



There is evidence that practices such as bonded labour are still prevalent in India. Photograph: iStock/Boonyachaoat

Ending modern slavery in India

Although India has made huge efforts in recent years to end modern slavery, the Global Slavery Index estimates that around eight million people in India were in some form of modern slavery in 2016. The British Safety Council asked three global experts how India can eradicate all forms of slavery.

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In July 2019, newspapers across India featured a shocking photograph of 'Kasi', an elderly man begging at the feet of officials who had come to rescue him and over 40 other adults and children from being allegedly trapped in bonded labour at woodcutting units in Tamil Nadu.

The newspapers (tinyurl.com/y6bkcuax), reported that many of those rescued had been forced to work as labourers for several years to repay money they had borrowed from the owner of the woodcutting units. According to the news reports, the adult labourers were forced to work long hours, were rarely allowed to leave the woodcutting units where they

lived and some of their children were being forced to work alongside them to help repay the families' debts.

The case provided a sharp reminder that modern slavery – where people are exploited and completely controlled by others, without being able to leave – remains a significant problem in India.

According to the Global Slavery Index, on any given day in 2016 there were nearly eight million people living in modern slavery in India. The Index, which is produced by the Walk Free Foundation, a global anti-slavery campaigning organisation, says this means there are an estimated 6.1 victims of modern slavery for every 1,000 people in India.

Modern slavery is an umbrella term that essentially refers to situations where people are exploited and completely controlled by others, without being able to leave. It includes forced labour, debt bondage (or bonded labour), human trafficking, forced and early marriage and the sale and exploitation of children.

Common examples include people being forced to work against their will under the threat of some form of punishment, in settings such as agriculture and domestic service; people being held in debt bondage (bonded

labour), where they borrow money and are then required to work to pay off the debt; and women being forced to marry against their will and to provide labour under the guise of 'marriage'.

The Global Slavery Index estimates that in 2016, 40.3 million men, women and children globally were victims of modern slavery – 24.9 million of whom were in forced or bonded labour.

The Index found that 10 countries – India, China, Pakistan, North Korea, Nigeria, Iran, Indonesia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Russia, and the Philippines – account for almost 60 per cent of all the people trapped in modern slavery around the world.

In its 2018 analysis of the extent of modern slavery in India, the Global Slavery Index says that, while India has criminalised most forms of modern slavery, research suggests that practices such as bonded labour are still prevalent. It adds that research suggests that a lack of employment opportunities in the organised sector is continuing to drive people to seek employment in the unorganised sector, "where withholding of wages, debt bondage, and physical and sexual abuse at the workplace are common".

The Index adds that discrimination against scheduled castes, Dalits and scheduled tribes is still a characteristic of Indian society, and this increases the vulnerability of these marginalised groups to being exploited by unscrupulous employers.

The Index also warns that women, especially those from economically disadvantaged and marginalised communities, still face an increased risk of exploitation and abuse.

For example, it says that illegal Sumangali schemes – where poor families send their young daughters to work in factories for several years in return for the promise of a bulk payment that can be used as a 'marriage dowry' to attract a husband – "often result in trapping women and girls in situations of debt bondage".

Safety Management asked three experts on modern slavery for their views on how India can eradicate all forms of modern slavery.

We interviewed:

- **Elise Gordon**, a research analyst at the Walk Free Foundation, a philanthropic organisation that campaigns to end modern slavery around the globe, and publishes the Global Slavery Index that seeks to measure the extent of modern slavery
- **Terry FitzPatrick**, communications and advocacy director at Free the Slaves, a non-governmental organisation that works to end all forms of slavery globally
- **Dr. Lenin Raghuvanshi**, founder and CEO of the People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights, a non-governmental organisation in India that fights for the rights of marginalised people in North Indian states.

❓ How serious is the problem of modern slavery in India? How successful has India been in eradicating all forms of slavery compared to other countries

Lenin: In its latest report, the Global Slavery Index 2018 estimates that on any given day in 2016 there were nearly eight million people living in 'modern slavery' in India. However, this claim has been strongly contested by the Indian government on the grounds that the report's parameters were poorly defined and too wide-ranging.

In its report, the Global Slavery Index says that the most current available data from India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) indicate that there were 8,132 reported cases of human trafficking across India in 2016.

In the same year, 15,379 people were trafficked, of whom 9,034 victims were under the age of 18. In addition, 23,117 people were rescued from trafficking situations, of whom 14,183 people were under the age of 18.

Most of the rescued victims reported being trafficked for the purpose of forced labour (10,509 victims), followed by sexual exploitation for prostitution (4,980 victims) and other forms of sexual exploitation (2,590 cases).

❓ What kind of measures can the Indian government take to eradicate cases of modern slavery

Elise: The Indian government's response to preventing and dealing with modern slavery was ranked seventh out of the 36 countries in the Asia and the Pacific region, according to the Global Slavery Index 2018. The Index also ranked the Indian government's response to preventing and responding to modern slavery at 67 out of the 181 countries around the world that were assessed for the Index.

The Indian government has drafted legislation intended to address human trafficking and provide mechanisms for the identification, protection and rehabilitation of victims of human trafficking. The legislation intends to provide a comprehensive law on all forms of trafficking and to establish stricter penalties for aggravated forms of trafficking.



Modern slavery includes people being forced to work to pay debts. Photograph: iStock/AlxeyPnferov

In its current form, the legislation has been heavily criticised for its potentially counter-productive and even harmful consequences – for example, punishment for activities not necessarily associated with human trafficking, stemming largely from its vague provisions and setting the bar too high for immunity for victims from criminal prosecution.

Despite these criticisms, there is a need for the Indian government to amend and pass human trafficking legislation to ensure that it adequately protects vulnerable groups.

Terry: All governments need to recognise that modern slavery must be confronted on three fronts.

Firstly, the rule of law must be strengthened throughout the world. Police and judges in every country must have the training and resources they need to enforce existing laws to turn human trafficking into a high-risk activity.

Secondly, companies must investigate their supply chains and eliminate modern slavery. The economic pressure on an international scale can have a tremendous impact.

Thirdly, the community development programmes in all countries must integrate anti-slavery strategies and activities into their everyday operations.

By ending the things that make people vulnerable to modern slavery, governments in every country can have a dramatic impact.

Lenin: India needs to introduce a Modern Slavery Act as the UK has (see tinyurl.com/y4kh3fyt).

The Indian government needs to establish a Modern Slavery Innovation Fund to experiment with new ways to stop this crime. The government of India also needs to work with businesses to end trafficking which will create a safer and more prosperous world for us all.

As a nation, India also needs to respond to modern slavery in its supply chains. India does not have one central legislative framework governing public procurement. Although government ministries and departments must comply with the requirements of various guidelines, manuals and the procedures available for public procurement, none of these currently refer to modern slavery.

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❓ How serious are the health and safety risks faced by people trapped in all forms of modern slavery in India

Terry: People who don't care about human rights don't care about the health and safety of workers. People who become enslaved in every country are typically desperate and marginalised, and slaveholders frequently treat them with neglect and abuse.

Beatings and humiliation are common; nutrition is inadequate; healthcare is non-existent; and escape is often impossible.

Lenin: It is a known fact that certain sectors and occupations are more dangerous than others. Protecting workers in hazardous conditions – in what is often known as the '3D', dirty, difficult and dangerous jobs – is a primary focus of the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Therefore, priority is given to helping workers in the most hazardous sectors and occupations – such as agriculture, construction, mining, brick kilns or where working relationships or conditions create particular risks. The priority is also on emerging risks, the informal economy and new forms of the economy.

Work-related accidents and diseases take a particularly heavy toll in India, where large numbers of workers are concentrated in the activities mentioned above. India often lacks adequate technical and economic capacities to maintain effective national occupational safety and health (OSH) systems, particularly regulatory and enforcement mechanisms.

The ILO is making use of its extensive experience in promoting standards, codes of practice, technical guides and training materials, as well as developing means of practical action for the protection of workers in hazardous conditions.

