Modern Slavery in Malaysia

A collaboration of

GLOBAL Shepherds

OUR JOURNEY

FREE THE SLAVES

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This Fact Sheet provides an overview of modern slavery in Malaysia, highlighting key figures, characteristics, drivers, and efforts to combat this grave violation of human rights.

Modern slavery refers to the various forms of forced labor, human trafficking, forced marriage, and exploitation that exist in contemporary society. Modern slavery affects vulnerable groups such as migrant workers, children, women, and members of marginalized communities.

The Magnitude of Modern Slavery in Malaysia

An estimated **202,000** people are currently trapped in various forms of modern slavery. However, it is challenging to obtain precise statistics due to the clandestine nature of modern slavery and the reluctance of victims to come forward.

According to the 2023 TIP Report, the majority of victims are among the estimated 1.5 million documented and an even greater number of undocumented migrant workers in Malaysia.

As in the 2023 Global Slavery Index, electronics and garments from China and Malaysia remain the highest-value at-risk product imported by G20 Countries. Palm oil is also an at-risk Malaysian export.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, eight of every 1,000 palm oil plantation workers were in situations of forced labor. These forced labor plantations are particularly pervasive in Sarawak.

The 2023 US Trafficking In-Persons (TIP) Report classified Malaysia as a Tier 2 Watchlist country.

This signifies improvement nationwide in preventing and disrupting human slavery, as it was classified a Tier 3 country in the 2022 TIP report.

Forms of Slavery in Malaysia

Women and girls lured by traffickers with the promise of job opportunities often become victims of sexual trafficking either in Malaysia or in neighboring countries such as Cambodia.

Forced labor is widespread. Many individuals, both domestic and foreign, are subjected to forced labor in sectors such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and domestic work. Children are also exploited in forms of forced labor, prevalent in sectors such as agriculture (e.g. palm oil).

Malaysia serves as a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking, involving women, men, and children for purposes such as forced labor, sexual exploitation, and organ trafficking.

Migrant workers, especially those from countries like Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, often fall into debt bondage due to excessive recruitment fees and deceptive employment practices.

Malaysian Anti- Trafficking Government Action Instruments

- Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Council (MAPO council)
- Royal Malaysia Police's (RMP) special anti-trafficking task force
- Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act (ATIPSOM) of 2007
- National Human Rights Action Plan (NHRAP) of 2018

Unfortunately, the 2023 TIP Report indicates corruption and official complicity in human trafficking still remains a significant issue, undermining anti-trafficking governmental measures.

Contributing Factors to Modern Slavery in Malaysia

Governmental corruption and inadequacies.

Inadequate implementation and enforcement of labor laws, as well as corruption within law enforcement agencies, contribute to the prevalence of modern slavery. Law enforcement facilitates trafficking through migration by raising the price of immigration and also accepting bribes from smugglers through airports and across borders.

Large migrant and refugee populations

According to the 2023 TIP report, migrant workers make up about 20 percent of Malaysia's workforce. Malaysia’s economy relies heavily on migrant workers, who often face exploitation due to limited legal protections, weak social networks, language barriers, discrimination, and limited awareness of their rights. Traffickers recruit from Rohingyas refugee camps in Bangladesh and Indonesia and are trafficked into Malaysia, as they are especially vulnerable, simultaneously affected by poverty, displacement, and conflict.

Poverty

Poverty and the search for better job opportunities also drive many Malaysian women and girls into the hands of human traffickers who lure them with fictional job offers in Malaysia and abroad. Malaysian traffickers also recruit refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless women and children from refugee communities with the false promise of jobs.

In pursuit of a better life, Abegail Compuesto decided to leave her home with her sister to find a job in Malaysia.

"We arrived in Mindanao (a southern island in the Philippines) and were made to stay in a house to receive job training before going to Malaysia. But instead of training us to cook and wait tables, they made us drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes. Then some of the women were taken away to do video calls with men.

Throughout this time, I made a lot of excuses to the "recruiters" for why I didn't want to do this, because I was getting scared.

When it was time to go to Malaysia, the "recruiters" confiscated our phones and told us what to say and how to act when going through immigration. They noticed that I was scared and that I knew what was happening, and they threatened us with guns. We were terrified."

*Read Abegail's full story **here**.*

Abegail is now a member of Batis AWARE Women's Organisation in the Philippines

Combatting Modern Slavery in Malaysia

Actions to disrupt and prevent modern slavery and human trafficking require the efforts of actors across the public and private sector, working efficiently to confront modern slavery using these various methods:

- **Legislation** - Malaysia has taken steps to address modern slavery, including enacting the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act (ATIPSOM) of 2007 and the National Human Rights Action Plan of 2018 (recent NAPTIP 3.0 2021-2025) NAP on Force Labour, National Guidelines on trafficking in persons indicators recently revised to the recent 2022 ATIPSOM revisions.

- **Law Enforcement** - The Royal Malaysian Police have established specialized anti-trafficking units, Specialized Court to hear trafficking-in-person cases and efforts have been made to improve interagency coordination and cooperation to combat modern slavery. However, enforcement efforts are hindered by poor interagency coordination and overall inadequate victim protection services.

- **Victim Support** - Malaysia provides limited services for victims, including shelters, counseling, and legal aid. However, significant gaps remain in providing comprehensive support and assistance.

- **International Engagement** - Malaysia has engaged in collaboration with international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), International Labour Organization (ILO) which played a significant role in the development of National Action Plan for force labour and guides various NGOs to address modern slavery. Bilateral agreements have been established between Malaysia and countries of origin for migrant workers, aiming to enhance protection and reduce vulnerability.

Continuing the Efforts in Malaysia

Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) in Malaysia work to raise awareness, provide support to victims, and advocate for stronger legislation. These organizations play a crucial role in identifying and rescuing victims, providing legal aid, and assisting with survivors' rehabilitation and reintegration.

The current objectives, outlined by the 2023 TIP report for Malaysia Include:

LABOR RIGHTS

Increase protections for foreign workers, eliminate recruitment or placement fees charged by recruiters, inform migrant workers of their labor rights in Malaysia, including their right to maintain their passport at all times.

PROSECUTION

Increase efforts to investigate and prosecute trafficking cases, increase transparency around investigations on corrupt and complicit officials involved in trafficking, reduce prosecution delays, introduction of guidelines on TIP indicators and training of law enforcement officers on victim-centered approach and trauma-informed care approach.

VICTIM CARE

Expand freedom of movement and Freedom of employment for victims in shelters, improve communication (especially with family members back home) and case management with victims, increase efforts in victim identification and ensuring safe return.

This factsheet was prepared by

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OUR JOURNEY

Our Journey provides a platform for migration experts to develop a supportive migration system for non-citizens in line with international standards and norms. It provides legal and other services to migrants, refugees, and other non-citizens in Malaysia.

FREE THE SLAVES

Free the Slaves is in the vanguard of the growing global movement to end one of history's greatest human rights abuses. We work locally, in some of the world's worst trafficking hot spots, to generate global change.