

How the coronavirus pandemic is adding to the world's slave labour workforce

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The economic disruption created by the Coronavirus pandemic could

trap hundreds of thousands more workers around the world in modern slavery working conditions, researchers are warning.

With businesses forced to act urgently by increased time and [financial pressures](#) while safeguards are relaxed or unenforced, the number of workers in [modern slavery](#) conditions could rise significantly according to academics from the universities of Sussex, Nottingham and Kassel, Germany.

An academic opinion piece, newly published in the Journal of Risk Research, emphasizes that the urgent need for [medical equipment](#) could see procurement practices such as quality checks and due diligence measures for modern [slavery](#) being dropped in industries, such as the manufacturing of medical gloves, where labour abuses are well-documented.

The diversion of supply routes to meet demand carried out by a host of businesses and public institutions, including the NHS, required the rapid onboarding of suppliers that had never been used previously increased the likelihood of modern slavery occurring in the supply chain, the paper warns.

In their haste to respond to economic and supply chain emergencies, governments have also relaxed restrictions designed to limit the risk of modern slavery. Examples include the UK Government, who are allowing labour providers to temporarily provide workforce without the usual gangmasters licence, and the US Government, who lifted an import ban on a Malaysian manufacturer of medical gloves accused of using forced labour.

And workers have been physically isolated by Coronavirus response restrictions from the bodies that would in ordinary circumstances offer them support, advice and protection, the academics state.

Dr. Martin C. Schleper, Senior Lecturer in Operations Management at the University of Sussex Business School, said: "The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the wicked problems that sustainable supply chain management face and the assumed prioritisation of economic sustainability when confronted with disruptive shocks that threaten firm survival. We know tightly coupled supply chains prioritising short-term efficiency goals are proven to be particularly weak for handling shock events and cause firms to take untested measures with greater social risks, including modern slavery, and this is now being played out across the globe."

Among the industries cited in the research most likely to have seen an increase in the risk of modern slavery is the garment industry and agriculture.

The paper warns that the failure of Western clothing brands to honour orders and payments ultimately causes financial hardship to low-paid workers and mid-level managers, leaving them and their families even more vulnerable to exploitative employment practices in the same or other sectors.

Border closures and movement restrictions are creating labour shortages in sectors including agriculture, the academics said. National governments have struggled to fill these vacancies with local workers, opening up the prospect for more slave labour as companies become increasingly desperate not to see their produce rot in the fields.

Dr. Alexander Trautrim, Associate Professor in Supply Chain and Operations Management in the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham, said: "Our research has identified a number of ways that the global supply and demand shock resulting from COVID-19 has exacerbated workers' vulnerability to modern slavery. These include buyers, who in urgent need of widening their supplier base, forewent the

opportunity for comprehensive modern slavery risk assessments."

The research details how physical distancing and other lockdown measures have made it much more difficult for victims of modern slavery to access support and disclose their situation.

Travel restrictions and social distancing guidelines have also made physical audits of suppliers and their workforces impossible, the paper highlights.

Stefan Gold, Professor of Sustainability Management at the University of Kassel in Germany, said: "Despite this gloomy diagnosis on working conditions and workers' rights, this crisis could also represent a window of opportunity to rethink current supply chain designs and trade relationships.

"Studies conducted after the 2008 financial crisis have shown that strategically formulated social and environmental practices that base on long-term relationships and commitments—rather than mere tick-box compliance exercises—can significantly increase organisational resilience and thus better prepare for exceptional states. Firms with proactive, value-oriented, and long-term [supply chain](#) management prior to COVID-19 may now prove their superiority compared to arm-length, transactional, and oftentimes myopically economically incentivised approaches."

More information: Alexander Trautrimis et al. Survival at the expense of the weakest? Managing modern slavery risks in supply chains during COVID-19, *Journal of Risk Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/13669877.2020.1772347](https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2020.1772347)

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