

# EXPOSING THE HIDDEN VICTIMS OF COVID-19

Demanding better protections for  
victims and communities  
vulnerable to modern slavery



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# Overview



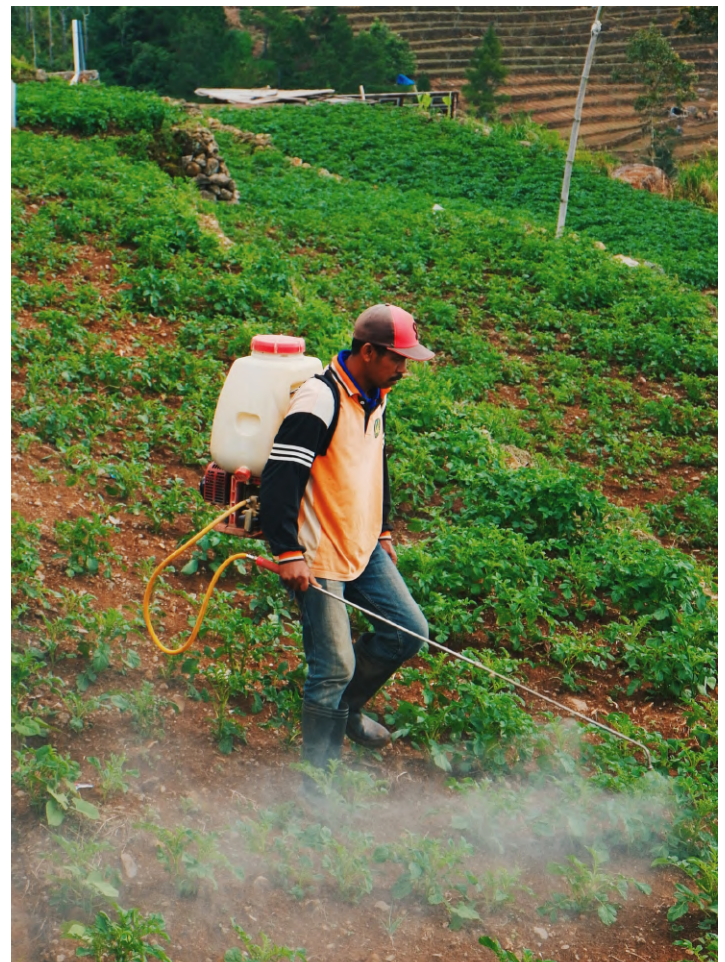
**The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly evolving and Freedom United is working fast to adapt our collective campaigns. This call to action summarizes the ways in which the pandemic is affecting our campaigns for the changes needed for a world where modern slavery no longer thrives.**

**We draw on assessment and analysis of news, publications, and other newly released literature and, in particular, on recommendations and statements published by our partner organizations.**

**We would like to thank our partners for their swift response to the pandemic. A full list of acknowledgements is included at the end of the brief.**

The COVID-19 pandemic is exposing just how fragile the protection and prevention framework on modern slavery is, despite progress in recent years resulting from a new focus, marked particularly by a drive toward national anti-slavery legislation.[1] Freedom United's campaigns, which focus on securing changes to improve specific anti-slavery prevention and protection needs around the world, are even more challenged as the pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable. It is clear that vulnerable migrants, including modern slavery victims and survivors, and those who do not have the legal right to remain in a country are being placed at greater risk of both the virus and its effects, as well as exploitation.[2] Victims of modern slavery are often referred to as being hidden in plain sight – washing cars, harvesting crops, manicuring nails –

but during the pandemic, they are hidden twice over. When governments lift restrictive measures, traffickers will find rich pickings. Using our partners' resources, Freedom United is working to help expose the new ways in which communities and people are being made vulnerable to modern slavery, how the risk is increasing and the disproportionate effect this global health crisis is having on victims and survivors. The current climate, the 'new normal,' and suspension of regulations reinforce the importance of robust protection mechanisms in order to protect people from exploitation. The pandemic is exposing the fragile nature of policies to prevent millions from being coerced under threat into contemporary forms of slavery including forced marriage, debt bondage, human trafficking, and forced labor.



