

# Modern slavery and exploitation of women and children in the Asia-Pacific region

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**POLICY BRIEF**

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## ABOUT THE GRIFFITH ASIA INSTITUTE

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The Griffith Asia Institute (GAI) is an internationally recognised research centre in the Griffith Business School. We reflect Griffith University's longstanding commitment and future aspirations for the study of and engagement with nations of Asia and the Pacific.

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We do this by: i) conducting and supporting excellent and relevant research on the politics, security, economies and development of the Asia-Pacific region; ii) facilitating high level dialogues and partnerships for policy impact in the region; iii) leading and informing public debate on Australia's place in the Asia Pacific; and iv) shaping the next generation of Asia-Pacific leaders through positive learning experiences in the region.

## Introduction

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Modern slavery is an issue that has gained new significance across the Asia Pacific region due to the economic and social impacts of COVID-19. Australia's political leader have articulated renewed commitment to combating the forces driving contemporary slavery, especially related to the persistent exploitation of women and girls. Taking this issue forward demands a new approach to policy, one that engages with the challenges presented at the regional, national and individual levels, and integrates multiple and diverse stakeholder perspectives—from across government, business and community, and victims of slavery themselves to ensure sustainable outcomes are achieved.

This policy brief reviews the persistent challenges arising from the issues of modern slavery, with a focus on their disproportionate impacts on women and girls, and the significance of the issue arising in the context of Australia's ongoing engagement in Asia and the Pacific. It highlights the opportunities for more human-centred policy-making, and provides recommendations for strengthening national and regional frameworks while supporting the needs of those most vulnerable to modern slavery and its impacts.

Australian foreign policy has placed the highest degree of importance on engagement in the Asia-Pacific region. The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper highlighted the importance for Australia to foster opportunity, security and strength, especially through the promotion of an open, inclusive and prosperous Asia-Pacific region.<sup>1</sup> Australia's longstanding commitment to policy dialogue and development assistance attests to its dedication to building resilience among its regional partners.

Vital to the stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific is Australia's engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The White Paper reiterates Australia's commitment to being a leading economic, development and strategic partner for ASEAN. Since becoming a Dialogue Partner in 1974, followed by becoming a Strategic Partner in 2014, ASEAN has provided Australia with the opportunity to engage in regional diplomatic, economic and security activities.<sup>2</sup> Participation with ASEAN and other regional forums like APEC and the Bali Process compliment Australia's intent to promote economic cooperation and champion international norms that foster peace and stability. Regional stability remains a top priority for Australia's national security and economic prosperity.<sup>3</sup>

This stability can be threatened by a range of natural and human factors that must be addressed by regional governments. Environmental threats like climate change, and biological threats like the outbreak of COVID-19 demonstrate the transnational nature of contemporary security issues, highlighting the importance of a united and collective response. Modern slavery is yet another threat that transcends national borders. It is deeply entrenched in business models, in cultural practices, and in social expectations, many of which reinforce the gendered nature of modern slavery which disproportionately affects women and girls.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst this brief primarily focuses on women and children trapped in modern slavery, it is important to understand that women and children are not homogenous groups who share the same experiences of modern slavery.<sup>5</sup> Using an intersectional approach, Australia can tailor policies to address the multitude of interrelated factors that affect the experiences of individuals trapped in modern slavery. Addressing modern slavery through a gendered lens is no longer sufficient. Instead, considering factors such as ethnicity, race,

sexuality, class and geography will enable a more comprehensive and holistic response to modern slavery in a region that is enriched by diversity.<sup>6</sup> Social, economic and geographical factors are not the only challenges facing women and children, especially since the outbreak of COVID-19.

