

Modern Slavery

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INTRODUCTION

Modern slavery, a term often associated with past times, remains a pervasive and omnipresent prevailing issue in our contemporary world. Despite its often invisible nature in the Western world, modern slavery keeps being an issue for many people worldwide, depriving individuals of their fundamental freedom, human rights, and dignity.

This complex issue appears in various forms like forced labor, debt bondage, forced marriage, and human trafficking, sexual slavery and forced prostitution, adapting and evolving with global economic and social shifts.

Despite international legal frameworks that are aimed at eradicating modern forms of slavery, like Article 8 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), which explicitly prohibits slavery, servitude, and forced labour, or conventions established by the International Labour Organization like the Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour (1930) and several regional instruments, modern slavery continues to thrive, fueled by inequality, severe poverty, and discrimination paired with a lack of awareness.

Victims are often the most marginalized groups, who are exploited by industries, hidden by ambiguous supply chains, and left without justice or accountability for the ones responsible. Due to a lack of verified data, the actual number of victims of modern slavery is likely worse than anticipated, making forced labor a crisis found in every country and industry, as well as across diverse demographics.

While there are various forms of modern slavery, many closely related and sometimes gathered under the term forced labor, this report aims at dissecting these nuances, shedding light on human trafficking, forced labor, debt bondage, and forced prostitution.

1. HUMAN TRAFFICKING

1.1 DEFINING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking - also referred to as trafficking in persons or trafficking in human beings - is one of the grossest contemporary forms of human rights abuse and a critical component of modern slavery. It involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of individuals through means of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or the giving and receiving of payments to obtain control over another person, for the ultimate purpose of exploitation.

The internationally accepted legal definition of human trafficking is set out in the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000), supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. According to this instrument, exploitation includes, at a minimum: the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, and the removal of organs.

The crime of human trafficking is understood to comprise three key elements:

- The act – *what* is done: recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons;
- The means – *how* it is done: through threats, use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or the giving/receiving of benefits to those in control of the victim;
- The purpose – *why* it is done: for the purpose of exploitation.

Importantly, in the case of child victims, the element of coercion or deceit is not required for the act to be considered trafficking. Any action undertaken for exploitative purposes involving a person under the age of 18 automatically constitutes trafficking in persons, recognising the particular vulnerability and special protection owed to children under international law.

Human trafficking affects women, men, and children of all ages and backgrounds and occurs in every region of the world. Victims may be trafficked across borders or within their own countries. Traffickers often use deceptive employment agencies, false promises of education or migration, and exploit people's economic desperation or displacement. Once trafficked, victims are commonly subjected to violence, psychological abuse, threats, manipulation, and isolation. Control is maintained through confiscation of identity documents, debt bondage, surveillance, or threats against family members.

Human trafficking thrives on systemic and structural inequalities such as poverty, discrimination, armed conflict, gender inequality, limited legal migration pathways, and weak governance and rule of law. It is both a cause and consequence of broader socio-economic injustice and is deeply linked to the demand for exploitative labour and commercial sexual exploitation. The hidden and multifaceted nature of trafficking makes it especially difficult to detect and prosecute, allowing it to persist in both formal and informal sectors, in times of peace and conflict, and across digital and physical spaces.

1.1.1 Human Trafficking Vs Smuggling

Smuggling and trafficking, though often conflated, are distinct crimes with different legal definitions, dynamics, and implications for victims. According to the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants, smuggling refers to the procurement of the illegal entry of a person into a country of which they are not a national or permanent resident, in exchange for a financial or material benefit. Key elements of smuggling include the migrant's consent, the absence of coercion or deception, and the primary purpose being border crossing for profit. In most smuggling cases, migrants willingly approach smugglers to facilitate their movement, and the relationship typically ends upon arrival at the destination. By contrast, trafficking in persons involves acts such as recruitment, transport, or harbouring of individuals through coercion, deception, or abuse, for the purpose of exploitation, including forced labour, sexual exploitation, or servitude. Consent in trafficking cases is either absent or rendered irrelevant due to the coercive means employed. Trafficking may or may not involve cross-border movement; exploitation is the core element, not migration. Moreover, trafficking is considered a crime against the individual, whereas smuggling is primarily a crime against the State and its immigration laws.

However, the distinction is not always clear-cut. In practice, smuggled migrants may become victims of trafficking during or after their journey, and traffickers often operate alongside or as smugglers, using the same routes and networks. This overlap makes it critical for authorities and service providers to assess each case carefully, as misidentifying trafficked persons as smuggled migrants can lead to severe consequences, including denial of protection and support. Ultimately, while smuggling centres on movement for payment, trafficking is defined by exploitation and control. Key elements and main differences between the two crimes are summarised in the table below.

	Trafficking in persons (adults)	Trafficking in persons (children)	Migrant smuggling
Victim's age	Over 18	Below 18	Irrelevant

Mental element	Intention	Intention	Intention
Material element	Act Means Exploitive purpose	Act Exploitive purpose	Act: procurement of an illegal entry Purpose: for financial or other material benefit
Consent of the trafficked or smuggled person	Irrelevant once the means are established	Irrelevant; means do not need to be established	The smuggled person consents to the smuggling
Transnationality	Not required	Not required	Required
Involvement of an organised criminal group	Not required	Not required	Not required

1.1.2 Victim Identification

Early and accurate identification of trafficking victims is critical to ensuring their protection, access to support services, and removal from exploitative situations. Otherwise, victims risk continued abuse, denial of rights, prosecution for actions committed under coercion, or deportation. It also undermines efforts to dismantle trafficking networks and hinders the development of effective prevention strategies. Identifying trafficked persons early is essential to recognising them as victims and guaranteeing them access to care, safety, and justice. Crucially, the focus must remain on the rights and needs of victims rather than their potential usefulness in criminal proceedings.