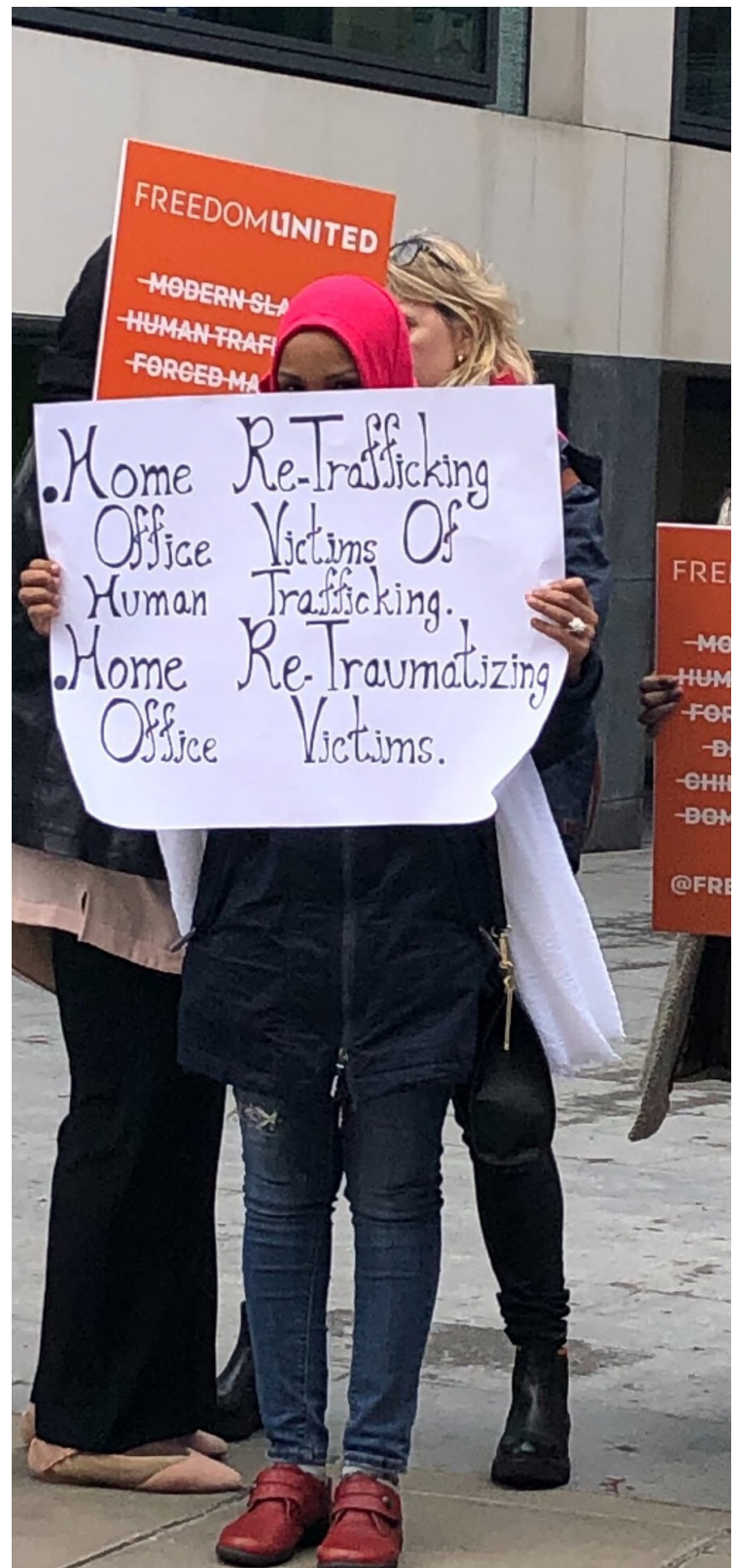


**Prevention mechanisms:** Fighting modern slavery requires protecting vulnerable communities from being coerced into exploitation. This means expanding resources to reduce pressures to take risks that might lead to exploitation. The removal or absence of support including financial, social, shelter, and food, for example, will increase the risk of vulnerable individuals becoming trapped in forced labor and other forms of modern slavery. Prevention measures should focus on communities known to be at a heightened risk to modern slavery because of their vulnerability, discrimination, or marginalization. This includes women and girls, who are disproportionately affected by forms of modern slavery such as commercial sexual exploitation, forced marriage, and domestic servitude.