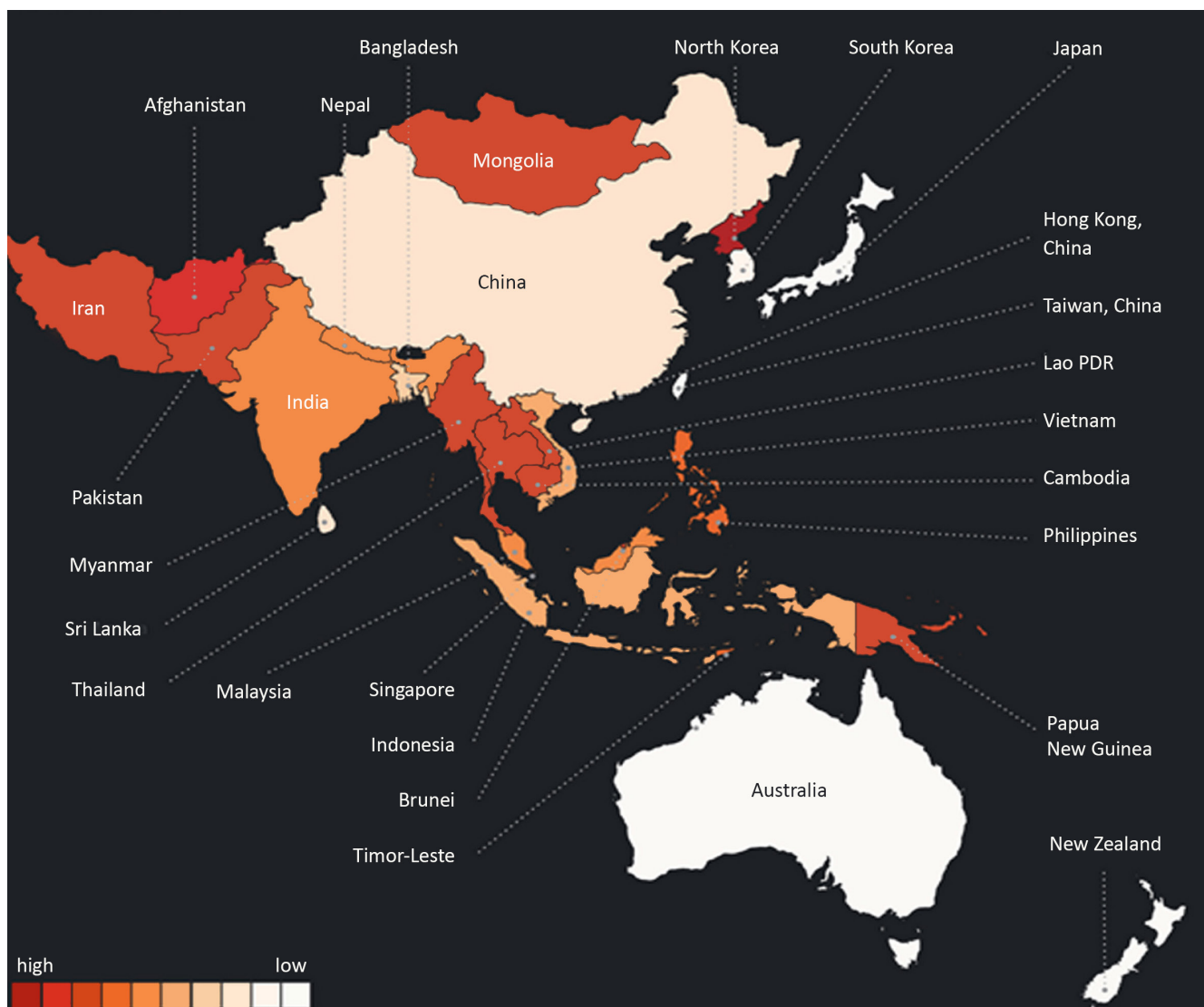
The Coronavirus outbreak represents just one of many contemporary challenges that exacerbate the factors which cause modern slavery. Regional governments are faced with the difficulty of ensuring their policy responses remain adaptable to an everchanging landscape altered by emerging and pressing issues. Mass displacement on brought by regional conflicts and climate change, as well as technological developments that provide criminals with the cyber space to exploit victims, all demonstrate ongoing challenges that impact the underlying causes of modern slavery.<sup>7</sup> Australia and the Asia-Pacific can draw from many decades of cooperation to eradicate these criminal practices and progress reforms designed to prevent, disrupt, investigate and prosecute those involved in modern slavery practices.

This policy brief explores the possibilities available to Australia to strengthen its role in a regional response to modern slavery by evaluating its current policy and legislative frameworks.