Early identification is important because it removes victims from harm and ensures they receive care, protection, and support; it prevents further intimidation by separating victims from traffickers; it enables prosecution of traffickers and helps monitor trafficking trends; and it supports prevention by identifying those at risk before exploitation occurs.

A human rights-based approach requires officials to respect the dignity of migrants and to be trained to identify victims appropriately. Only reasonable grounds, not absolute proof, are needed to recognise someone as a victim. When age or victim status is unclear, individuals should be given the benefit of the doubt. Respectful and sensitive treatment of victims significantly increases the chances they will participate in legal proceedings. However, victims often do not self-identify due to mistrust of authorities, fear of deportation or retaliation, intimidation, trauma, stigma, or lack of knowledge about their rights. Some may

even feel dependent on traffickers or have emotional or familial ties to them, further complicating identification.

Overall, the identification of trafficking victims must be grounded in a human rights approach that ensures non-conditional protection, timely support, and coordinated action across all relevant sectors.

1.2 LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The international legal framework addressing human trafficking is principally anchored in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, commonly known as the Palermo Protocol, which supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC). Adopted in 2000, the Protocol provides the first comprehensive international definition of human trafficking. A key principle of the Palermo Protocol is that a victim's consent is rendered irrelevant when any illicit means, such as coercion or abuse of vulnerability, are used. The Protocol obliges States Parties to criminalise trafficking in persons, adopt protective and assistance measures for victims, and foster cross-border cooperation. It further calls on States to strengthen border controls, enhance law enforcement collaboration, and provide social, legal, and psychological support to victims. Over time, its provisions have shaped domestic and regional anti-trafficking legislation globally and continue to serve as the foundation of international efforts to combat human trafficking.

This Protocol, together with the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (commonly referred to as the Migrants Protocol), forms a cohesive international legal architecture for addressing trafficking and related transnational crimes. These instruments not only require States to align their national laws with international standards but also offer mechanisms for cooperation in investigation, prosecution, extradition, and mutual legal assistance.

While the Palermo Protocol focuses specifically on human trafficking, the broader Organized Crime Convention facilitates the prosecution of various interconnected crimes often perpetrated by the same criminal networks, including drug and arms trafficking, migrant smuggling, money laundering, and corruption. This integrated approach allows States to address the multifaceted nature of organised crime, sometimes enabling prosecution for broader criminal participation even when direct evidence of trafficking is insufficient.

The Trafficking in Persons Protocol outlines three main objectives: (1) to prevent and combat trafficking in persons, (2) to protect and assist victims of trafficking with full respect for their human rights, and (3) to promote cooperation among States Parties in order to achieve these goals.

1.2.1 Critiques

While the Protocol's definition of trafficking is a break from conservative definitions, many groups and authors have still critiqued it for an emphasis on law and order at the expense of human rights (Kapur 2007; Saunders 2005). By situating the Protocol within a framework aimed at combating transnational organised crime, critics argue it emphasises criminality and victimhood, potentially sidelining the socio-economic and complex realities of trafficking (Doezema, 2002). It is often seen as a tool designed primarily to promote state cooperation on border control and law enforcement rather than ensuring justice and restitution for victims (Segrave & Milivojević, 2005). Furthermore, restrictive border policies and limited mobility rights are argued to deepen the marginalisation of vulnerable populations, increasing their exposure to trafficking-related harm (Sanghera, 2008). The focus on sexual exploitation has also been critiqued for overshadowing other forms of forced labour (ILO, 2001), and the conflation of women and children in the text is seen as infantilising adult women and undermining their agency (Howard & Lalani, 2008). Additionally, the Protocol's lack of clear definitions for key concepts like "sexual exploitation" and "slavery-like practices" creates space for inconsistent national interpretations, which has, in practice, led to repressive migration controls, surveillance of sex workers, and deportations of migrant women under the guise of anti-trafficking efforts (Coomaraswamy, 2001; Doezema, 2002; Gallagher, 2001).

1.3 DRIVERS AND ROOT CAUSES

As with other forms of modern slavery, the causes of human trafficking are varied, multifaceted, and often context-specific, influenced by a complex interplay of economic, social, political, and structural factors. In countries of origin, trafficking is frequently driven by poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunities, and weak social protection systems. Political instability, armed conflict, natural disasters, and humanitarian crises often displace large populations, rendering them particularly vulnerable to exploitation, especially women and children. In some cases, children from poor families are entrusted to wealthier acquaintances or relatives with the hope of securing better futures, but instead fall victim to exploitation and trafficking networks (IOM, 2022). Social and cultural norms that devalue women and girls, as well as practices such as child marriage and informal fostering, also contribute to vulnerability (UNODC, 2008). At the same time, the strong desire to migrate in search of safety or improved living conditions is commonly exploited by traffickers, who initially gain cooperation through promises of employment or education, only to resort to coercion once victims are in transit or abroad.

In destination countries, demand for cheap, low-skilled labour and commercial sex fuels trafficking, is exacerbated by organised criminal activity, restrictive immigration regimes, inadequate border controls, and technological tools such as the internet that facilitate recruitment and exploitation. For traffickers, the incentives are high: profits are significant, and the risks of detection and prosecution are low, especially in contexts where legislation is weak, enforcement is poor, or corruption is prevalent (IOM, 2022). Many traffickers operate with impunity while victims are often criminalised or neglected by the justice system. The

lack of political will, institutional capacity, and coordinated law enforcement responses across borders further enable trafficking networks to flourish.