- Governments must heed the United Nations' call to action and adopt measures to grant every individual- including modern slavery victims, refugees, and people seeking asylum—access to healthcare free from the risk of detention or deportation.[3]
- Relief packages such as unemployment benefits should be extended to all persons regardless of their immigration or work authorization status, so they do not resort to working under exploitative conditions.

**Active implementation of modern slavery regulations:** As governments enforce quarantine guidelines, regulations that are created to protect individuals from modern slavery are being suspended. Embassies' services are reduced across the globe with protection measures set aside, leaving temporary workers vulnerable to misinformation.

- As the pandemic exacerbates modern slavery risks for the most vulnerable in our communities, existing regulations must be implemented and strengthened where practical.



# Domestic Servitude



## Help end domestic slavery



Domestic workers, the majority of whom are women, are one of the least protected groups of workers under national laws—migrant domestic workers even more so—as the enforcement of employment laws does not extend to private homes. Isolation is often enhanced for workers in a foreign country, and their immigration status means they are already among the most vulnerable to exploitation and forced labor.[4] During the COVID-19 pandemic, these risks are intensified.

Social distancing policies requiring people to stay indoors have led to some domestic workers losing their jobs thus increasing their vulnerability, while others face more intense work due to their employer staying home.[5] This is a matter of deep concern when we consider the numerous shocking reports that have exposed employers subjecting domestic workers to servitude in the Middle East and around the world. In interviews, exploited migrant domestic workers speak of having little to no food, working long hours without rest or days off, and experiencing delays in payment, underpayment, or the withholding of wages.[6] Under these abusive conditions, women also report that employers confiscate their passports, limit their communication with family members, and experience physical and sexual abuse.

Freedom United has been campaigning to protect domestic workers' rights by calling on governments to ratify the International Labour Organizations' (ILO) Domestic Workers Convention (C189). This is a global standard that prevents the exploitation of domestic workers through preventive and protective measures, including access to minimum wage and freedom to choose where to live. Since it was adopted in 2011, only 29 countries have ratified, meaning the vast majority of countries still do not abide by this standard—which is part of the reason why domestic workers are particularly vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With employers being home most, if not all, of the day, for those who are still working, we can reasonably expect an increase in the oppression, control, and surveillance of migrant domestic workers. This makes the possibility of escape even more improbable under COVID-19 lock-downs.

Additionally, the pandemic has caused increases in unemployment and respective decreases in family income.[7] These financial circumstances may lead to more migrant domestic workers having their pay withheld and may even cause greater restrictions on their food intake. Thus, the possibility is ripe to either aggravate an already terrifying situation for an enslaved domestic worker and creates new situations of forced labor for domestic workers who were not enslaved.



# Domestic Servitude



## Recommendations:

**Access to financial relief for domestic workers:** Governments must include all domestic workers in their relief packages, so they are not forced or coerced to stay with their employers. This will reduce their vulnerability to modern slavery. Spain recently took action by offering subsidy unemployment benefits for authorized domestic workers; however, this should be extended to all domestic workers, regardless of their immigration status.[8]

**Ratify ILO Convention 189:** We urge all countries to ratify the Domestic Worker Convention 189 to protect domestic workers from exploitation and unlawful working conditions. The convention creates a solid foundation to tackle domestic servitude not only during the COVID-19 pandemic, but beyond the impacts of the virus. Convention 189 creates basic protections to ensure decent pay, monitor child labor, and establish standards to ensure fair employment.