Key recommendations for strengthening Australia's national frameworks and regional commitment include: i) redefining the relationship between modern slavery and security; ii) ratifying international conventions; iii) increasing information awareness campaigns; iv) improving private sector transparency and accountability; v) supporting workplace diversity and inclusion; vi) investing in online service to provide support throughout the outbreak; and vii) developing Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) frameworks.

Overall, this brief highlights the opportunity to expand on frameworks already in existence. Australia's prioritization of stability, security, criminal justice, gender-responsiveness and victim support provide sufficient trajectories that can continue to be developed. The spirit of cooperation has never been more important, especially amidst the outbreak of COVID-19. The pandemic has exposed the disparities and injustices that the victims of exploitation endure, especially for women and children. Eradicating modern slavery will require the joint effort of all Asian-Pacific countries to mitigate the economic and social factors that perpetuate the gendered nature of modern slavery.

Figure 1: Prevalence of modern slavery by country, Asia and the Pacific



Source: Walk Free Foundation 2018, Global Slavery Index.

## Context

Modern slavery refers to a relationship whereby offenders manipulate their victims to inhibit their freedom, impacting the victim's ability to make both personal and work-related decisions.<sup>8</sup> The globalization of production lines and supply chains has exposed many vulnerable populations to exploitation and slavery. Commitments to protect the security, safety and freedom of Australians impacted by transnational crimes like modern slavery are reaffirmed in the Foreign Policy White Paper (2017). Protecting vulnerable peoples is essential to fostering development and maintaining stability in the region, enabling Australia to pursue its interests and advance its prosperity in a secure and open environment.<sup>9</sup>

Australia's *Modern Slavery Act* (2018) defines modern slavery as a criminal practice that includes<sup>10</sup>:

1. Trafficking in persons
2. Slavery
3. Servitude
4. Forced marriage
5. Forced labour
6. Debt bondage
7. Deceptive recruiting for labour and services, and
8. The worst forms of child labour

On the international level, modern slavery has been integrated into the UN Sustainability Development Goal 8.7. This goal aims to completely eradicate modern slavery practices by 2030, whilst striving to end the worst forms of child labour by 2025.<sup>11</sup> Regional commitment in the Asia-Pacific to pursue SDG 8.7 was reaffirmed by the ASEAN states endorsing this goal.<sup>12</sup> Securing regional commitment from Asian-Pacific states is a significant gesture given the region's vulnerability to exploitative practices.

A report commissioned by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2017 indicated that the Asia-Pacific had the second highest prevalence of modern slavery in the world, according to available data.<sup>13</sup> The region was defined in the Walk Free Foundation's Global Slavery Index report (2018) and consisted of territory that spanned as far east as Iran, as far north as Mongolia, and as far south as New Zealand (See Appendix A for a map of the region).<sup>14</sup> Given the prominence of modern slavery within the region, a united response is crucial. Forced labour victims remain most prevalent in the Asia-Pacific, with every 4 out of 1000 people being subjected to this exploitative practice.<sup>15</sup>

The region is also most vulnerable to forced and commercial forms of sexual exploitation, with every 7 in 10 victims residing in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>16</sup> Forced labour, sexual exploitation and child marriage were also key concerns outlined in a Walk Free Foundation (2020) report which investigated modern slavery in eight countries situated in the Pacific. Disjointed regional efforts and weak governance have created difficulties in eradicating these practices from the Pacific region.<sup>17</sup> Slavery practices such as trafficking and exploitation are 'significantly embedded within the region'.<sup>18</sup> Social norms such as a lack of educational opportunities for girls, and cultural practices that permit discriminatory and violent behaviour towards women and girls contribute to embedding the gendered nature of modern slavery in the region.<sup>19</sup>

ASEAN countries have been classified into three tiers according to their response to modern slavery. Myanmar and Laos were categorized into Tier 3, indicating that they make no effort to meet minimal standards to address modern slavery crimes. The Philippines was the only ASEAN country to receive a Tier 1 designation, indicating that it abides to the minimum standards outlined by the United States in the *Trafficking Victim Protection Act* (2000).<sup>20</sup> These ratings illustrate the lack of urgency and dedication in the Asia-Pacific to address modern slavery.