1.3.1 Case: human trafficking in Libya

Libya has become a major hub for human trafficking, driven by ongoing political instability, weak governance, and its strategic location as a transit point for migrants attempting to reach Europe. Since 2011, both official and unofficial detention centres in Libya have been sites of severe human rights abuses, including modern slavery. These crimes have been perpetrated by militias, criminal networks, government officials, and state security forces. Despite the International Criminal Court (ICC) receiving substantial evidence and announcing investigations, and the creation of a legal framework paper on modern slavery in Libya, however, as time passed, no prosecution was announced against the Libyan militia leaders by the ICC (Crawford, 2019).

The scale of trafficking is extensive, with Libya scoring 8.5/10 for human trafficking in the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index and ranking 192nd out of 193 countries in resilience to organised crime.

Detention centres operated by the Libyan Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM), as well as those run by militias, are central to the trafficking system. Migrants are detained without legal protections, often tortured, exploited for labour or sex, and released only after paying bribes or ransoms. Migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa face especially harsh treatment. Armed groups and private employers frequently exploit detainees for forced labour, including military support roles such as transporting weapons and cooking for militias. In many cases, traffickers send videos of abuse to families to extort payments.

Libya's fragmented political environment, marked by the limited authority of the Government of National Unity (GNU) and ongoing conflicts with rival factions such as the Libyan National Army (LNA), has left vast areas under the control of armed groups. These groups, along with corrupt officials and transnational trafficking networks, continue to profit from human trafficking. The country's failed judicial system, endemic corruption, and lack of institutional oversight have allowed trafficking crimes to flourish unchecked, making Libya one of the most dangerous and exploitative environments for migrants in the world.

European Union support has further entrenched this system. Through funding, training, and equipping the Libyan Coast Guard and migration authorities, the EU has enabled the interception and forced return of tens of thousands of migrants to Libya, where they face detention and abuse. Multiple international organisations have documented how this externalisation of border control has made Europe complicit in the cycle of exploitation and violence suffered by migrants in Libya.

1.4 TOWARDS ERADICATION

The eradication of human trafficking necessitates a comprehensive and coordinated international response, grounded in the principles of prevention, protection of victims, and prosecution of perpetrators. The Trafficking in Persons Protocol underscores the importance of addressing the root causes of trafficking and calls on States Parties to implement wide-ranging measures such as social and economic initiatives, research, public information campaigns, and cooperation with civil society actors.

Preventive efforts are central to this approach and require the involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders (including lawmakers, law enforcement, the media, and the public) in the design and implementation of targeted and context-specific strategies. These include awareness-raising campaigns, rapid response mechanisms during emergencies, and strategies aimed at discouraging the demand that fuels all forms of exploitation. Effective prevention must also include border control measures, anti-corruption initiatives, and the promotion of safe and legal migration pathways (UNODC, 2008).

Complementing these international legal obligations, the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) promotes a human rights-based approach to combating trafficking, focusing on the rights and dignity of victims through capacity-building, law enforcement, and aligning national legislation to international human rights standards.

2. FORCED LABOUR

2.1 DEFINING FORCED LABOUR

The ILO officially defines forced labor as "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily" (ILO, 1930).

Hence, it comprises three core elements, namely the work or service that refers to any form of work, regardless of sector, industry, or work activity, even if occurring in an informal economy. The second element is the voluntariness, which is fulfilled if the person has freely and informedly agreed to do a job, which includes the person's freedom to end the activity at any time. Thirdly, a key aspect of forced labor is the risk of different types of penalties if the victim is not coerced into working (Ollus, 2015).

Among these factors, the most ambiguous is the „menace of penalty.“ It is essential to clarify that this can refer not only to physical violence as a form of punishment but also to psychological intimidation, withholding identity documents, threats against family members,

or even threatening to report someone's irregular migration status. Moreover, the conditions that define forced labor must be clearly distinguished from poor working conditions or exploitative work situations where the person has entered voluntarily, which is by no means acceptable but does not fall under the specific criteria of forced labor (Mapp, 2007).

2.1.1 Historical Background

When tracing the historical roots of forced labour, it becomes apparent that forced labor is often referred to as modern slavery and transitioned from early forms of slavery. One of the first forms of forced labour was chattel slavery, forming the foundations of forced labor systems and grounded on the idea that persons were owned, traded, and treated as property. One prominent example is the transatlantic slave trade, which grew from the strong demand for workforces, which is still a primary driver for forced labor nowadays, as it will be assessed later (Rawley et al. 2005).

Furthermore, colonial empires established forced labor systems through *corvée* labor, which involved unpaid and mandatory work directed by the government, as well as indentured labor systems, both of which were mainly coercive and exploitative. Additionally, native populations were used and exploited to work on establishing infrastructure, mining, and agriculture.

Over the years, formal slavery and the original form of forced labour have been abolished, but the practice simply shifted into modern forms and moved from legal ownership to control through coercion, deception, or economic dependence, which will be further examined in the next section. Common methods of control include threats of violence, confiscation of documents, restrictions on movement, psychological coercion, and manipulation. Additionally, state-driven forced labour remained widespread into the 20th century, as evidenced by the Soviet Union's gulag system, Nazi forced concentration camps officially established for forced labour, and China's re-education camps through labour (Roberts, 2024).

While the terminology and legal context have evolved, the underlying power dynamics, exploiting vulnerability through force or coercion, have stayed the same. The rise of global supply chains as a part of globalization, mass migration, and informal labor markets in the late 20th and 21st centuries has created new opportunities for forced labor to flourish.

2.1.2 Forms and Manifestations

There are different types of forced labour, one being state-imposed forced labour enforced by governments or related state authorities. Common forms include mandatory

prison labour, which often occurs without fair trial guarantees and is typically accompanied by a lack of basic protections against labour exploitation and abuse, demonstrated through complete proprietary control (ACLU, 2022).