“**EXPLOITED MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS SPEAK OF HAVING LITTLE TO NO FOOD, WORKING LONG HOURS WITHOUT REST OR DAYS OFF, AND EXPERIENCING DELAYS IN PAYMENT, UNDERPAYMENT, OR THE WITHHOLDING OF WAGES.**”

# Forced Marriage



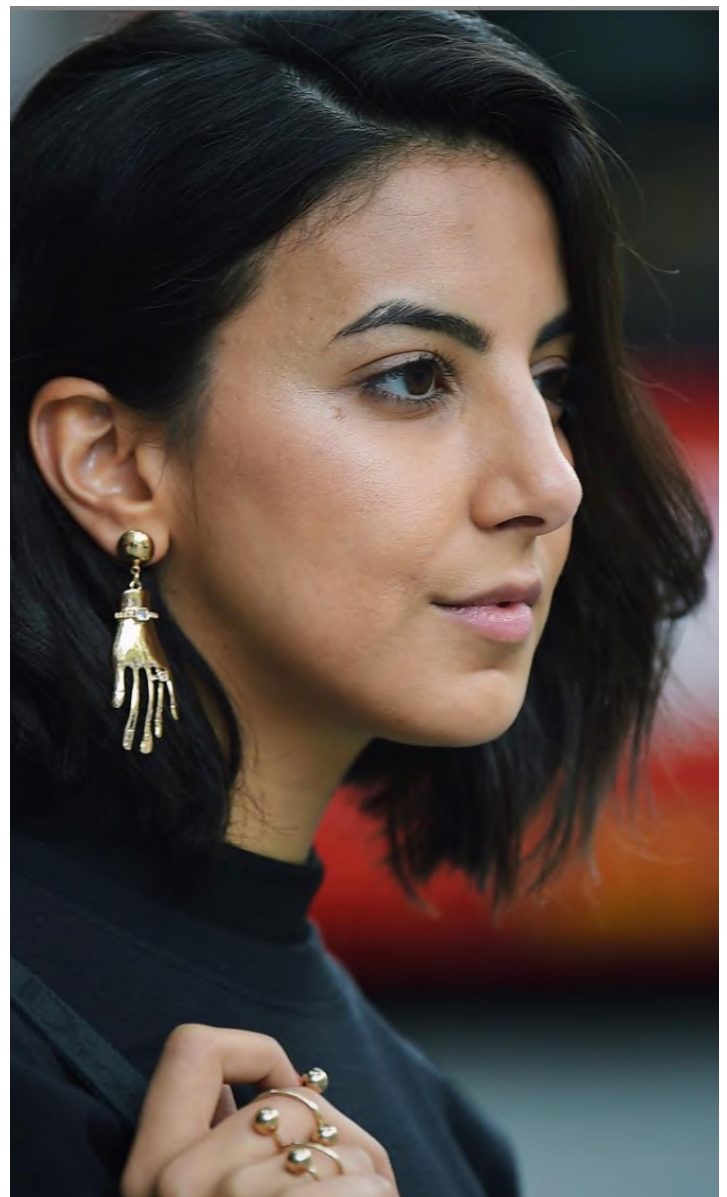
## Join the Fight against Forced Child Marriage



The ILO reports that women and girls represent an estimated 13 million, or 84 percent, of all victims of forced marriage, and represent an estimated 71 percent of modern slavery victims worldwide.[9] Research has shown that financial stress is one of the root causes of child marriage.[10] As COVID-19 continues to spread, the inevitable global economic downturn will lead to widespread unemployment and income losses across societies. We are concerned the number of girls forced into marriage will increase as financial hardship progressively worsens for families. This may result in families believing they have no choice but to marry off their young daughters as survival is the overriding focus. It could also result in practices such as bride prices or dowries becoming an appealing economic incentive for families to force their children into marriage.[11] Furthermore, school closures as a result of COVID-19 are likely to heighten the risks of forced marriage, with research showing that early child marriage is associated with education cessation among girls.[12]

The recent spike in domestic violence as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns may also put young girls in forced marriages at risk of enduring heightened levels of abuse. UN Women has reported that intimate partner violence is a greater risk for girls who enter marriage in childhood compared to girls of the same age who marry later on in life.