Australia's geographic position has exposed national businesses to the risk of modern slavery practices infiltrating supply chains. The federal government acknowledges Australia's vulnerability to 'high risk' sectors such as agriculture, construction, fashion and electronics.<sup>21</sup> Business engagement in these sectors is becoming increasingly regulated through Australia's *Modern Slavery Act* (2018), although transparency and accountability still remain highly contentious issues for big corporations. The introduction of this legislative reform was crucial for Australia since it was estimated that 1,900 victims and survivors of modern slavery were residing in the country between 2015-2017.<sup>22</sup> Victims of modern slavery in the Australian context are not restricted to individuals involved in business supply chains. In fact, many employees who work well within Australia's borders experience modern slavery.

Seasonal workers employed in Australia are likely to be exploited due to their work in high-risk sectors like agriculture. Labour laws and policy frameworks must continue to be developed to protect casual and contract workers, who comprise 34.4 per cent of the 315,680 people involved in labour use on farms, many of which are non-local or overseas workers.<sup>23</sup> Backpackers and international students are also exploited and experience wage theft, with 46 per cent receiving wages of \$15 an hour or under according to a 2017 study which investigated wage theft from national temporary migrants.<sup>24</sup> International students are Australia's fourth largest export as of 2021, emphasizing the urgency to ensure these students are protected.<sup>25</sup> If Australia intends to uphold its mission to combat modern slavery, then developing national and regional policy frameworks must continue to be a high priority.

Australia is committed to being at the forefront of combatting modern slavery both in the domestic and regional spheres.<sup>26</sup> Since 2004, a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach has been implemented to target slavery-like practices (Australian Government, 2020).<sup>27</sup> Combative measures and support programs at the national level include:

- The Modern Slavery Act (2018), which was the first piece of legislation to clearly define modern slavery
- The National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking and Slavery (2015-2019; 2020-2025), and
- The Support for Trafficked People Program.

Regional initiatives have also seen Australia assume leadership roles and provide major investment funds. Australia is currently active in:

- The ASEAN-Australia Counter-Trafficking Program (2019-2028), to which it has invested \$80 million AUD
- The Bali Process, as one of the permanent co-chairs
- The Indo-Pacific Justice and Security Program (2017-2021), and
- The TRIANGLE in ASEAN program (2015-2027).

Improvements in criminal justice responses, technical capacity, and expertise remain central to these legislative and policy responses. However, these improvements will be more effective if governments recognize the gendered nature of these crimes. The ILO reports that approximately 99 per cent of victims of sexual exploitation are women and children. Women and girls also account for 88 per cent of victims of forced marriage, while approximately 58 per cent of victims of privately imposed forced labour are women. Overall, **71 per cent of the 40 million victims** of modern slavery are women and girls.<sup>28</sup>

Modern slavery is a gendered problem, as the data from the ILO has highlighted. *The National Action Plan (2020–2025)* acknowledges the unique vulnerabilities that women and children face, emphasizing that they are disproportionately impacted by modern slavery. The Plan prioritizes the need to protect the rights of victims and survivors, particularly women and girls.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has intensified the conditions that leave women and children vulnerable to slavery and exploitation. Border restrictions and lockdowns have limited the freedom of movement for women and girls, impacting domestic workers and victims of sexual exploitation. Access to healthcare and information on COVID-19 are key concerns for domestic workers.<sup>29</sup> For children, school shutdowns leave them vulnerable to predatory activity online, whilst strains on parents caused by unemployment can result in children being forced into marriage for short-term financial gains.<sup>30</sup>

COVID-19 has exposed the extreme vulnerability of women and children who face social disparities and economic hardships, both of which are exacerbated by gender inequality. Australia's *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy (2016)* promotes the empowerment of women and girls, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. While upholding its reputation as a global leader in gender equality and women's empowerment, Australia strives to enhance women's voices in decision-making and leadership, promote their economic empowerment, and end violence against women and girls through this empowerment strategy.<sup>31</sup> The strategy aligns with the Foreign Policy White Paper commitment to maintaining a stable Asia-Pacific region by stating that women's empowerment is a key driver of stability.

