

Human Trafficking for Forced Labour in Supply Chains: What You Need to Know

The food on your plate, the clothes you wear, the phone in your pocket – each may have passed through the unseen hands of individuals trapped in forced labour.

Human trafficking for forced labour is on the rise. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#), in 2022 [forced labour](#) cases made up 42 per cent of all detected human trafficking cases globally, surpassing those related to sexual exploitation. Yet, the response has not kept pace with the scale of the crime. The complexity of global supply chains makes it difficult to track labour conditions, increasing the risk that exploitation is embedded in the products we use every day. We explore below how trafficking for forced labour infiltrates supply chains and outline what businesses, policymakers and consumers can do to prevent it.

What is a supply chain, and how does it shape global commerce?

A supply chain is a network of businesses that collaborate to, for example, transform raw materials into finished goods. In today's interconnected global economy, supply chains often span multiple industries and regions, operating across diverse regulatory environments and economic conditions.

To manage this complexity, global supply chains are structured in tiers. Tier 1 suppliers provide finished products directly to companies, while Tier 2 suppliers provide materials or components to Tier 1 suppliers. This hierarchy continues with raw material suppliers at the lowest tiers.

How does trafficking for forced labour become part of the supply chain?

While multi-tier supply chains enhance efficiency and reduce costs, they also create blind spots where the use of forced labour can thrive. The farther down the supply chain a supplier is, the harder it becomes for those in the market for the finished product to monitor working conditions and enforce ethical standards. This lack of visibility can enable exploitative labour practices. To prevent this, regulators and companies must strengthen supply chain due diligence, improve transparency and hold suppliers accountable.

Which industries are most affected?

According to UNODC's 2022 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, forced labour is especially prevalent in the food supply chain, particularly in agriculture and farming (29 per cent) and the fishing industry (28 per cent). But no sector is immune—forced labour exists across multiple industries and regions.

Importantly, exploitation can be both hidden and visible. In some cases, workers are isolated or concealed from public view. In others, exploitation occurs in formal settings – such as factories or farms – where warning signs like long hours, constant surveillance or onsite sleeping arrangements are in plain sight but frequently ignored.

What can companies do to prevent this crime?

Companies play a critical role in preventing forced labour within their operations and supply chains. Risks can arise within a company's own workforce, through business partners and subcontractors, or even in sourcing everyday goods and services such as office supplies, cleaning and security.

To mitigate the significant legal, reputational and financial risks associated with forced labour, companies should conduct a risk or impact assessment on human trafficking and forced labour and develop a clear policy that explicitly prohibits human trafficking. Managers, human resources employees and other staff should be trained on how to identify and report exploitation. Measures to monitor subcontractors and contract labour providers are essential.

Resources for businesses on how to implement these measures can be found in the Supplier Sensitization Initiative (see below).

How can consumers make a difference?

Consumers have significant power. By making informed purchasing decisions, they can collectively drive change. Researching brands and their sustainability practices allows consumers to support companies committed to transparency and ethical labour standards. If a product appears unusually cheap or lacks information about its origin, consumers should consider alternatives that offer better visibility and align with fair practices.

Opting for fair trade or certified sustainable products helps combat forced labour and encourages companies to adopt better practices. This ultimately benefits both people and the planet, sending a strong message to suppliers that accountability matters.

What is UNODC doing to respond to this crime?

As a key member of the Taskforce for Combating Human Trafficking and Forced Labour in UN Supply Chains, UNODC is actively working to address this issue head-on. This involves raising awareness and equipping procurement officers with the tools to prevent human trafficking for forced labor occurring in UN supply chains across the globe.

UNODC also leads the Supplier Sensitization Initiative, offering resources such as self-assessment tools, supplier statements and sample contract clauses to help businesses that work with the UN to prevent human trafficking and forced labour in their supply chains.

In 2023, United Nations procurement reached USD \$24.9 billion, spent on everything from medicines and safety equipment to vehicles and other essential goods and services. With thousands of suppliers operating in nearly 220 countries and territories, the scale of this spending carries a critical responsibility: ensuring that UN funds do not inadvertently fuel exploitative labour practices.

(Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime)