

How can there still be 30m people living as slaves in 2013?



Globally 29.8 million people live in modern slavery, according to a new report called the Global Slavery Index released today by the Walk Free Foundation. The country with the highest number of enslaved people is India, with over 1.2 million, followed by China, Pakistan, Nigeria and Ethiopia.

Shackles which were used to tether slaves on display at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool. Photo: Getty.

Nick Grono, the CEO of the Walk Free Foundation said that the report's authors "were not particularly surprised by the findings, though of course they make for disturbing reading" and that they wanted to highlight the scale of the problem globally.

The UK and Ireland ranked as the countries with the lowest proportion of people in slavery. The report estimates that between 4,200-4,600 people are enslaved in the UK and 300-340 in Ireland.

The Global Slavery Index, which covers slavery in 162 countries, defines slavery to include forced labour, forced marriage, debt bondage and bonded labour and human trafficking. It has found that the vast majority of enslaved people are in Asia (home to 29.8% of the 29.8m in modern slavery), followed by sub-Saharan Africa (16%), while Europe has the lowest number (1.8%). It argues that internationally, high levels of corruption and poverty, and low levels of human development all correlate with higher rates of poverty.

Mauritania has the highest proportion of people in slavery of any country in the world, estimated at 20%. Mauritanian society practices chattel slavery along ethnic lines, where masters have full control

over adults and children in slavery, as well as their descendents. There are also incidences of forced marriage, and of children in religious schools being forced to go begging.

In India, the country with the highest number of people in slavery, this has taken varied forms from child labour and bonded labour, to commercial sexual exploitation and forced and servile marriage. The reports authors suggest that both widespread poverty (32.7% of Indians live on less than \$1.25 a day) and the caste system have contributed to India's appalling record.

Although the index compares the UK favourably to other countries, modern slavery and forced labour, particularly for those trafficked into the country, is still a big problem, as recent Sunday Times investigations have demonstrated. The reports authors acknowledge that because the UK lacks an official data capture mechanism on the subject, obtaining figures were hard (although the lack of data is a problem everywhere.)

It singles out Vietnamese gangs forcing children and young adults to work on cannabis farms, as well as forced labour in factories, the food industry, construction and in nail salons. Only 10% of police officers have undergone training in modern slavery, and the report flagged up the need to extend the reach of anti-slavery education campaigns currently running at ports and borders.

The report acknowledges that it is difficult to collect statistics on slavery, because it is usually illegal and hidden from national governments, but it hopes that countries will agree to work with the Walk Free Foundation to improve reporting.

“We are hoping that countries engage with, and respond to these findings. We expect that many countries will challenge these findings, and we welcome that. To any country that challenges our findings we will say - please work with us to do a much more rigorous assessment in your country of the state of modern slavery. The most effective way to do that is to work with us to conduct a random sample survey of your population to get a far more accurate measure of the scale of the problem,” Grono said.

Sophie McBain - New Statesman magazine