## Policy overviews

The whole-of-government approach that Australia has adopted to combat modern slavery involves an advanced network of policy and legislative frameworks that can be separated into three levels of analysis: the individual, the national, and the regional/global.

The individual level comprises of Australia's efforts to support individuals impacted by modern slavery through victim empowerment and protection. The national level includes frameworks intended to impact the domestic sphere, whilst additionally setting standards for Australian conduct abroad. Global and regional responses involve responses that are intended to strengthen combative efforts in the Asia-Pacific, whilst simultaneously working towards international

commitments to eradicate modern slavery. The three levels of analysis highlight that Australia has adopted a multilayered approach to combatting modern slavery.

Responses intended to impact on the individual level include the *Support for Trafficked People Program*, a victim support service that is integral to the *National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery (2020–2025)*. The Trafficked People Program is provisioned by the Department of Social Services and delivered by the Australian Red Cross. Through an assortment of different streams, the program assists victims with security and safety requirements, counselling, medical treatment and vocational training, among other essential services.<sup>32</sup> In conjunction with this support service, Australia strives for regional policy responses to incorporate gender responsiveness which addresses the inequalities women experience particularly through labor mobility and the criminal justice system.

Australia's national-level responses include frameworks that predominately target its position as a consumer of products that are riddled with compromised supply chains in the Asia-Pacific region. The *Modern Slavery Act (2018)* provides the legislative foundation for its national policy frameworks. The Act was the first piece of legislation to provide a comprehensive definition of modern slavery. Businesses that generate an annual revenue of \$100 million or more are required to report on the potential risks that modern slavery poses to their supply chains and daily operations. Failure to report results in the Minister of Home Affairs publishing the company's information on a public register. All other entities that generate a revenue lower than the threshold can report on a voluntary basis.<sup>33</sup>

The *National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery (2020–2025)* is Australia's guiding policy framework to combat modern slavery. Over a period of five years, the government aims to prevent, disrupt, investigate and prosecute modern slavery crimes. The program not only dedicates resources towards infiltrating slavery networks and holding perpetrators accountable, but it seeks to identify the causing factors of modern slavery, whilst empowering victims and survivors.<sup>34</sup>

Both the Modern Slavery Act and National Action Plan are supplemented by regional and international frameworks outline in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, as well as DFAT's International Strategy on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery, which is currently still being drafted. Both documents reaffirm Australia's commitment to using its technical capabilities and expertise to support the region's capacity development in criminal justice responses to modern slavery.

Capacity building is one of the core objectives of the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking Program, an initiative which is vital to combatting modern slavery on the regional level. This ten-year program was initiated in 2019 and is funded by the Australian government's \$80 million investment.<sup>35</sup> Collaboration amongst the ASEAN states is essential to improving the region's justice systems and victim protection initiatives. Supporting the development of fair and effective justice systems works towards Australia's overarching goal of maintaining regional stability.

Criminal justice is additionally imperative to maintaining regional stability through the Indo-Pacific Justice and Security Program.

With \$4 million in funding allocated per annum over a four-year period, the program aims to strengthen regional justice responses to modern slavery practices by focusing on four key areas of transnational crime<sup>36</sup>:

1. Financial crime and illicit financial flows
2. People smuggling and human trafficking
3. Mutual legal assistance and extradition
4. Countering Violent Extremism

Trafficking, smuggling and the development of legal systems are not Australia's sole focus on regional-level responses to modern slavery. The *TRIANGLE in ASEAN* program is jointly funded by the Australian and Canadian governments over roughly a ten-year period. The Australian government alone has contributed \$24 million to developing labour migration governance frameworks and ensuring gender responsiveness in labour mobility. Knowledge generation through extensive research projects combined with awareness raising contribute to information sharing and a greater understanding of the nature of labour exploitation. Directing funds towards women's empowerment and focusing on delivering education about labour migration issues to women contribute to establishing gender equality to the process of labour migration.<sup>37</sup>

