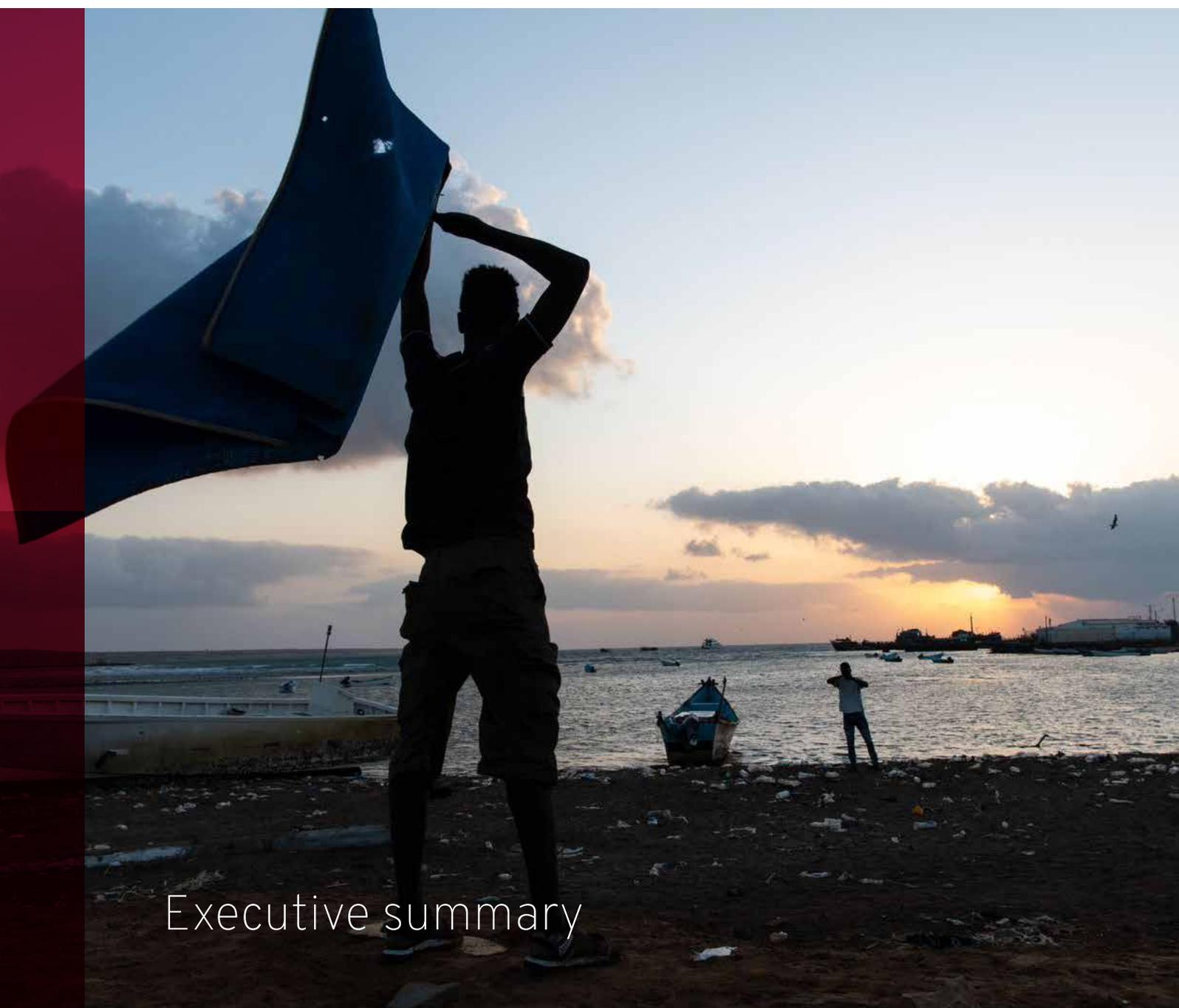


Global Estimates of Modern Slavery **Forced Labour and Forced Marriage**



Executive summary



Photo: ILO / Marcel Crozet.



Executive summary

Modern slavery is the very antithesis of social justice and sustainable development. The 2021 Global Estimates indicate there are 50 million people in situations of modern slavery on any given day, either forced to work against their will or in a marriage that they were forced into. This number translates to nearly one of every 150 people in the world. The estimates also indicate that situations of modern slavery are by no means transient – entrapment in forced labour can last years, while in most cases forced marriage is a life sentence. And sadly, the situation is not improving. The 2021 Global Estimates show that millions more men, women, and children have been forced to work or marry in the period since the previous estimates were released in 2017.

Through the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the global community has committed to ending modern slavery among children by 2025, and universally by 2030 (Target 8.7). This report underscores the scale of the challenge facing the global community in the short period remaining to meet these ambitious targets.

Compounding crises – the COVID-19 pandemic, armed conflicts, and climate change – in recent years have led to unprecedented disruption to employment and education, increases in extreme poverty and forced and unsafe migration, and an upsurge in reports of gender-based violence, together serving to heighten the risk of all forms of modern slavery. As is usually the case, it is those who are already in situations of greatest vulnerability – including the poor and socially excluded, workers in the informal economy, irregular or otherwise unprotected migrant workers, and people subject to discrimination – who are most affected.

It is urgent that the global community gathers the will and resources to overcome these obstacles and get progress towards ending modern slavery back on track. Promises and statements of good intent are not enough. While the principal responsibility for change lies with national governments, a whole of society approach is needed – the social partners, participants in the social and solidarity economy, businesses, investors, survivor groups, civil society, and an array of other actors have critical roles to play. Technical cooperation and assistance from UN agencies, other multilateral and bilateral organizations, international non-governmental organizations, and other groups will also be important to progress. Social dialogue provides an essential framework for building lasting, consensus-based solutions to the challenge of modern slavery.

The global and regional estimates presented in this report were developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The estimates are based on a jointly developed methodology summarised in the Annex and described in detail in the methodology report produced along with this 2021 Global Estimates report. As was the case for the 2016 global estimates, the 2021 calculations are derived from multiple data sources, as no single source was sufficiently reliable. The principal sources are data from nationally representative household surveys – 68 forced labour surveys and 75 forced marriage surveys – jointly conducted by ILO and Walk Free, as well as the Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC) anonymised case dataset on victims of trafficking collected by IOM and its partners in the process of providing protection and assistance services to trafficked persons.

Overview of key findings

Modern slavery, as defined for the purpose of the global estimates, is comprised of two principal components – forced labour and forced marriage. Both refer to situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or cannot leave because of threats, violence, deception, abuse of power or other forms of coercion.

The scourge of modern slavery has by no means been relegated to history. The 2021 Global Estimates indicate that 49.6 million people are in modern slavery on any given day, either forced to work against their will or in a marriage that they were forced into. Forced labour accounts for 27.6 million of those in modern slavery and forced marriage for 22 million.

Forced labour

Forced labour, as set out in the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No.29),¹ refers to “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.”

There are 27.6 million people in situations of forced labour on any given day. This absolute number translates to 3.5 people in forced labour for every thousand people in the world. Women and girls make up 11.8 million of the total in forced labour. More than 3.3 million of all those in forced labour are children.

Forced labour has grown in recent years. A simple comparison with the 2016 global estimates indicates an increase of 2.7 million in the number people in forced labour between 2016 and 2021, which translates to a rise in the *prevalence* of forced labour from 3.4 to 3.5 per thousand people in the world. The increase in the number of people in forced labour was driven entirely by forced labour in the private economy, both in forced commercial sexual exploitation and in forced labour in other sectors.

The initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic were accompanied by widespread reports of forced labour linked to the crisis. Disruptions to income because of the pandemic led to greater indebtedness among workers and with it reports of a rise in debt bondage among some workers lacking access to formal credit channels. The crisis also resulted in a deterioration of working conditions for many workers, in some cases leading to forced labour. Yet little is known about how forced labour risks have evolved since the initial months of the crisis, as strict economy-wide workplace shutdowns were phased out in most countries and the world economy began its fragile recovery. There are many reasons for concern in this regard. The World Bank indicates that extreme poverty – one important metric of forced labour risk – remains far higher than the pre-pandemic trajectory² and the ILO reports that the jobs recovery has stalled in much of the world.³

No region of the world is spared from forced labour. Asia and the Pacific is host to more than half of the global total (15.1 million), followed by Europe and Central Asia (4.1 million), Africa (3.8 million), the Americas (3.6 million), and the Arab States (0.9 million). But this regional ranking changes considerably when forced labour is expressed as a proportion of the population. By this measure, forced labour is highest in the Arab States (5.3 per thousand people), followed by Europe and Central Asia (4.4 per thousand), the Americas and Asia and the Pacific (both at 3.5 per thousand), and Africa (2.9 per thousand).

Forced labour is a concern regardless of a country's wealth. More than half of all forced labour occurs in either upper-middle income or high-income countries. When population is taken into account, forced labour is highest in low income countries (6.3 per thousand people) followed by high income countries (4.4 per thousand).

Most forced labour occurs in the private economy. Eighty-six per cent of forced labour cases are imposed by private actors – 63 per cent in the private economy in sectors other than commercial sexual exploitation and 23 per cent in forced commercial sexual exploitation. State-imposed forced labour accounts for the remaining 14 per cent of people in forced labour.

Forced labour touches virtually all parts of the private economy. The five sectors accounting for the majority of total adult forced labour (87 per cent) are services (excluding domestic work), manufacturing, construction, agriculture (excluding fishing), and domestic work. Other sectors form smaller shares but nonetheless still account for hundreds of thousands of people. These include adult workers who are forced to dig for minerals or perform other mining and quarrying work, fishers who are trapped in forced labour aboard fishing vessels, people forced to beg on the street, and people forced into illicit activities.

The composition of forced labour differs from that of the broader labour force in a number of ways. The share of migrants in the group of people in forced labour is much higher than the share of migrants in the overall labour force. There are also relatively more men among workers in forced labour compared to the labour force generally. People in forced labour are more likely to be in manufacturing, and much more likely to be in construction, than workers in the overall labour force. They are less likely to be in the services and agriculture sectors than workers in the overall labour force.

People in forced labour exploitation are subjected to multiple forms of coercion to compel them to work against their will. The systematic and deliberate withholding of wages, used by abusive employers to compel workers to stay in a job out of fear of losing accrued earnings, is the most common form of coercion, experienced by 36 per cent of those in forced labour. This is followed by abuse of vulnerability through threat of dismissal, which was experienced by one in five of those in forced labour. More severe forms of coercion, including forced confinement, physical and sexual violence, and the deprivation of basic needs, are less common but by no means negligible.

Forced labour in the private economy has an important gender dimension.

Women in forced labour are much more likely than their male counterparts to be in domestic work, while men in forced labour are much more likely to be in the construction sector. Women are more likely to be coerced through wage non-payment and abuse of vulnerability, and men through threats of violence and financial penalties. Women are also more likely than men to be subjected to physical and sexual violence and threats against family members.

Migrant workers face a higher risk of forced labour than other workers.

The forced labour prevalence of adult migrant workers is more than three times higher than that of adult non-migrant workers. This figure makes clear that when migrant workers are not protected by law or are unable to exercise their rights, migration is irregular or poorly governed, or where recruitment practices are unfair or unethical, migration can lead to situations of vulnerability to forced labour.

An estimated 6.3 million people are in situations of forced commercial sexual exploitation at any point in time.

Gender is a key determining factor: nearly four out of every five people trapped in these situations are girls or women.

The tragedy of children subjected to forced labour demands special urgency.

A total of 3.3 million children are in situations of forced labour, accounting for about 12 per cent of all those in forced labour. And because of data constraints, these numbers, already alarming, may well be just the tip of the iceberg. The forced labour of children constitutes one component of child labour,⁴ which the international community – through Target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals – has committed to ending by 2025.

The forced labour of children occurs across wide array of economic sectors and industries.

Over half of all children in forced labour are in commercial sexual exploitation.⁵ Domestic work, agriculture, and manufacturing are among the many other sectors where children in forced labour are found. Qualitative reports indicate that children can be subjected to severe forms of coercion and abuse, including abduction, drugging, being held in captivity, deception, and manipulation of debt. Some of the worst abuses occur in situations of armed conflict.

The 2021 Global Estimates indicate that 3.9 million people are in state-imposed forced labour at any point in time.

Males make up more than three of every four of those in forced labour imposed by state authorities, while 8 per cent of those in state-imposed forced labour are children. Over half (55 per cent) of all cases involve some form of abuse of compulsory prison labour, 27 per cent involve the abuse of conscription and 17 per cent involve forced labour for economic development or for work beyond normal civic obligations.

Forced marriage

Forced marriage is a complex and highly gendered practice. Although men and boys are also forced to marry, it predominantly affects women and girls. Forced marriages occur in every region of the world and cut across ethnic, cultural, and religious lines. The many drivers of forced marriage are closely linked to longstanding patriarchal attitudes and practices and are highly context specific.

The number of men, women, and children living in forced marriages has risen globally. An estimated 22 million people were living in situations of forced marriage on any given day in 2021. This is a 6.6 million increase in the number of people living in a forced marriage between 2016 and 2021, which translates to a rise in *prevalence* from 2.1 to 2.8 per thousand people.

Forced marriages take place in every region in the world. Nearly two-thirds of all forced marriages, an estimated 14.2 million people, are in Asia and the Pacific. This is followed by 14.5 per cent in Africa (3.2 million) and 10.4 per cent in Europe and Central Asia (2.3 million). When we account for the population in each region, prevalence of forced marriage is highest in the Arab States (4.8 per thousand population), followed by Asia and the Pacific (3.3 per thousand population).

Over two-thirds of those forced to marry are female. This equates to an estimated 14.9 million women and girls. While women and girls account for the majority of people living in a forced marriage, men and boys are also subjected to forced marriage.

Three in every five people in a forced marriage are in lower-middle income countries; however, wealthier nations are not immune, with 26 per cent of forced marriages in high or upper-middle income countries.

Family members were responsible for the vast majority of forced marriages. Most persons who reported on the circumstances of forced marriage were forced to marry by their parents (73 per cent) or other relatives (16 per cent).

Half of those living in forced marriages were coerced using emotional threats or verbal abuse. This includes the use of emotional blackmail – for example, parents threatening self-harm or asserting that the family’s reputation will be ruined – and threats of estrangement from family members, among other things. Physical or sexual violence and threats of violence were the next most used form of coercion to force a marriage (19 per cent).

Once forced to marry, there is greater risk of sexual exploitation, violence, and domestic servitude and other forms of forced labour both inside and outside the home. Females are more likely than males to report being forced to perform work by their spouse or the spouse’s family.

COVID-19 has exacerbated the underlying drivers of all forms of modern slavery, including forced marriage, which often is linked to economic hardship. Widespread socio-economic instability due to the pandemic led to increased global unemployment, increased indebtedness, and an increase in extreme global poverty for the first time in two decades. As the data only partially reflect the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the estimates presented in this report are likely to understate the full magnitude of the pandemic’s impact.

Ending modern slavery: the path to 2030

Nothing can justify the persistence of modern slavery in today's world. We can and must do better. It is not a question of not knowing what to do. There is a substantial and growing body of policy and programming experience in addressing modern slavery, offering critical guidance for the future. The overall rise in modern slavery also masks numerous contexts that have registered significant reductions, offering additional key insights into the policy choices needed for progress. International legal instruments provide the normative framework for efforts against modern slavery.⁶

Some of the key policy priorities for addressing forced labour and forced marriage in the lead up to the 2030 target date for ending modern slavery are discussed below.

