

International Day for the Abolition of Slavery  
2 December 2022

## Alarming rise in people pushed into contemporary forms of slavery: UN experts

Over 70 years since the adoption of the first United Nations convention to combat human trafficking, which we are celebrating today, we are seeing an alarming rise in the number of people subjected to trafficking in persons and contemporary forms of slavery. Conflict and crisis, including the continued pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic and the adverse effects of climate change, have exacerbated existing types of discrimination and pushed an [unprecedented 50 million people](#) into contemporary forms of slavery, representing a 25 per cent increase in the prevalence of contemporary forms of slavery in less than a decade.

On any given day, 28 million people are estimated to be in situations of forced labour, predominantly in the private sector, which accounts for 86 per cent of forced labour instances. This highlights the need to strengthen human rights compliance, oversight, and due diligence in alignment with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. An additional 22 million people are estimated to be in situations of forced marriage. Illegal earnings from trafficking, contemporary forms of slavery and forced labour also fuel cross-border illicit financial flows and indeed, these practices know no borders, affecting every region of the world and countries at all income levels. Nonetheless, the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society continue to be disproportionately affected.

Migrants are especially impacted, with forced labour three times as prevalent among adult migrant workers as it is among their non-migrant counterparts. Fraudulent recruitment practices, private sponsorship systems which lack oversight of migrants' working conditions, limited legal protections for migrant workers, particularly those in irregular situations, and an absence of effective migration governance, including safe and regular migration pathways, enable the ongoing exploitation of migrants in the labour force. Migrants often lack information regarding their rights or the ability to navigate justice systems without adequate support.

Contemporary forms of slavery have an outsize impact on [members of ethnic, religious or belief, and linguistic minority communities](#). These communities are frequently subject to intersecting forms of discrimination, and overlooked by public policies and national budgetary allocations. They lack access to education, land rights, justice, employment and public services, and are often underrepresented in the political sphere. This leaves them with fewer opportunities for decent work and consequently subject to multiple forms of abuse and exploitation, including forced labour, forced marriage, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation.

[Workers in the informal economy](#) also face elevated risks of falling into contemporary forms of slavery. Poverty and discrimination push those who are already marginalized out of the formal economy, leaving migrants, minorities, women, persons with disabilities, older persons and youth overrepresented in the informal

economy. Informal work tends to be insufficiently regulated by national labour and social protection legislation, leaving vulnerable workers without oversight of their working conditions and few channels for redress.

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by certain manifestations of slavery. Although men and boys are also subjected to child and forced marriage, two-thirds of those affected by this practice are women and girls. Women and girls in forced marriages are also more likely to be forced to perform work by their spouses or their spouses' families. Of the over 6 million people trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation, four out of five are women and girls. Displaced women and girls and those in conflict situations face particularly high risks of falling prey to human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. More than 10 million children lost one parent to the COVID-19 pandemic, and 7 million of these children were orphaned, leaving them at risk of being pushed into child labour, joining the over 3 million children already subject to contemporary forms of slavery.

Much work remains ahead in order to achieve the effective abolition of contemporary forms of slavery and realize the commitments made under the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Target 8.7, which calls on States to take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced and child labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking, and the Goals' overarching imperatives to leave no one behind and reach the furthest behind first. In the face of climate change and conflict drivers, many countries are increasingly adopting restrictive migration policies and perpetuating structural discrimination that leads to the exclusion of vulnerable groups from decent work and exposes them to exploitative practices. Emergency measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic have been used to curtail the rights of workers to associate and advocate for their rights to decent work and non-discrimination and protest abuses and exploitation in the workplace. There is also a clear link between slavery, deprivation of liberty and torture or ill-treatment, and public authorities must ensure that no one is subject to slavery or servitude in any detention system.

To overcome these challenges, we call on States and businesses to take concrete steps to ensure workers' association and collective bargaining rights, provide safe and dignified working conditions including by limiting exposure to hazardous substances, expand social safety nets, strengthen labour inspectorates and rights-based migration governance, facilitate access to protection, increase access to adequate health care and health services, as well as psychological support, remedy and reintegration for those freed from slavery, and combat forced labour and trafficking in supply chains. States should expand transnational collaboration to effectively address cross-border cases and safeguard the rights of victims and survivors.

States must also address the practice of child and forced marriage by ensuring adequate civil and criminal protections against this crime, particularly for children, and by investing in the agency of women and girls. States should build communities' awareness of the real societal costs of child marriage and child labour, engage them in combatting these practices, and provide families who feel they have no choice but to send their children to marry or to work with viable alternatives.

We also urge States and other stakeholders to address the structural inequalities and discrimination that continue to marginalize specific groups, including migrants,

forcibly displaced persons, racial, ethnic, religious or belief, and linguistic minorities, communities discriminated on work and descent, older persons, persons with disabilities, children and LGBTQI+ persons.

Finally, we appeal to States to step up their contributions to the [UN Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery](#). In 2022, the Fund awarded 43 grants to assist 13,000 slavery survivors in 33 countries, thanks to the generous support of 11 Member States. We urge other Member States to contribute to the Fund, to enable it to keep pace with the growing number of victims of modern slavery worldwide, on this occasion of the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery. To commemorate this occasion, the Fund will host a hybrid event – “Road to Recovery: 30 years of supporting slavery survivors” – on 2 December 2022 at 11:30 AM CET, in Palais des Nations (Room XXV) and [online](#), and we invite all those interested to attend.

ENDS

*The International Day for the Abolition of Slavery marks the date of the adoption, by the General Assembly, of the United Nations Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (resolution 317(IV) of 2 December 1949). Today, the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery recalls the date of the adoption of this first Convention to fight human trafficking by the United Nations General Assembly*

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The [UN Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery](#), establishment by the General Assembly in 1991 ([resolution 46/122](#)), is managed by the United Nations Secretary-General through the OHCHR, with the advice of a Board of Trustees composed of five independent experts. Board members are appointed by the Secretary-General from amongst experts with wide experience in the field of human rights, in particular contemporary forms of slavery. The Fund's mandate is to support victims of contemporary forms of slavery. It does so by channelling voluntary contributions to civil society organizations providing legal, social, psychological and medical services, humanitarian assistance and vocational training.

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