

Daily chart Modern slavery is disturbingly common

Forced labour persists around the world, particularly for domestic workers

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Not free to choose

Worldwide exploitation of forced labour, 2016



Prevalence
Per 1,000 people
World total: 3.4



Sources: International Labour Organisation; International Organisation for Migration; Walk Free Foundation

Economist.com

IN 1981 Mauritania became the last country in the world to abolish slavery. Yet although forced labour is now banned everywhere, a new report by the

International Labour Organisation (ILO), International Organisation for Migration and the Walk Free Foundation finds that the practice remains widespread. Last year 25m people around the world were in some type of involuntary servitude; between 2012 and 2016, 83m were subjected to at least a brief period of such work. A quarter of such exploitation happened outside of the victim's country of origin.

The definition of forced labour was laid down in an ILO convention in 1930: work or service exacted from people against their will and “under the menace of any penalty”. Around a sixth of the people experiencing such mistreatment today are forced to work by the state, primarily in prisons or the army (including conscripts made to do non-military tasks). Another 4.8m, roughly a fifth of the total, were victims of sexual exploitation. Even after excluding prostitution, almost three-fifths of those in forced labour in private enterprises are women, mainly because domestic work makes up a plurality of such exploitation. In construction, manufacturing and agriculture, the next three most-exploitative sectors, most victims are men. The report retells horrific cases of people dragooned into work, including 600 men rescued from foreign fishing boats in Indonesian waters. Some of them had not set foot on land for years; one had been separated from his family for 22 years.

Coercion can take multiple forms, from sexual violence to threats against family members, confinement and having passports taken away. The most common means is withholding the worker's wages. Michaelle De Cock, one of the report's co-authors, says she was shocked by the level of debt bondage that the study revealed. More than half of the respondents in the survey who were subjected to forced labour had to work to repay a debt with punitive interest rates. In agriculture, domestic work and manufacturing this share rose to over 70%.

Governments are beginning to beef up their efforts against this stubbornly persistent practice of forced labour. Brazil, for instance, has increased the number of inspectors who can turn up at farms and factories to ensure that workers haven't been forced into jobs. In 2014, Britain established an

independent anti-slavery commissioner to investigate cases of involuntary labour. Just this month nine people were jailed for offences under the country's Modern Slavery Act, passed in 2015. This law also requires companies with revenues of at least £36m (\$50m) to ensure that they do not exploit workers and that their supply chains also comply with British law. Over 80,000 organisations have signed up for an open-data register demonstrating that they and their suppliers make no use of forced labour. Over 200 years ago, Britain led the charge to abolish slavery. Today the country is taking a leading role against its modern manifestation.