Forced labour

- **Respect for the freedoms of workers to associate and to bargain collectively** is indispensable to a world free from forced labour. These fundamental labour rights enable workers to exert a collective voice to defend their shared interests and to bargain collectively for secure and decent work, thus creating workplaces that are inimical to forced labour and workers who are resilient to its risks. These rights are essential prerequisites for social dialogue, which in turn is critical to building lasting, consensus-based solutions to the challenge of forced labour. Currently, workers in much of the world, and the vast majority of workers in the informal economy – migrants as well as nationals – lack a representative and collective voice.
- **Extend social protection, including floors, to all workers and their families**, to mitigate the socio-economic vulnerability that underpins much of forced labour, and to provide workers with the basic income security to be able to say no to jobs that are abusive and to quit jobs that have become so. Extending social protection coverage in the informal economy is a priority. It is important that social protection also provides inclusive, equitable and non-discriminatory coverage to migrants.
- **Promote fair and ethical recruitment**, to protect workers from abusive and fraudulent practices during the recruitment and placement process, including the charging of extortionate fees and related costs by unscrupulous recruitment agencies and labour intermediaries. The global estimates indicate that a large share of forced labour cases can be traced to abuses occurring during the recruitment phase of their employment.
- **Strengthen the reach and capacity of public labour inspectorates**, so they are able to detect and act on labour violations before they deteriorate into forced labour, able to raise awareness of forced labour risks and the compliance obligations of employers, and able to promptly detect and refer actual forced labour cases. Extending the reach of labour inspectorates into the informal economy is a priority.

- **Ensure protection for people freed from forced labour**, through immediate assistance, rehabilitation, and long-term sustainable solutions, so they can successfully recover and avoid re-victimization. Special consideration should be given to children, migrants, and those trafficked for forced labour. Despite progress, still only a small fraction of those subjected to forced labour and trafficking for forced labour are identified and referred to comprehensive protection services.
- **Ensure access to remedy for people freed from forced labour**, to help recompense them for the consequences of their subjection to forced labour and to help in their recovery. Remedies include compensation for material damages (e.g., as medical costs, unpaid wages, legal fees, and loss of earnings and earning potential) or for moral damages (e.g., pain and emotional distress). Currently, only a very small share of those subjected to forced labour and human trafficking are provided with compensation or other forms of remedy.
- **Ensure adequate enforcement**, to bring perpetrators to justice and deter would-be offenders from contemplating the crime of forced labour. Statistics indicate that the number of cases of forced labour and human trafficking reported for legal investigation remains low and, due to limited capacities for adequate investigation and prosecution of these crimes, the rate of conviction is minimal.
- **Address migrants' vulnerability to forced labour and trafficking for forced labour**. Although most migration is voluntary and has a largely positive impact on individuals and societies, the global estimates indicate that when migrants are not protected by law or are unable to exercise their rights they can be at increased risk of forced labour and human trafficking. National policy and legal frameworks that promote respect for the rights of all migrants at all stages of the migration process, regardless of their migration status, are urgently needed.
- **Address children trapped in forced labour**. Far more investment is needed in identification and protection measures for children in forced labour, including, but not limited to, those in commercial sexual exploitation and those in forced labour linked to armed conflict. Better information on the numbers of children involved, and on the nature and drivers of the forced labour they are trapped in, is urgently needed to inform responses.
- **Mitigate the heightened risk of forced labour and trafficking for forced labour in situations of crisis**. Much of forced labour and human trafficking occurs in situations of crisis linked to armed conflicts, disasters, and disease. There is a need to mainstream prevention and protection measures across all phases of crisis responses, from pre-crisis preparedness to humanitarian action following crisis outbreak and on to post-crisis reconstruction and recovery. Measures to sustain livelihoods during crises are especially important in preventing workers from falling into forced labour and trafficking as they struggle to support themselves and their families.

- **Combat forced labour and trafficking for forced labour in business operations and supply chains.** Attention should focus on identifying, prioritizing, and acting on “hotspots” where the risk of forced labour and other human rights abuses is highest in terms of both severity and scale. Particularly important in this context are the informal micro- and small enterprises operating at the lower links of supply chains in high-risk sectors and locations.
- **End state-imposed forced labour, which accounts for one in seven of all forced labour cases.** The fact that state-imposed forced labour is the direct product of deliberate laws and practices on the part of states makes abundantly clear what is needed for change – namely, the political commitment and follow-up to reform these same laws and practices.
- **Partnership and international cooperation.** The challenge of forced labour is too big, and its myriad root causes too complex, for national governments or other stakeholders to address on their own. Alliance 8.7 plays an important role in facilitating cooperation and experience exchange on forced labour and human trafficking across the array of governmental and non-governmental organizations that make up its wide membership. International support to financing and resource mobilization is one of the key ingredients of broader cooperation and partnership against forced labour.