Freedom United is campaigning to end forced child marriage. We joined **Girls Not Brides** calling on world leaders at the United Nations to implement Sustainable Development Goal 5.3. Led by survivor-advocate **Payzee Mahmood**, Freedom United launched the public campaign with a coalition of organizations pushing for the UK government to ban child marriage and protect girls from this form of modern slavery.



# Forced Marriage



## Recommendations:

**Prevention of forced marriage and support for victims:** Women and girls should have continued access to education, programs, and support services to prevent child abuse and forced marriage. Programs in place to protect victims of forced marriage, such as shelters and hotlines, must be supported by governments and made accessible to all.

**Criminalize child marriage:** Many countries allow child marriage, either in customary law or with parental consent under the age of 18. This loophole makes young girls vulnerable to parental and familial coercion. We urge all governments to ensure all girls are protected against modern slavery by criminalizing all marriages where at least one party is under the age of 18. Girls who are currently trapped in a forced marriage are at a higher risk of violence and exploitation. We must demand preventive measures are implemented to safeguard young girls from the impacts of forced marriage during this pandemic and beyond.

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# Homelessness & Modern Slavery



## Protect runaway and homeless youth



Homeless shelters around the globe are closing their doors to contain the spread of the virus, while those that remain open are reaching full capacity and struggle with limited resources.[13] The impact of this will be particularly stark for the newly homeless escaping escalation in abuse brought on by the lockdown. Those who are homeless are more likely to experience human trafficking, especially homeless youth.

Reports from Loyola University of New Orleans show one in five youth who have received services from their shelter had experienced some form of human trafficking.[14]

Freedom United is campaigning alongside **National Network for Youth (NN4Y)** to protect runaway and homeless youth in the United States with a campaign calling on Congress to pass the Runaway and Homeless Youth Trafficking Prevention Act (RHYTPA) (H.R. 5191/S. 2916), a critical piece of legislation that would allow service providers to focus on human trafficking and prevent more children from falling prey to it.

Its passing would guarantee funding and update and reauthorize current programs. Resources towards homeless and runaway youth have always

been inadequate; however, during this pandemic, we are seeing an even greater need for these resources.

As lock-down procedures are implemented across the globe, public places where homeless youth commonly find shelters such as bathrooms, schools, libraries, and gyms are closing. This risk is even greater for those who are part of the LGBTQ community, as they are more vulnerable to youth homelessness. As the number of cases of domestic violence rise, we expect to see an increase in runaway youth escaping domestic violence.[15] With limited options to access safe shelters and support, runaway and homeless youth are at greater risk of coercion and human trafficking.[16]

### Recommendations:

#### Access to housing for vulnerable communities:

Government must support housing shelters for runaway youth and other communities who are vulnerable to being homeless due to COVID-19. We urge governments and development agencies to include funding provisions to all shelters to prevent human trafficking. During the pandemic, we also encourage the implementation of measures to protect private renters from eviction should a loss of income prevent them from being able to pay rent.

“THOSE WHO ARE HOMELESS ARE MORE LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE HUMAN TRAFFICKING, ESPECIALLY HOMELESS YOUTH.”

# MODERN SLAVERY IN PRISONS & DETENTION CENTERS



## Help stop forced labor of detainees



Individuals who are currently within the prison system or detained in detention centers are shockingly at risk of modern slavery. This is because the 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution abolished slavery whilst permitting it as a punishment for crime. This has been exploited by prison operators. The ILO defines the line between free prison labor and forced prison labor through a set of indicators.[17] However, this has not prevented the exploitation of millions for profit within these systems, including outside the U.S.