Additionally, other possible forms of forced labour include mandatory national service that exceeds reasonable civic duties and labour camps used as punishment for dissent or minority status, as seen in China's Xinjiang region with the forced labour camps for Uyghurs.

Domestic servitude is a form of forced labour where individuals are made to work in private homes under exploitative conditions, including long hours, isolation, withheld wages, and abuse, often dangerously hidden from public view and oversight.

One core form of forced labour that has gained increasing attention in recent years due to public awareness of fast fashion brands is forced labour in global supply chains. An exploitation embedded in subcontracting and outsourcing, which is common in various industries like agriculture, textiles, and garment production, as well as mining and electronics (ILO, n.d.). Related practices such as debt bondage, human trafficking, and forced marriage are addressed in dedicated chapters due to their distinct features and scale.

However, all types of forced labour involve similar mechanisms of coercion and control, which include tactics like confiscating ID documents or travel papers, threatening violence, arrest, or deportation, withholding wages or manipulating debt, as well as surveillance and physical confinement to keep victims in forced labour.

2.1.3 Child labour

The still widespread occurrence of child labour can, but does not always, qualify as forced labor. Typically, child labor is defined as work that deprives children of their childhood and fundamental human rights. However, not all work children do is harmful, such as helping on a family farm part-time or after school. Regardless, when the work children do becomes exploitative, hazardous, or involuntary, it can indeed constitute child labor. Additionally, it involves children who are below the legal working age and are coerced into work through threats, punishment, or manipulation.

Typical examples are children being forced to work in mines, plantations, or factories under abusive supervision. Alternatively, some children work in domestic settings, hidden in private homes and cut off from family or access to education. Another frequent form of child labour involves the use of child soldiers or children forced into illegal activities like drug trafficking or prostitution (Mapp, 2007).

2.2 LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

As already touched upon in the introduction, the ILO established several core instruments to combat forced labor. One of the most crucial is the Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) from 1930, which defined forced or compulsory labour and called upon all states to suppress all types of it. Another important instrument is the ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (No. 105) from 1957, which prohibits the use of forced labour and strengthens the protection against state-imposed forced labour.

Especially, the ILO protocol of 2014 to the Convention No. 29 reiterates the obligations for member states and their role in shaping global policy by requiring states to prevent forced labour, protect victims, and ensure access to justice and remedies. An ILO convention aimed explicitly at combating child labour is Convention No. 182 from 1999, which points out the worst forms of forced child labour and mandates immediate and effective measures for elimination (ILO, n.d.).

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) Article 8 prohibits slavery, slave trade, and forced or compulsory labour. It is legally binding on all state parties that signed and ratified it (ICCPR, 1966). Additionally, the Palermo Protocol seeks to prevent, suppress, and punish human trafficking. It emphasizes its particular importance in relation to forced labour, as trafficking is a key factor behind it, which will be further discussed in the chapter on human trafficking (UNGA, 2000).

Furthermore, many regional and domestic legal frameworks are addressing forced labour through modern slavery acts or anti-slavery laws (e.g., UK Modern Slavery Act, US Trafficking Victims Protection Act, and EU Directives).

2.3 DRIVERS AND ROOT CAUSES

The world is still divided by extreme economic inequality. This poverty and extreme deprivation, combined with the desperate need for income, are one of the main drivers of forced labour. In low-income countries shaken by severe inequality and poverty, economic desperation forces people into exploitative jobs, often due to the lack of an alternative, resulting in forced labour.

Economic crises and shocks lead to displacement, loss of livelihoods, and growing desperation, pushing people into forced labour. Similarly, other crises such as armed conflict and climate disasters often result in mass migration and loss of protection, increasing vulnerability to coercion. Additionally, this can cause irregular migration, leaving migrants without legal status and making them highly prone to exploitation and also less likely to report abuse. Furthermore, these crises are often followed by infrastructure collapse and a

lack of governance and rule of law, frequently leading to corruption and impunity, allowing exploiters to operate without restraint (Aronowitz, 2016).

A major cause of forced labor is the rapid growth of global supply chains and informal sectors that increase dependence on underpaid, unprotected, and coercively controlled labor due to high demand for cheap labor and reduced costs. A complex issue here is that a lack of transparency and accountability in supply chains makes it difficult to identify and address forced labor. Furthermore, inadequate due diligence by businesses and the failure to properly assess and mitigate risks exacerbate the issue (LeBaron et al, 2018).

Lastly, there are also social and cultural factors like discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, caste, religion, or migrant status that fuel social exploitation and result in marginalized groups being targeted and driven into forced labor. Women are disproportionately targeted due to their often lower social or legal status, particularly in domestic servitude and sexual exploitation, which will be addressed in more detail later.

2.4 IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES OF FORCED LABOUR

Forced labour has far-reaching effects on individuals, societies, and the global economy. Concerning the impact on individuals, forced labour often results in physical and psychological trauma. It is frequently accompanied by abuse, violence, and neglect, and it increases the risk of mental health issues. Additionally, it involves a loss of liberty and autonomy, reflected in control over movement, communication, and decision-making. Possible health effects include malnutrition, disease, and, especially for migrants without a legal residence permit, resulting in forced labour and often accompanied by a lack of medical care. All these consequences not only affect individuals but also lead to long-term recovery challenges that include integration, trauma recovery, and often a long way to economic stability.

Besides the individual impact, forced labour also affects society and the economy. It can harm legitimate businesses by producing unfair competition from those using forced labour. Related to this is also the loss of tax revenue for a state, which challenges the welfare and rule of law standards due to the illegal nature of forced labour. This also hampers development goals and slows progress in reducing poverty and promoting equality. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, forced labour erodes human rights and dignity and degrades societal values (ILO, 2024a).

2.5 TOWARDS ERADICATION: EFFORTS AND CHALLENGES

There are multifaceted efforts underway to extinguish forced labour, ranging from international legal interventions to local and civil society campaigns. Yet, they face persistent challenges that call for more innovative and cooperative efforts.

2.5.1 Efforts and Interventions

On the international level, efforts are focused on strengthening the legal frameworks mentioned above and on their enforcement and rigorous implementation. Most countries also have and work on the enforcement and adoption of anti-slavery laws that criminalize forced labour. Moreover, due diligence mechanisms in the context of business and human rights frameworks are being progressively imposed, aimed at increasing transparency in global supply chains and avoiding forced labour.

Law enforcement is working to hold perpetrators accountable and simultaneously improve victim identification, rescue, and protection. Very importantly, and tried by many authorities but still leaving room for improvement, is the access to justice for victims, which should include remedies, compensation, and legal aid, that is still lacking in many countries (Thomann, 2011).

As outlined in the section about drivers and the root causes of forced labour, many of these are known, making prevention strategies essential to address the root causes and proactively combat forced labour. Root causes like poverty and discrimination can be addressed through development programs and public awareness campaigns, often underpinned by multi-stakeholder collaboration, including civil society, governments, intergovernmental organizations, and businesses. As part of the prevention, and already mentioned above, there are also due diligence mechanisms of business, often integrated due to ethical standards that need to be upheld in order to create positive images and encouraged by governments or even legally required (ILO, 2024b).

2.5.2 Persistent Challenges

Regardless of these ongoing efforts and prevention methods, eradicating forced labour continues to face challenges. The ambiguous nature of forced labour makes it difficult to identify its occurrence, and the constant fear of reprisal from the exploiting perpetrators, or, especially for migrants without legal residence status, the fear of deportation. Furthermore, because the profit and benefits of forced labour are relatively high compared to the low risk of being held accountable, along with low conviction rates, it creates strong economic incentives for continued exploitation, which in turn impedes the eradication efforts. The complexity of global supply chains often conceals exploitation and challenges the efforts to combat it.

While certain legal mechanisms exist to combat forced labour, many countries, especially in conflict-ridden areas with weak governance and the rule of law, where instability continues, see efforts undermined by inadequate legislation, limited enforcement resources, and corruption. This is often paired with the lack of resources to tackle these issues, and additionally, a lack of political will prevents effective, sustainable action (International Labour Office, 2022).

Looking forward, more intensified and innovative strategies that foster collaboration across countries and industries are required to combat forced labour effectively. A key focus should be on the more rigorous data collection to support a more evidence-based approach in effectively taking action and establishing informed policies. Moreover, the leveraging of technologies and innovation could be a promising way forward to increase supply chain transparency, and also digital tools to expand avenues to justice and remedies.

The strengthening of cooperation across countries is key to dismantling transnational criminal networks and ensuring worker protection through international labour agreements. A victim-centred, human rights-based approach should be strengthened, which emphasizes survivor involvement in policy development, comprehensive support, and the principle of non-punishment for victims (Schwarz et al, 2022).

Lastly, shifting economic incentives to make exploitation unprofitable through asset seizures and financial penalties, promoting fair trade, and enhancing labour governance by empowering inspectors and supporting worker voices will be essential in the ongoing effort to combat forced labour.

3. DEBT BONDAGE

3.1 DEFINING DEBT BONDAGE

3.1.1 Core Elements of Debt Bondage

Debt bondage is a distinct and widespread form of modern slavery that continues to rapidly expand and is characterized by individuals borrowing loans they are unable to repay, often under terms that make escape impossible (Khan et al, 2021). While being closely related to forced labour and sharing many characteristics with it, as discussed in the previous

chapter, debt bondage is characterized specifically by the main coercion being the repayment of debts.

Defined by the UN Supplementary Convention, debt bondage refers to a situation in which a debtor pledges their own services, or those of someone under their control, as security for a debt, without clear limits on the duration or nature of the work, or where the value of the work provided is not reasonably applied to reduce the debt (OHCHR, 1956).

Most important is the aspect that the individual is inherently unable to leave or repay the debt due to manipulated terms, hence creating a form of slavery and forced labour. It clearly differs from legitimate forms of employment, because of the prevailing coercion, absence of free consent, and lack of reasonable means to end the situation, which are all hallmarks of forced labour. Debt bondage appears in many sectors like agriculture, brick kilns, domestic work, fisheries, and mining.

3.1.2 Forms and Manifestations

One form of debt bondage is intergenerational debt, manifested through debt that is inherited from one generation to another. This debt traps families in unescapable circumstances that are difficult to escape and often remain their entire lives.

Moreover, debt bondage also appears through recruitment fee debt. This manifestation is characterized by exorbitant fees that come with the job placement and create overwhelming debt for the workers. The victims of this form of debt bondage are often migrants who are in desperate need of a job offer and hence are driven into unfair agreements and trapped in conditions that violate fundamental human rights and dignity.

Lastly, there is subsistence debt, loans that come for basic necessities like food or housing, often occurring in highly vulnerable contexts, where people are left with no choice but to be even more drawn to those exploitative conditions (LeBaron, 2014). In all these forms, debt bondage might also include, in addition to threats of violence, the confiscation of ID, making it impossible for the victims to escape, being literally left without an identity, very much resembling former versions of slavery.

3.2 LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AGAINST DEBT BONDAGE

Since debt bondage is a form of forced labour and often mentioned in the broader framework of forced labour, many international legal frameworks that apply to forced labour, as outlined in chapter 2, also apply to debt bondage. The primary instrument aimed at the abolition of debt bondage is the already mentioned UN Supplementary Convention on the

Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (1956), which explicitly defines and prohibits debt bondage.

