



## Global Slavery Index: Tackling Modern Slavery in India

India has been undergoing a remarkable 'triple transition', where economic growth is both driving and is being driven by the rapid socio-political changes. Notwithstanding these remarkable changes and given India's more than 1.3 billion population, there are still at least 270 million people living on less than US\$1.90 per day. While laws, systems and attitudes regarding key 'fault lines' including the caste system, gender and feudalism are rapidly changing, social changes on these scores definitely takes time. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that existing research suggests that all forms of modern slavery continue to exist in India, including inter-generational bonded labour, forced child labour, commercial sexual exploitation, forced begging, forced recruitment into non-state armed groups and forced marriage.

According to the 2016 Global Slavery Index, released by Australia-based Walk Free Foundation recently, an estimated 45.8 million people, including women and children, are subject to one or the other form of modern slavery in the world, compared to 35.8 million in 2014. Unlike historical slavery in which people were held as legal property, a practice universally outlawed now, modern slavery generally subsumes human trafficking, forced labour, bondage from indebtedness, forced, servile marriage or commercial sexual exploitation. Modern slavery refers to situations of exploitation that a person cannot leave because of threats, violence, coercion and abuse of power or deception.

With 18.35 million victims of forced labour, India has the dubious distinction of having the highest number of people trapped in modern slavery. India tops the world slavery index with over 40 per cent of the total people in slavery in the top ten economies of the world. In terms of absolute numbers, India is followed by China (3.39 million), Pakistan (2.13 million), Bangladesh (1.53 million) and Uzbekistan (1.23 million). These five countries together account for nearly 58 per cent of the world's enslaved. Incidences of slavery were found in all 167 countries in the index, with the above Asian countries occupying the top five places.

The countries with the lowest estimated prevalence of modern slavery by the proportion of their population are Luxembourg, Ireland, Norway, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Sweden and Belgium, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. These countries generally have more economic wealth, score higher on government response, have low levels of conflict, and are politically stable with a willingness to combat modern slavery.

The sectors engaging the highest number of modern slaves in India as indicated in the said survey include domestic work, bonded labour, prostitution, human trafficking, forced marriage, the construction and commercial sex industries, agriculture, forced recruitment in armed violence, fishing, manufacturing, manual labour, and forced begging. While India is home to more enslaved people than any other country, the Walk Free Foundation report said it had made “significant progress” in measures to address the problem. India has criminalised human trafficking, slavery, forced labour, child prostitution and forced marriage while also regulating child labour and domestic work.

The Global Slavery Index has based its survey findings on three main areas of measurement including prevalence of slavery, the strength of a government’s response in battling and preventing slavery, and vulnerability of the country’s citizens to modern slavery. However, the survey methodology as followed has been questioned by experts.

A major drawback of the Index is the extrapolation process used to estimate the number of those enslaved. Since 2014, survey questions based on the possible occurrence of forced labour have been incorporated into Gallup’s World Poll, but only in 25 countries (and seven of those countries’ estimates reflect survey data from 2014). Survey data is then extrapolated to the remaining 139 countries, which are now grouped into twelve clusters (the number of clusters has doubled since 2014).

The extrapolation process also uses secondary source data, taking into account additional factors such as state-sanctioned forced labour and conflict. Even without an extensive background on the prevalence of forced labour, it would be easy to see the flaws and implications this method poses. For example, according to the index, Japan is ranked only one slot below Yemen for the absolute number of those in modern slavery despite their drastically different total populations. Anyone with even a basic knowledge of the economic and political climate of these two countries would question the validity of this assertion. Clustering countries together based on such limited primary data creates false representation of the actual state of modern day slavery in many countries. And publicising such data that is not accurate could in turn distort vital policy decisions, law enforcement efforts, and budgetary allocations.

The year-on-year estimates are also found questionable. In 2014, the total number of those estimated to be enslaved was roughly 36 million. In 2016, that number has been estimated to be 45.8 million. Has the number of those enslaved globally actually risen or should we attribute this increase to a larger sample size? Either way, there is no mention of past years’ results or analysis to assess the rise or fall in numbers year to year.

Another area of major concern has been the manner in which the primary data was collected. Most notably, the sample size was extremely small. In the 25 countries where surveys have

been administered, roughly 1000 random families were sampled in each country (with the exception of Russia and India, with 2000 and 3000 families, respectively). In Pakistan, where the population is roughly 182 million, the representative sample amounts to 0.00001 percent of citizens. This arguably is too small for a sample to be representative.

Again, the target population of the surveys was those aged 15 and older, leaving out a large portion of child and teenage victims. In addition, the surveys were primarily conducted in source countries in hopes that upon return migrant workers would be free to speak about their experiences. Arguably, household surveys in developed countries may not reveal the same kind of vulnerabilities as those countries with a large migrant population.

Yet, this strategy again omits major populations of vulnerable people in destination countries (countries that people are trafficked or migrate to) who may actually be the best and most current representative sample. Furthermore, it assumes the 'developed' world has less of a slavery problem than 'undeveloped' or 'developing' source countries. In fact, there have been many reports of 'sweat shops' in some of the developed countries with very unedifying working conditions.

All said and done, the Global Slavery Index provides a basis to assess the problem of forced labour and modern day slavery. It has garnered attention of policy makers from across the world. There is no doubt the Index team of researchers worked diligently and effortlessly on producing and improving upon a detailed methodology for bringing out the phenomenon of modern slavery to the fore. The catch, however, lies in publicising data which is not grounded in validated research and may contribute to a misguided approach of tackling the problem of modern day slavery.

The results do provide insights into the pervasive exploitation of people throughout the world and focuses much-needed spotlight to the problem. It has engaged governments by assessing their responses, and could be a tool in holding our leaders accountable for taking action to fix the problem of modern slavery. One is sure that the policy makers across the world including India would sit up and take notice to make positive interventions to reduce the incidence of modern slavery.

## Salient Points

- Research suggests that all forms of modern slavery continue to exist in India.
- Modern slavery includes human trafficking, forced labour, bondage from indebtedness, forced, servile marriage or commercial sexual exploitation.
- Modern slavery refers to situations of exploitation that a person cannot leave because of threats, violence, coercion and abuse of power or deception.
- With 18.35 million victims of forced labour, India has dubious distinction of having the highest number of people trapped in modern slavery.
- India by criminalising human trafficking, slavery, forced labour, child prostitution and forced marriage while also regulating child labour and domestic work has made significant progress in addressing the problem.
- The research has been criticised for the methodology, sample size and assumptions made to arrive at the conclusions.

- A flawed finding may contribute to a misguided approach of tackling the problem of modern day slavery.
- The survey has engaged governments by assessing their responses, and could be a tool in holding our leaders accountable for taking action to fix the problem of modern slavery.

## Glossary

**Transition:** process of change from one condition to another

**Feudalism:** a social system in which nobility held lands and vassals were tenants of the nobles and where peasants were obliged to live on their lord's lands and give homage, labour, share of produce

**Trafficking:** illegal movement or trade of goods

**Bondage:** slavery

**Extrapolation:** concluding something by assuming that existing trends will continue

**Diligent:** showing care in one's duties