For example, the Chinese government legitimizes the widespread imposition of forced labor on citizens, especially racial minorities. Native ethnic groups in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, including Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Hui, are currently being subjected to systematic forced labor in the largest organized detention of an ethnic minority since the Second World War. Uyghurs were made to work during the pandemic when others sheltered at home, exposing them to COVID-19. Alongside with our partners, Freedom United is calling on the Chinese government to end this system of forced labor.

As businesses are closing, the demand for products, especially medical equipment, must still be met.

Many states are depending on prison labor to meet those demands. While not all prison labor is slavery, this is undoubtedly a vulnerable population. The Brennan Center for Justice reports prisoners in Missouri are earning less than a dollar an hour producing hand sanitizers and protective gowns. Reports have also shown those who are currently in prisons are at risk of contracting the virus, with measures such as social distancing impossible to observe.[18]

The impacts of COVID-19 also affect those held in detentions centers, which may include survivors of trafficking that have not been given the legal right to remain in a country. Migrants who are held in private for-profit detention centers at risk of forced labor and coercion.

Freedom United has been campaigning with **Detainee Allies** against CoreCivic, a private prison operator that stands accused of forcing detainees to work at one of its facilities in California. We are urging CoreCivic to address these numerous allegations, raise wages, and denounce forced labor explicitly in its Human Rights Policy Statement. It is important to continue calling for the implementation of protective measures in prisons and detention centers to ensure migrant detainees are not subjected to forced labor and exploitation during this pandemic.

The lack of response to prevent the spread of the virus in detention facilities is a further matter of deep concern. As of publication, one detainee at CoreCivic's Otay Mesa Detention Center has already died in the largest COVID-19 outbreak in San Diego county; over a hundred other inmates have tested positive.[19] With limited ability to socially distance, self-isolate, or otherwise protect themselves from the virus, modern slavery victims in U.S. detention centers—and detainees vulnerable to becoming victims—are at unacceptably high risk of infection.

# MODERN SLAVERY IN PRISONS & DETENTION CENTERS



## Recommendations:

**Ensure measures are in place to prevent the forced labor of detainees:** We urge all governments to roll back the privatization of the prison industry and dismantle systems of mass incarceration that facilitate the subjection of detainees to forced labor for the accumulation of private profit. Nobody should be subjected to modern slavery, regardless of their immigration status, and there should not be a financial incentive for private companies to encourage high incarceration rates. To help stop exploitation, all prisoners and detainees should receive wages comparable with free labor for work that they enter into voluntarily to help stop exploitation.



# Migrant Workers



## Urge California to ensure all its temporary workers are free from slavery



Low-paid migrant workers who leave their homes, and often their families, in search of employment are already among the most vulnerable to modern slavery. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, these risks are heightened to critical levels. For those who cross borders, the risk is even higher because their immigration status is easily leveraged to trap migrants in forced labor, trafficking, and other forms of modern slavery. Most undocumented migrants do not have access to legal protections or basic health care. This is true both in legal exploitative systems, such as the kafala system, and in illegal trafficking settings, where migrants work under threat of deportation. There are limited guidelines in place that promise better protections from forced labor or wages during the current coronavirus crisis.[20]

In India, the world's largest lockdown has seen over a billion people forced to stay inside and—in cases where the workplace also provided accommodation—caused many informal migrant workers to lose their jobs and homes at once. Many are now making arduous journeys on foot from cities back to their villages, sometimes walking for hundreds of miles. [21] Migrants who use irregular migration routes are known to be vulnerable to human trafficking.[22] Survey data has shown that many of these workers are at critical risk of debt bondage as they take out loans to survive.[23] Many migrants that were already in transit, meanwhile, have found themselves stranded and unprotected.