Forced marriage

- **As women and girls are disproportionately affected, legislative and policy responses should have a gendered lens,** including gender-sensitive laws, policies, programmes, and budgets, including gender-responsive social protection mechanisms. It is important that these initiatives are inclusive, equitable, and provide non-discriminatory access to migrants.
- **Ensure adequate civil and criminal protections in national legislation.** This should include raising the legal age of marriage to 18 without exceptions in order to protect children, criminalizing the act of marrying someone who does not consent, regardless of age, and civil protections that protect the individual from marriage without having to penalise the perpetrators, who are often family members. Legislative action should be part of a broader holistic response that tackles underlying drivers of forced marriage, and includes prevention and support measures such as safe accommodation, emergency funds, and psychosocial support.
- **Address underlying socio-cultural norms and structures that contribute to forced marriage.** Legislation is not in itself sufficient to end forced marriage and needs to be combined with wider preventative approaches addressing underlying discrimination and gender inequality, as well as related socio-cultural norms. Central to changing these attitudes is context-specific research on vulnerabilities and community-based education, training, and empowerment activities.

- **Invest in building the agency of women and girls.** Ensuring that women and girls have the opportunity and ability to complete school, earn a livelihood, and inherit assets plays a significant role in reducing vulnerability to forced marriage. To support this, institutions and employers should offer employment opportunities for women and girls while providing training for “soft-skills” beyond formal education, such as pre-employment and on-the-job skills building and training programmes.
- **Protect the rights of those vulnerable to forced marriage and trafficking for forced marriage during times of crisis.** This requires coordination among humanitarian agencies to create pathways for people to safely leave conflict areas and to provide livelihood and education opportunities, ensure food security, establish free civil registration services (including births and marriages), and build the capacity of local service providers.
- **Address the vulnerability of migrants, particularly children.** This includes improving capacity to identify the most vulnerable, as well as ensuring equal access to safe, dignified return and sustainable reintegration such as social protection and services, justice, psychosocial assistance, education, vocational training, employment opportunities, and decent work, regardless of their migration status. Legal identity is a core enabler of sustainable development and safe and regular migration; access to legal identity registration procedures is particularly important for migrants at risk of forced marriage.

Reliable information and statistics on forced labour, forced marriage, and human trafficking are critical to promoting awareness and understanding of the problem, and to informing policy responses. It is hoped that the findings presented in the report will encourage further research and data collection efforts focused on the national and local dimensions of all forms of modern slavery.

Endnotes

- 1 ILO, [Forced Labour Convention](#), 1930 (No. 29).
- 2 Daniel Gerszon Mahler, Nishant Yonzan, Ruth Hill, Christoph Lakner, Haoyu Wu and Nobuo Yoshida, “[Pandemic, prices, and poverty](#)”, World Bank Blogs (blog), 13 April 2022.
- 3 ILO, [ILO Monitor on the world of work](#). Ninth edition, 2022.
- 4 Forced labour of children is defined, for purposes of measurement, as work performed by a child during a specified reference period falling under one of the following categories: (i) work performed for a third party, under threat or menace of any penalty applied by a third party (other than the child’s own parents) either on the child directly or the child’s parents; or (ii) work performed with or for the child’s parents, under threat or menace of any penalty applied by a third party (other than the child’s parents) either on the child directly or the child’s parents; or (iii) work performed with or for the child’s parents where one or both parents are themselves in a situation of forced labour; or (iv) work performed in anyone of the following worst forms of child labour: (a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, [as well as forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; (b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances; (c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in relevant international treaties.
- 5 In accordance with the [ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 \(No. 182\)](#), any type of commercial sexual exploitation is considered forced labour when minors are involved
- 6 Including the ILO Forced Labour Conventions Nos 29 and 105; the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182); the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930; the Forced Labour (Supplementary Measures) Recommendation, 2014 (No. 203); the United Nations 1956 Convention on slavery and slavery-like practices; the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (2000) supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Crime; the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.



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