forced Labour Convention

The ILO sets up its first major treaty to fight forced labor worldwide. It declares forced labor illegal under international law and creates a foundation for protecting labor rights in the future.

2015 Adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

Specifically, goal 8.7 aims to end forced labor, human trafficking, and child labor by 2025. It includes these goals in global development efforts.

2023 Australia's Modern Slavery Amendment Act

Australia strengthened its Modern Slavery Act by increasing reporting requirements for companies and raising penalties for those who did not follow. The change encourages transparency and holds businesses accountable for their actions.

2024 New Global Corporate Reporting Standards for Human Rights

The IFRS Foundation established a task force aimed at creating worldwide standards for businesses to disclose human rights risks, such as forced labour, enhancing transparency and ensuring investor accountability.

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Previous attempts to solve the issue

International Labour Organization Forced Labour Convention (no.29), 1930

The ILO Forced Labour Convention is one of the eight fundamental conventions of the ILO, this one is aimed to abolish forced labour in all its forms. The convention was adopted on 28 June, 1930 and came into force on 1 May 1932. Currently, it has been ratified by more than 180 countries. Though the convention has had some success, there are also limitations in addressing exploitation within complex supply chains and its potential overlap with the Palermo Protocol on trafficking.

UN Palermo Protocol (2000)

Overview The UN Palermo Protocol, officially titled the "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children," is an international agreement that establishes the legal framework for combating human trafficking globally. The treaty entered into force on December 25, 2003 and currently has been ratified by 185 parties.

The Modern Slavery Act, 2015

Ten years ago, the United Kingdom introduced a law aimed at reducing exploitation in supply chains across the globe and combat modern slavery. It brought together existing laws related to slavery and human trafficking, designing a way to make it easier to prosecute offenders. The Modern Slavery Act is a multi-targeted approach to ending modern slavery, offering prevention measures, such as creating the office of Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. It also provided victim support for those experiencing human trafficking and forced labour, as well as making supply chains more transparent. While this act was very promising, it has failed to achieve its commitments. The Act wasn't designed to abolish modern slavery, but instead shed light and prosecute those perpetrators.

Australia's Modern Slavery Act (2018)

Australia's Modern Slavery Act 2018 is a law requiring large organizations operating in Australia with annual revenue exceeding AUD 100 million to submit annual Modern Slavery Statements, detailing their efforts to identify and address modern slavery risks. These statements must outline the entity's structure, operations, and supply chains, while describing specific actions taken to assess and mitigate slavery risks. This in turn, promoted transparency of large cooperation supply chains.

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Possible solutions

National Action Plans

Countries could create National Action Plans aimed at forced labor and modern slavery. These plans can bring together government efforts, set clear objectives, and promote cooperation among groups like law enforcement, businesses, and civil society.

Strengthen Legal Frameworks

This includes passing laws that criminalize all forms of forced labor, improving enforcement methods, and ensuring that penalties serve as effective deterrents. Strong labor laws also protect workers' rights and improve workplace conditions.

Education and Awareness

Raising education and awareness is essential for prevention. Governments, NGOs, and companies should run campaigns to inform vulnerable groups about their rights and the risks of exploitation. Awareness also helps consumers demand products that are ethically sourced.

Identification and Reporting of Corporate Actions

Improving the identification and reporting of corporate actions will help increase transparency and accountability. Mandatory reporting requirements, independent audits, and protections for whistleblowers make it easier to find and fix forced labor practices in supply chains.

Financial Support

Providing financial support to victims and groups fighting forced labor is vital. Funding rehabilitation programs, legal aid, and victim support services helps survivors recover and reintegrate. Supporting NGOs and initiatives focused on prevention and enforcement also strengthens the overall fight against modern slavery.

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Further reading

[Forced Labour, Modern Slavery, and Trafficking in Persons](#)

Provides official conventions, statistics, and research on forced labour worldwide.

[Global Slavery Index](#)

Offers detailed data, country profiles, and analysis of modern slavery prevalence globally.

[Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling](#)

Covers the international framework and efforts to combat human trafficking.

[Ethical Trading Initiative](#)

A collaborative alliance of companies, trade unions, and NGOs focused on improving workers' rights.

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