Across the African continent, border closures have left tens of thousands of migrants trapped at transit camps, ports, mines, and remote frontier areas in dangerous conditions.[24] These migrants run a high risk of exploitation and forced labor, with many agreeing to even riskier means of reaching their destination. With many official transit centers at capacity, overcrowding also makes these stranded migrants more vulnerable to COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic is also having an enormous impact on temporary migrant workers, many of whom have been identified as essential workers. Protections and regulations for temporary workers traveling to the U.S. have been waived due to the pandemic. This is especially concerning since they were insufficient to begin with. In the United States, the H-2A visa system through which temporary farmworkers are legally recruited is rife with exploitation: a recent survey found that 100 percent of workers experience at least one serious legal violation.[25] Meanwhile, U.S. embassies in Mexico—the largest source of H-2A migrant workers—are closed indefinitely, raising the risk of misinformation and limited transparency. [26]

Freedom United has been campaigning since early in 2020 with the **Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking (CAST LA)** to push for the amendment of a bill that, if correctly changed, will better protect all temporary workers in California regardless of their visa category. Many categories, including the H-2A system used by farmworkers that grow much of the country's produce, are insufficiently protected from exploitation and face widespread abuse. These risks come in addition to the serious health risks these workers run with regards to COVID-19 itself. Workers are typically housed in overcrowded dormitories, meaning social distancing is impossible, and many do not have access to hand washing facilities.

# Migrant Workers



For migrants and refugees fleeing, or living in, conflict zones, the pandemic raises modern slavery risks for an additional reason: many humanitarian operations have been suspended as a result of the pandemic. We have already seen migrants and refugees fleeing conflict zones face many forms of modern slavery due to poor regulations and support. Due to the pandemic, resettlement flights, humanitarian rescue missions at sea, and UN visits to detention centers have been suspended.[27]

Forced labor of migrants and refugees is widespread in Libya's notorious detention centers and the risk of exploitation is critical amid the suspension of aid and oversight. Since 2017, we have been advocating for the European Union to cease funding the Libyan coastguard, as they are placing migrants in harmful detention centers where they face a high risk of forced labor.

## Recommendations:

**Safe travel channels:** Governments must provide legal migration routes to prevent migrants from resorting to irregular routes. Together with business, ensure safe channels of transportation for migrants who have to travel home due to the lockdown. Without safe travel routes, migrants are a greater risk of exploitation.

**Prevention and protection mechanisms for refugees and migrant workers:** Governments should ensure all vulnerable migrants, refugees, and people seeking asylum are granted access to state welfare, housing, and protection from eviction during the pandemic. Government assistance and programs in place for victims of modern slavery should be extended where they would have otherwise come to an end. Government stipends for modern slavery victims and people seeking asylum should be increased to reflect any increase in living costs as a result of COVID-19.



# Modern Slavery Recovery



## Lift the Ban: give survivors the right to work & live in dignity



For survivors of trafficking and exploitation, the uncertainty triggered by the pandemic can be incredibly destabilizing and self-isolation can trigger additional trauma. Access to health services, including mental health services, is crucial to minimize individuals' vulnerability to harm.[28] Many countries fail to provide survivors of modern slavery with proper means of recovery. In the U.K., survivors who seek asylum are prevented from working and are therefore unable to sustainably rebuild their lives and ensure that they do not fall into being re-trafficked. In light of the delayed asylum decision-making process, which can stretch on for years, Freedom United joined **Lift the Ban and Refugee Action** in campaigning for the government to grant the right to work to all people seeking asylum.

The U.K. also fails to provide all child survivors of modern slavery with independent guardians to help them navigate complex support systems. Freedom United is partnering with **ECPAT UK** to urge the U.K. government to realize its commitment under the U.K. Modern Slavery Act and roll out a statutory system of legal guardianship nationally. This would ensure all child victims of trafficking in the UK are supported by an independent professional adult, acting in their best interests, to help them navigate complex legal, housing, education and criminal justice systems. The current support in place for survivors is insufficient and the government must ensure all child victims of trafficking are properly supported during this pandemic.