Moreover, the two ILO conventions, numbers 29 and 105, are also relevant because debt bondage is a primary means of exacting forced labour. Many countries have incorporated laws in their national legislations that criminalize debt bondage and reflect international standards, such as the ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) and the Supplementary Slavery Convention.

Furthermore, these laws that are sometimes directly drawn from those international instruments prohibit the use of debt or other forms of coercion in exchange for labour. They may include penalties for perpetrators and generally regulations for preventing exploitative employment tactics, often more strictly enforced than international legal instruments that are not always binding (UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, 2001).

3.3 DRIVERS AND ROOT CAUSES OF DEBT BONDAGE

The drivers of debt bondage are similar to forced labour, multifaceted, but the key root causes are poverty and a lack of economic opportunities. Economic vulnerabilities like the lack of access to formal credit and financial services, as well as poverty, followed by desperation, and hence driving individuals to take predatory loans are key drivers.

Cultural and social factors also play into it, like traditional systems of informal lending or patronage that can easily turn exploitative and further perpetrate inequality. Weak economic systems also often come hand in hand with the lack of educational opportunities and limited access to job training (Kahn et al, 2021). Hence, low literacy rates and a lack of awareness about rights or predatory contracts lead to debt bondage (LeBaron, 2014).

Again, as also seen in general forced labour, discrimination against specific groups makes them targets for exploitative lenders and hence drives them into modern slavery practices. However, there are also governance and rule of law deficits that drive debt bondage. Not only weak regulation of informal lending and recruitment industries, but also the lack of legal aid for victims is driving debt bondage. Additionally, general governance issues like corruption and conflict also exacerbate vulnerability and play into forced labour practices, which were highlighted in the previous chapter about forced labour (Avis, 2020).

3.4 IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES

A distinct impact on the individual basis of debt bondage, when compared to other forms of modern slavery, is the perpetual indebtedness. While this of course occurs in different kinds of forced labour too, debt bondage has a particularly high likelihood of staying indebted endlessly due to the unfair nature of terms and contracts, creating a cycle of

debt that is almost impossible to escape from. Consequently, this includes losing economic freedom due to the lack of options for leaving employment and seeking alternatives. As already touched upon, a consequence of debt bondage is often the intergenerational exploitation, a passing of debt and forced labour obligation through families. Bounded labourers are likely to be victims of different forms of abuse like physical and psychological abuse, and violence often due to long work hours (OHCHR, 2016).

However, like other forms of forced labour, victims also suffer physical and psychological trauma, loss of autonomy, and health issues, as discussed in chapter 2. Regarding the societal and economic consequences of debt bondage, the cycle of poverty in communities that is being perpetrated is one of the most significant impacts (Kahn et al, 2021). Moreover, debt bondage contributes to lost wages, lack of human capital development, and the undermining of legitimate businesses.

Nevertheless, the impact resembles the impact of forced labour. For a broader definition of loss of tax revenue, unfair competition for legitimate businesses, and erosion of human rights, see Chapter 2.

3.5 TOWARDS ERADICATION

To effectively eradicate debt bondage, policies and regulations must address the broader issue of forced labour, as debt bondage is a key tool used to maintain workers in exploitative conditions. As emphasised by the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, governments should develop comprehensive, integrated programmes grounded in international human rights standards. These programmes must focus on meeting the needs of those affected and to tackle the root causes of such practices connected to debt bondage to achieve sustainable eradication.

Additionally, the approaches should be multifaceted and should include legislative and policy measures that incorporate appropriate enforcement mechanisms and provide for protection, prevention, and redress for rights violations (OHCHR, 2016). Legal provisions should explicitly forbid predatory interest rates on loans that lead to debt bondage. Furthermore, recruitment fees charged to workers should be banned, with employers held accountable for these costs to prevent exploitation and further debt bondage. A challenge in eliminating debt bondage is the inadequate and flawed labour inspection system and limited judicial access. Hence, to abolish debt bondage more effectively, a well-resourced labour inspectorate that is trained to identify and intervene in debt bondage cases, along with accessible and affordable legal recourse for victims to challenge debts and achieve compensation, is crucial.

It is of utmost importance to promote economic empowerment by ensuring access to formal credit, providing comprehensive financial education, and creating decent employment

opportunities. These measures help to offer viable alternatives and foster long-term stability in livelihoods, which also build resilience against forced labour. Furthermore, safeguarding the rights of vulnerable groups, such as migrant workers, by implementing protective measures and ensuring the proper maintenance of their identity documents, is needed. Community education campaigns can also play an important role in raising awareness. While legislative measures are helpful, advocacy and awareness initiatives are equally required. Informing and educating vulnerable communities about the risks associated with debt bondage and their rights is an important step towards justice. To raise consumer awareness when it comes to possible links between products and debt bondage can encourage demand for ethically produced goods and thereby contribute to the prevention of debt bondage.

4. FORCED PROSTITUTION

4.1 DEFINITIONS AND CONTEXT

Forced prostitution, also referred to as involuntary or compulsory prostitution, is a severe form of sexual exploitation and a recognized manifestation of sexual slavery. It occurs when individuals are compelled to engage in sexual acts against their will through the use of force, threats, deception, abuse of authority, or coercion, often within organized trafficking networks. This form of exploitation is explicitly referenced in international legal instruments, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, where it is classified as a crime against humanity when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack. Despite its recognition under international law, the term "forced prostitution" has been applied inconsistently across legal and policy frameworks, sometimes leading to confusion or inadequate protection for victims. Nonetheless, the defining element remains the absence of genuine consent due to external coercive factors. Under such conditions, the individual's autonomy is entirely overridden, rendering their involvement in sexual activity a product of exploitation rather than choice.

