

Modern slavery

BRIEFING

The most recent report on slavery in the modern world suggests there are at least 35 million slaves across the world. How does this appalling institution continue in the 21st century?



Appalling Nepal: These labourers carry 18 bricks at a time for 18 hours a day © TEDxMaui

Q Why are we talking about slavery?

A Because the anti-slavery campaign group Walk Free has just published its latest global slavery index. It reckons that nearly 36 million people worldwide, or 0.5% of the entire world population, live as slaves.

Q Does that mean like slaves in the cotton fields of the American South before the American Civil War and the 18th-century Caribbean sugar plantations of the British Empire?

A Slavery did not end with the famous acts of abolition in the 19th century. The Walk Free report defines slavery in a modern sense of the term, rather than the broadly outlawed traditional practice where people were held in bondage and treated as another person's property.

It takes many forms. It includes bonded labour, human trafficking, forced or servile marriage and women coerced into prostitution.

In many cases, it means arduous and ill-paid menial work in countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, where expatriate workers mostly from Asia have minimal rights and cannot leave of their own free will, because their passports are routinely removed on arrival.

Q Is this happening across the world?

A The countries with the largest estimated numbers of people in modern slavery are India, China, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Thailand. Taken together, they account for 71 percent of the estimated 35.8 million people in modern slavery.

The ten countries with the highest estimated prevalence of modern slavery by population are Mauritania, Uzbekistan, Haiti, Qatar, India, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Syria and the Central African Republic.

Mauritania ranks number one in the Index. In 2014, an estimated four percent of the population – approximately 155,600 people – are enslaved in Mauritania, a country with deeply entrenched history of hereditary slavery. In the past 12 months, the Mauritanian Government has taken positive steps to deal with this, adopting a plan of action recommended by the United Nations. While this progress is important, it may be several years before these changes have any impact on the size of the problem.

The Republic of Uzbekistan, a Central Asian nation whose economy relies heavily on cotton production for export, is

second in the Index. This is a direct reflection of government-imposed forced labour which makes citizens pick cotton for two months every year. The most conservative estimate indicates that almost four percent – around 1.2m people – of the Uzbek population is subjected to modern slavery during the annual cotton harvest.

However Walk Free found examples of slavery in the 167 countries they looked into. Ireland and Iceland sit at 166 and 167 in the 2014 Index. While the estimated proportion of the population in modern slavery in each is small (seven in every 10,000 persons in the population), Ireland and Iceland are estimated to have approximately 300 and up to 100 people in modern slavery, respectively.

Q What can be done?

A Fortunately there is evidence that rising global awareness nudges governments, such as those of Qatar and India, to respond to the bad publicity into taking action.

In the UK a modern slavery bill will soon come before parliament introducing tougher sentences for traffickers and creating an independent anti-slavery commissioner. It contains provisions for seizing traffickers' assets and channelling some of that money towards the victims in the form of compensation payments.

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YOU DECIDE

Why do you think that slavery still exists in the modern world?

ACTIVITY

In groups, design a poster and a slogan which encapsulates the issues raised in this story, and present them to the class.

WORD WATCH

Bonded – Bonded labour is the most widely used method of enslavement. A person's labour is demanded as a means of repayment for a loan. They are then tricked or trapped into working for very little or no pay. The value of their work becomes invariably greater than the original sum of money borrowed. Often the debts are passed on to next generations.

Trafficking – Trafficking involves men, women and children being exploited through the use of

violence, deception or coercion and forced to work against their will. People can be trafficked for forced prostitution, forced labour, forced begging, forced criminality, domestic servitude, forced marriage and forced organ removal.

Qatar – A *Guardian* investigation last year revealed that thousands of Nepalese, who make up the single largest group of labourers in Qatar, faced exploitation and abuses that amount to modern-day slavery as defined by the International Labour Organisation, during a building binge paving the way for 2022 football World Cup.

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