

Research suggests Brexit likely to increase modern slavery in the UK

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Credit: University of Bath

Theresa May's historic signing of Article 50 looks set to be her lasting legacy as Prime Minister. Unfortunately, it is also likely to derail her other signature policy on modern slavery. Our research suggests Brexit could increase modern slavery in the UK.

The signing of Article 50 marks the point of no return for the UK's exit from the European Union. Although she inherited the Brexit decision, Theresa May's political legacy will stand and fall on how successfully she

manages to steer the country through the turmoil.

Without a doubt, Article 50 will bring untold changes to the political, economic and cultural landscape of the country. One change that will certainly be high on May's radar is its effect on modern slavery in the UK.

Modern slavery has been May's signature policy since she was Home Secretary. She introduced the landmark Modern Slavery Act in 2015 prior to becoming PM, and has since continued to champion the cause. In announcing a ramping up of Government efforts to improve enforcement last year, she identified modern slavery as "the great human rights issue of our time" and heralded the UK as leading the way in defeating it.

While the Act is far from perfect, it has certainly focused increased attention and resources on modern slavery. Prosecution levels also appear to be improving. This was most recently illustrated by the sentencing of the Markowski brothers to six years in prison for trafficking and then exploiting 18 people from Poland, who they brought to the UK to work in a Sports Direct warehouse.

The problem is, despite the advances gradually being made in addressing modern slavery in the UK, the signing of Article 50 is likely to worsen the problem. As May is probably acutely aware (but is so far not saying), Brexit may well undermine the progress she has made to date. It is a case of two steps forward, one step back.

According to research I conducted with an international team of colleagues looking at forced labour in the UK (initially funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation), four main problems are evident.

1. Brexit will increase the demand for modern slavery

The Brexit vote has already created uncertainty among the legions of poorly paid, but legal [migrant workers](#) from Eastern Europe that are employed in the UK's low wage economy. Signing Article 50 may ultimately help stem the flow of workers into the country as intended. But who is going to replace them? Domestic workers will fill some of the gaps but companies are unlikely to be willing to improve wages and conditions to attract them in sufficient numbers. So there will be greater opportunities for unscrupulous middlemen to traffic in workers from overseas or prey on vulnerable UK citizens to force them into exploitative situations. Forced labour flourishes where local, low skilled labour is in short supply.

2. Brexit will facilitate exploitation

Modern slavery often occurs when workers do not fully understand their legal rights and status. Our research uncovered various examples of migrant workers being exploited because those exploiting them misled them into the belief that they were working illegally. Perpetrators would also wait for or deliberately engineer changes in workers' [immigration status](#) in order to exploit them. The point is that Brexit will create a period of increased uncertainty around legal status that will be a significant boon to exploiters.

3. Brexit will increase the supply of modern slavery

Modern slavery occurs when people are vulnerable, either because of legal status, poverty, mental health, or drug and alcohol problems. In our research, the most common victims were those from countries such as Romania and Bulgaria who, at the time, were able to enter the country but were unable to work legally. This vulnerability was exploited by perpetrators who were able to coerce them into working in highly exploitative situations. The more the UK puts up barriers to people

entering the country legally, the higher the risk of traffickers bringing them in illegally and pushing them into debt. Once workers are in debt, perpetrators are adept at escalating their indebtedness and creating situations of debt bondage.

4. Brexit will turn victims into criminals

Our research found that many victims of forced labour in the UK were prosecuted under immigration offences rather than being identified as victims. The Modern Slavery Act has improved this situation but as the UK moves towards Brexit, the chances of this happening will increase because policing around immigration status is likely to intensify far more than around modern slavery.

May claims that under her leadership, "Britain will once again lead the way in defeating modern [slavery](#)". But the bottom line is that by triggering Brexit, May will be left trying to solve a problem that she is helping create.

Provided by University of Bath

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