4.1.2 Forced prostitution and sex work

The distinction between sex work and forced prostitution continues to generate significant debate within feminist and legal discourse. Neo-abolitionist feminists argue that all forms of prostitution are inherently exploitative and indistinguishable from sex trafficking, as they are grounded in systemic gender-based violence and the objectification of women. They maintain that the issue of consent is irrelevant, contending that prostitution is inherently an institution of male domination and exploitation and calling for the criminalisation of all parties involved, except the sex worker, as a means of eradicating the sex trade (Raymond 2002). In contrast, neo-regulationists and pro-sex work advocates view sex work as a legitimate form of labour that should be decriminalised or legalised. They argue that trafficking, defined by coercion and exploitation, is distinct from voluntary sex work, which can represent a conscious livelihood choice involving agency and consent (Saunders 2005). From this perspective, laws equating all sex work with trafficking "coincide all too easily

with anti-feminist ideas about female sexuality" and threaten women's sexual autonomy (Howard and Lalani 2008). Critics of the victimhood paradigm contend that it erases the voices and experiences of sex workers themselves, who often reject both criminalisation and victimisation, instead demanding "bodily integrity, pleasure, livelihood, self-determination and a safe working environment" (Jayasree 2004).

The blurred boundaries between voluntary and forced entry into sex work, given socio-economic constraints, deception, or constrained choices, have led some scholars to argue that a rigid distinction between the two is unhelpful in practice. Instead, there is growing consensus that anti-trafficking interventions must centre the rights, agency, and lived realities of those involved in sex work, focusing less on moral judgment and more on harm reduction, legal protection, and empowerment (Evans and Bhattarai 2000; Segrave and Milivojević 2005).

4.2 LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The legal framework on forced prostitution is grounded in international and regional instruments that criminalise the exploitation of individuals for sexual purposes through coercion, deception, or abuse of power. The Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others obliges states to punish anyone who procures, entices, or exploits another person for prostitution, even with the victim's consent. The UN Palermo Protocol further defines trafficking for sexual exploitation as involving force, coercion, or deception for the purpose of exploitation, making the victim's consent irrelevant when such means are used. At the regional level, Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights has been interpreted by the European Court of Human Rights to encompass forced prostitution and human trafficking, requiring states to criminalise and effectively punish these practices. Within the European Union, directives such as the 2011 EU Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings mandate that member states criminalise forced prostitution and trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Many Asian countries have incorporated prohibitions on forced prostitution and exploitation of the prostitution of others into their national legal systems, however, the legal landscape is highly diverse: in most Asian countries, prostitution is illegal and regulated by a patchwork of criminal laws, social customs, and local ordinances, with law enforcement practices often resulting in the penalization and stigmatization of sex workers rather than traffickers.

4.3 DRIVERS AND ROOT CAUSES

The structural causes of forced prostitution are deeply rooted in interconnected socio-economic, cultural, and political factors, similar to other forms of modern slavery. Chief among these are poverty and gender discrimination, which significantly heighten women's and girls' vulnerability to trafficking (Bandyopadhyay 2004). Discriminatory norms, such as denial of inheritance rights, lack of education, cultural preference for sons,

and limited livelihood options, compound women's marginalisation and push them toward risky migration and exploitative arrangements under false promises.

Globalisation has also played a contradictory role. While it opens markets, it has led to the erosion of traditional livelihoods and the expansion of informal, unregulated labour sectors where coercive conditions are rife. Migration, urbanisation, and the breakdown of joint family systems have increased the precarity of women's economic situations, thus increasing susceptibility to trafficking. In many cases, family and community members are implicated in the trafficking process, often through deceitful marriages, employment scams, or even direct sales (Sharma 2007).

Armed conflict, displacement, and natural disasters add to this vulnerability. Refugees, internally displaced persons, and women affected by calamities often become easy targets for traffickers offering misleading prospects of safety or employment (Manohar 2002). These vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by systemic governance failures.

4.3.1 Case: Nigerian women trafficked for sexual purposes to Italy

A very specific yet widespread case is represented by the trafficking of Nigerian women to Europe, especially Italy, via Libya that has reached alarming proportions, with IOM describing it as a "crisis". Thousands of women are arriving by sea and are systematically funneled into networks of sexual exploitation, and this form of trafficking is particularly insidious as migrant reception centres, meant for protection, are being used by traffickers as "holding pens" where women are picked up by criminal networks, often as soon as they receive legal documents.

Unlike many other trafficking models that rely heavily on physical force, Nigerian trafficking networks often use a psychological and spiritual system of control. Victims are typically recruited through false promises of legitimate employment and then subjected to traditional "juju" rituals that bind them through fear and shame. These oaths are designed to ensure debt repayment, interlinking this form of slavery to debt bondage, and to create the perception that disobedience will bring harm to the victim's family. The debt contract is considered a pact by both trafficker and victim, where failure to comply carries emotional and spiritual consequences, and traffickers use this fear to maintain control. Yet, when this coercion proves insufficient, victims may also be subjected to extreme physical abuse, particularly during the Libya leg of the journey, as documented in notorious locations such as 'Adam's Ghetto' in Sabah (InfoMigrants, 2022).

Nigerian trafficking is largely run by women, many of whom were once victims themselves. Having "paid off" their own debts, they often continue in the trafficking industry due to limited legal employment opportunities in Europe and social stigma back home. Families, meanwhile, may see a daughter's migration to Europe as the only viable route out of poverty, placing immense pressure to provide financial support. Traffickers increasingly target rural areas where awareness of trafficking is low, access to education is limited, and religious rituals hold strong cultural sway.