In South Asia generally, women and young people, often children, work ceaselessly for hours, surrounded by highly harmful dust, and under the sun. There is no clean air, and the health protection system, hygiene and safety are completely lacking.

Everyone seems to know about this problem, but there are very few who fight against this injustice.

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❓ Are large companies around the world directly or indirectly supporting slavery by purchasing or procuring products and services that are at risk of being produced by people who are subject to slavery, such as forced labour? What can international businesses do to eradicate slavery in their global supply chains

Terry: Companies have a vital role to play in eradicating modern slavery by investigating their supply chains. This



Over 23,000 victims of people trafficking were rescued in 2016. Photograph: iStock/Tinnakorn Jorruang

includes investigating the supply chain all the way down to the raw materials and avoiding suppliers who cannot certify that they are slavery-free.

There is a growing momentum in global trade to ban the import of products tainted by forced labour. Companies need to know that sooner or later they will not be able to operate in the global economy if they enslave workers.

Elise: There has been increased recognition globally of the role that the private sector can play in eradicating modern slavery.

By taking action to reduce the opportunity for forced labour in their operations and supply chains, businesses can help to tackle modern slavery.

According to the Global Slavery Index for 2018, the number of countries that are investigating government and business supply chains for labour violations, including forced labour, remains low, with only 40 countries globally taking any action in this area.

Government responses to preventing and dealing with modern slavery in the Asia and the Pacific region – the top 10 rankings

Ranking	Country	Total score
1	Australia	63.8
2	New Zealand	57.6
3	Philippines	55.8
4	Indonesia	50.8
5	Thailand	48.9
6	Vietnam	48.1
7	India	45.7
8	Bangladesh	44.4
9	Nepal	38.7
10	Malaysia	38.4

Source: Global Slavery Index 2018.

100 is the highest possible score for the effectiveness of a government’s response to modern slavery and 0 is the lowest.



The Global Slavery Index ranked the Indian government’s response to preventing and responding to modern slavery at 67 out of the 181 countries analysed



Lenin: My opinion is that some big corporations are playing a major role directly in promoting or supporting slavery. I appeal to all big corporations to introduce a code of conduct for the elimination of slavery from the world.

How extensive is the problem of modern slavery globally and in India

Terry: When people hear the words ‘modern slavery’, they immediately think of brothels – because that is what television shows and movies concentrate on.

The truth is that, globally, 21 million people are enslaved at farms, factories and construction sites, on fishing boats, in mines and in private homes as servants. About four million people are trapped in sex slavery and

15 million people are trapped in forced marriage slavery.

When you look at the nature of modern slavery today, and how it affects the products we buy every day, you realise that everyone has a role to play in ending this abuse of fundamental human rights.

Many people think slavery ended more than a century ago. It didn’t. It was outlawed, not ended. Our generation’s job is to finish the work that earlier abolitionists started.

Lenin: There are estimated to be around 160 million people in India who are members of the lowest caste of the Hindu social and religious system, sometimes known as Dalits. These people are often forced to perform the most degrading and odious work tasks.

These people are marginalised and often condemned to accept a life of slavery, poverty and misery.

Which industries or sectors in India have the greatest risk of people being subject to modern slavery

Elise: Most forced labour exploitation occurs in domestic work, construction, manufacturing, as well as agriculture, forestry, and fishing.

Lenin: More than 90 per cent of India’s total workforce is engaged in the informal economy in agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining, manufacturing, construction, and service industries. According to the Global Slavery Index, a lack of formal employment opportunities leads individuals to seek employment in the informal sector where the withholding of wages, debt bondage, and physical and sexual abuse at the workplaces are common.

Lower real wages, which are typical of the informal sector, further exacerbate vulnerabilities. With no records or contracts maintained, there is no accountability to hold employers responsible for any exploitation, making informal workers highly vulnerable to exploitative practices.

Indian migrant workers, who move seasonally from rural villages to the cities in search of work opportunities, have limited access to support and redress in cases of exploitation due to the informal nature of their work.

The Global Slavery Index 2018, including the findings for India, can be found at:

globalslaveryindex.org