Each of the programs above contribute to national capacity development in Asia-Pacific countries, leaving little opportunity to foster intergovernmental policy dialogues, as well as dialogues between the public and private sectors. The *Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime* (est. 2002) is an inter-regional forum in which Australia and Indonesia are permanent co-chairs. The forum facilitates information and intelligence sharing, whilst using soft diplomacy to create frameworks that assist countries to adopt best practices in protecting victims of modern slavery crimes.<sup>38</sup> Inter-regional cooperation between law enforcement agencies is also used to disrupt trafficking and smuggling networks.<sup>39</sup>

## Thematic challenges

A review of Australia's policy and legislative frameworks reveals several driving thematic priorities. These priorities include supporting law and justice capacity development in the region, increasing supply chain transparency and improving survivor protection through gender-responsiveness. Whilst there have been significant developments to ensure that Australia's diplomatic engagements and economic advancements in the region complement its commitment to eradicating modern slavery, ongoing and emerging challenges have presented the opportunity to adapt current policy frameworks to an everchanging climate.

The National Action Plan has identified several emerging challenges such as COVID-19, technological developments and gender norms that are contributing factors which continue to threaten the stability of the region and the security of its people.<sup>40</sup> These issues have impacted the response to modern slavery, as governments divert resources towards combatting the effects of the virus. As a

global and regional leader in combatting modern slavery and championing gender equality, Australia has the opportunity to demonstrate its independent decision-making and commitment to protecting those impacted by transnational crime.

The multilayered approach that Australia has adopted to combat modern slavery can be used to guide policy trajectories towards further addressing the gendered nature of exploitative practices and reaffirming a victim-centered approach to policy responses. Among each of the three levels of analysis, thematic issues were identified which guided the formulation of the main recommendations.

**At the individual level**, *gender consciousness* and *gender equality* were recurring themes that repeatedly appeared in suggestions to develop awareness raising, victim support and empowerment, and criminal justice responses. Diversity and inclusion in the workplace continue to be championed by Australia, therefore, advocacy efforts must remain ongoing to enable women to fill vacancies of leadership positions. The disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 imposed on women and children in modern slavery must also be urgently addressed and mitigated.

**At the national level**, *structural and procedural inefficiencies* in Australia's policy and legislative frameworks presented thematic challenges in advancing the country's response to modern slavery. Despite Australia's private sector facing increased accountability measures through the Modern Slavery Act (2018), transparency among business supply chains remains shallow. Modifications within Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) frameworks were also identified as essential to ensuring Australia's policy responses were contributing towards the overarching goals stipulated in the National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery (2020-2025).

**At the regional/global level**, *security* and *informational awareness* prevailed as thematic urgencies that must be addressed. The concept of security in relation to modern slavery can be understood through both traditional and non-traditional means. Victims of modern slavery must be protected through the ratification of international conventions that dually provide the foundations for the construction of a unified regional response. However, more non-traditional avenues of security can be explored through policy dialogues in regional forums. Understandings about the security risks pertaining to employment sectors vulnerable to modern slavery should also be disseminated to those most likely to be entrapped in exploitative practices. These awareness campaigns have the potential of being vital forms of prevention.

Each of these thematic challenges is not confined to the level of impact they have been categorized in. In fact, they overlap and can be jointly overcome using an intersectional, multilayered approach. This approach can employ the policy frameworks already initiated by Australia and develop them using the strategic priorities outlined in influential frameworks.

One of these frameworks include the National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery (2020-2025), which

stipulates awareness raising among at-risk communities as a key preventative strategy to modern slavery.<sup>41</sup> It also highlights the importance of M&E frameworks for research efforts in determining the impact and success of combative initiatives.<sup>42</sup>

DFAT's International Strategy additionally reaffirms the importance of supporting countries to implement international norms and standards, providing a basis for harmonizing regional responses. Harmonization can also involve the promotion of a human rights-based approach to combatting modern slavery. The strategy also emphasizes the need to increase corporate reporting and transparency of supply chains to strengthen business sustainability.<sup>43</sup>

Australia's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy strives to champion women in leadership and promote women's economic empowerment. The strategy also seeks to end violence against women and girls, a trend that has spiked since the pandemic.<sup>44</sup>

Each of these strategic priorities offer a policy trajectory that can lead Australia's framework developments and extensions. The following recommendations are designed to enhance Australia's strong commitment to eradicating modern slavery and cement its position as a regional leader.