The fear of detention is enough to prevent undocumented migrants and victims of trafficking from seeking medical help. Immigration detention centers in the U.S. are reportedly failing to provide detainees with soap and appropriate protective gear.[29] Cramped conditions mean that detention centers are a hotbed for the spread of disease and social distancing measures are almost impossible for detainees to observe.[30] Some detainees may be trafficking victims, and for those trafficked into a country with no legal rights, the prospect of being arrested and kept in a detention center can result in them not seeking medical help when needed.[31]

Portugal has already implemented measures to grant all migrants in the country the same rights as citizens regardless of the status of their immigration application until at least July 1, 2020. [32] Once an individual presents proof of an ongoing application, they will have access to the health service, government welfare, as well as work and residency permits. It is vital that beyond the pandemic, all survivors and victims of modern slavery are provided with specialist long-term support for at least 12 months to aid a sustainable recovery from their experiences and reduce the risk of re-trafficking.

**AN ESTIMATED  
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# Modern Slavery Recovery



The U.K. has recently announced a new policy removing charges under the National Health Service for COVID-19 testing and treatment. All migrants, irrespective of their immigration status, will be able to access COVID-19 testing and treatment free of charge.[33]

## Recommendations:

**Access to healthcare for victims and survivors of modern slavery:** Governments and service agencies must guarantee healthcare services are accessible to all modern slavery victims and at-risk migrants irrespective of their immigration status.

**Provide adequate support for victims and survivors of modern slavery:** Governments must ensure that during the pandemic and beyond all survivors and victims of modern slavery are provided with specialist long-term support including the option to regularize their immigration status, safe accommodation, granting access to residency and work permits and sufficient financial government support.



# Looking Forward



The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed what Freedom United and our allies already knew: that protections and prevention measures against modern slavery are fragile and insufficient. The world risks backsliding on the progress that has been made to change this, and is likely to witness a sharp increase in modern slavery victims. It is only with a strong and united anti-slavery effort that we can prevent or lessen the impact of the pandemic on the modern slavery movement. Mobilizing public support and engagement for ending modern slavery has always been a crucial part of our movement, and it will be a crucial part of the effort to tackle this growing crisis. With this call to action briefing, we hope to enhance and strengthen the valuable work of our partners during this crisis and beyond.

## **Freedom United Campaigns Referenced** Number of actions current as of publication

**Help End Domestic Slavery: 84,996 actions**

**Join the fight against forced child marriage: 89,529 actions**

**Safeguard Futures: End child marriage: 108,063 actions**

**Protect Runaway and Homeless Youth: 36,325 actions**

**Free Uyghurs from forced labor in China: 19,684 actions**

**Help stop forced labor of detainees: 52,335 actions**

**Urge California to ensure all its temporary workers are  
free from slavery: 17,303 actions**

**Call to End Slavery in Libya: 15,249 actions**

**Lift the Ban: give survivors the right to work & live in  
dignity: 92,099 actions**

**Help trafficked children in the UK: 26,854 actions**



# Key Resources from Partners



Anti-Slavery International: <https://www.antislavery.org/the-response-to-covid-19-is-an-opportunity-to-redesign-a-world-free-from-slavery/>

Alliance to End Slavery and Trafficking: <https://endslaveryandtrafficking.org/congress-must-address-human-trafficking-in-emergency-funding-legislation/>

Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking: <https://cdns.freedomunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/08121306/CastBudgetRecommendations-GovernorNewsominResponsetoCOVID-19andHumanTrafficking-FinalApril2020.pdf>

Detainee Allies: <https://www.alliestoenddetention.org/covid/>

Girls Not Brides: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/resource-centre/covid-19-and-child-early-and-forced-marriage-an-agenda-for-action/>

Global Citizens: <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/coronavirus-impact-on-homeless-population/>

International Domestic Workers Federation: [https://idwfed.org/en/covid-19/the-idwf/advocacy/idwf-policy-brief\\_final-eng.pdf](https://idwfed.org/en/covid-19/the-idwf/advocacy/idwf-policy-brief_final-eng.pdf)

National Network for Youth NN4Y: <https://nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/Youth-Policy-Recommendations-Phase-Four-COVID-19-Bill-NN4Y-4-9-20.pdf>

Refugee Action: <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/coronavirus-response/>

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- [33] <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/visiting-or-moving-to-england/visitors-from-outside-the-european-economic-area-eea/>