The structural barriers faced by these women, ranging from systemic poverty and gendered expectations to the shame surrounding sexual exploitation, make reintegration exceedingly difficult, even for those who escape. Despite international legal frameworks that obligate states to identify and protect trafficking victims, many Nigerian women are not recognised as such by Italian or Libyan authorities, denying them access to asylum or protective services. Human rights organisations argue that both Italy and Libya have violated obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), especially Articles 2 and 6, by failing to prevent trafficking and protect its victims (ASGI, 2021).

4.4 IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES

Forced prostitution inflicts severe and lasting harm on victims, both physically and psychologically. Survivors often endure repeated sexual violence, physical assaults, forced unprotected sex, and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Many report chronic health issues such as exhaustion, hepatitis C, gynecological problems, and substance dependency, often used as a coping mechanism for the trauma. Psychological consequences are equally profound, including anxiety, depression, dissociation, suicidal ideation, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For many, these symptoms evolve into complex PTSD, a condition reflecting prolonged and repeated trauma under conditions of captivity, coercion, or helplessness. (Cloitre, Courtois, Charuvastra, Carapezza, Stolbach and Green, 2011).

Beyond the direct health impacts, victims of sex trafficking experience a deep rupture in their ability to trust and form safe relationships. Their dependency on traffickers for basic needs like food or shelter is intertwined with exploitation, creating confusion and long-term damage to their sense of safety and autonomy. The shame, loss of identity, and missed educational or vocational opportunities further compound feelings of hopelessness. (Levine, 2017).

To effectively support recovery, a complex trauma-informed approach is critical. This means addressing survivors' immediate physical safety and health needs, while also recognizing their psychological and emotional injuries. Practical strategies include providing psychoeducation about trauma and sexual violence to reduce self-blame; using evidence-based therapies like Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT) to improve coping with grief, social isolation, and role transitions; offering choices and autonomy in services to avoid recreating the controlling dynamics of trafficking; building peer support networks, such as survivor or parenting groups, to reduce isolation and restore social bonds; embedding mental health care in primary and maternal health settings to make psychological support accessible and less stigmatized; and training and supporting caregivers and service providers to manage vicarious trauma and burnout through supervision and co-leadership models. (Ventevogel, van Ommeren, Schilperoord and Saxena, 2015).

4.5 TOWARDS ERADICATION

4.5.1. Migration policies in the fight against forced prostitution

Migration policies play a crucial role in addressing forced prostitution and trafficking in women, which are stark manifestations of gender inequality and exploitation. Trafficking linked to migration has evolved into a vast, highly organised criminal enterprise that violates women's human rights, including their dignity, freedom of movement, and sometimes even their lives. Labour shortages in destination countries increase demand for migrant workers, while restrictive migration policies often push women into irregular status, heightening their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

Restrictive measures, including repeated police raids and “rescue operations”, undermine victims' safety, pushing them underground and increasing their exposure to violence, exploitation, and trafficking. Deportations and repatriations frequently send migrant victims to countries where they face high levels of gender-based violence and persecution. The criminalisation of migration and sex work, alongside restrictive policies, deepens migrants' vulnerabilities by limiting their access to employment, health services, and justice.

To effectively challenge forced prostitution linked to migration, urgent policy responses are needed at both International and national levels. These should include the development of safe, legal migration pathways and bilateral labour agreements, alongside efforts to improve economic stability and opportunity in countries of origin. Access to welfare, employment, and health care for asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants is essential.

Legal reforms should establish clear definitions and harsh penalties for trafficking crimes, improve victim protection, including residence permits on humanitarian grounds and access to rehabilitation, and promote collaboration between law enforcement, social services, and civil society. Preventive efforts such as awareness campaigns, specialised training for officials, and international cooperation can further reduce trafficking risks.

CONCLUSION

Modern slavery, in all its forms, including human trafficking, forced labor, debt bondage, and sexual exploitation, remains a deep crisis across the globe.

As seen, the root causes of modern slavery are complex and interconnected. Systemic poverty, gender inequality, discrimination, conflict, and restrictive migration regimes create fertile ground for traffickers and exploiters. In both countries of origin and destination, weak governance, corruption, and the lack of effective victim identification and protection mechanisms further perpetuate cycles of abuse. The evidence gathered in this report, including the case of Libya as a major hub for trafficking and exploitation, underscores how

instability, armed conflict, and the breakdown of rule of law dramatically increase vulnerability to modern slavery. Yet, this needs to be addressed.

Victims are overwhelmingly drawn from the most marginalised groups, and are often deceived by false promises of work or safety, only to find themselves subjected to violence, coercion, and exploitation. The distinction between smuggling and trafficking is frequently blurred in practice, with many migrants becoming victims of trafficking during their journeys. The hidden and multifaceted nature of these crimes, particularly in sectors with ambiguous supply chains or in conflict-affected areas, makes detection and intervention extremely challenging.

While international and national laws provide a necessary foundation, major gaps remain. Many victims do not self-identify due to fear, stigma, or mistrust of authorities, and are often criminalised or deported rather than supported. The lack of reliable data and the clandestine nature of these crimes mean the true scale of modern slavery is likely much greater than current estimates suggest.

To move towards eradication, policies that address root causes, such as poverty, discrimination, and unsafe migration, are needed, while also pushing for stronger enforcement of existing laws and better cross-border cooperation. Prevention efforts must be expanded through education, community engagement, and demand reduction strategies. Victim identification and support systems must be improved, ensuring unconditional access to care, legal assistance, and long-term reintegration support.

Only by centering the dignity, agency, and rights of survivors, and by addressing the systemic factors that enable exploitation, there is hope to dismantle the structures that perpetuate modern slavery for freedom, justice, and human rights for all.

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