## Pathways to a slavery-free future

The global impacts felt by the outbreak of COVID-19 have highlighted the interconnectedness and interdependence of our contemporary world. The reliance on international suppliers for products and services has meant that exploitative practices have become deeply embedded within the mechanics of global supply chains. Inequalities between populations living in developed and developing countries are as visible as they have ever been. The intensified display of these disparities has presented an opportunity to better understand the nature of modern slavery practices, as well as devise collective strategies to tackle this transnational issue.

A review of the national priorities of Australia highlights its commitment to eradicating modern slavery. National and international policy frameworks reaffirm Australia's intention to be a regional leader and partner with its neighbors to combat modern slavery. With the establishment of regional forums and initiatives such as the Bali Process, ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking Program and TRIANGLE in ASEAN, Australia has the foundations to harmonize regional cooperative efforts and further pursue multisector engagement that bridges together research, industry and government. Australia's focus on gender sensitivity, criminal justice and transparency in supply chains will be essential drivers for the development of victim support services and greater accountability for the private sector.

Australia can continue to develop its national response and strengthen its role in joint regional responses by considering the following possible ways forward.

### *1. Change the relationship between modern slavery and security*

Much of the discourse surrounding modern slavery practices, such as people smuggling and trafficking networks, have occurred in the space of border security, particularly at the national and regional levels.<sup>45</sup> Australia can therefore explore the relation between modern slavery and other dimensions of security at both the national and regional level. Using strategic dialogue and regional forums such as the Bali Process, Australia can expand this discussion to the context of human, environmental, and cyber security, extending beyond the focus of criminal justice to include an intersectional approach that is human-centric and environmentally conscious.

This human-centric approach can build on the recent rhetoric of leaders such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who called for institutional reform in multilateral organizations. His urge for a human-centric approach comes in the wake of COVID-19 and the revived spirit of cooperation that has driven global efforts to combat the virus. The virus has presented the opportunity to reform multilateral institutions and re-prioritize humanity at the center of global progress and development.<sup>46</sup> Structural reform on the international level will enable governments to address systems of power and oppression which have contributed to the inequalities that trap people into the cycle of modern slavery.

### *2. Ratify ILO Conventions 188 and 189 on Domestic Workers and Work in Fishing Convention*

The pathway towards a unified regional-level response to modern slavery can begin by internalizing international standards that protect workers in sectors susceptible to exploitation. Australia can demonstrate its regional leadership by ratifying these ILO conventions to pave the way for other Asia-Pacific countries to follow by example. The Philippines is the only country in ASEAN to ratify the Domestic Workers convention,<sup>47</sup> leaving vulnerable domestic workers from countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Bangladesh unprotected.<sup>48</sup>

The Work in Fishing Convention is also particularly important for Australia to ratify since fishing is one of its five most vulnerable import products to modern slavery.<sup>49</sup> Fishing is also identified as a vulnerable sector to modern slavery in several Southeast Asian countries,<sup>50</sup> as well as Pacific Island Countries.<sup>51</sup> If Australia intends to "Step Up" its relationship with Pacific Islands, it can do so by demonstrating its commitment to the protection of the inhabitants.

### 3. Increase information awareness campaigns about modern slavery

Migrant women are especially vulnerable to coercion in modern slavery practices. To support these women on the individual level, knowledge about the warning signs of exploitative practices, as well as information regarding workplace rights, protective measures against COVID-19, and reporting mechanisms must be disseminated through awareness campaigns. The information can be distributed in training facilities for migrant workers, through online platforms that cater for the linguistic diversity among migrant communities, or through community programs.<sup>52</sup>

Spreading awareness about modern slavery could also be accomplished on a regional level utilising broadcast media. The BBC's Media Action Team helped launch the *Majboor Kisko Bola* ('Who are you calling helpless?') initiative in 11 districts of India as part of the Reach and Response project, which aims to prevent bonded labour by informing victims of their workplace rights. The BBC helped these residents present their experiences to local government officials which was then broadcast over the radio. Community reporters then took these dialogues and disseminated them to local populations translated into native dialects. The BBC's efforts have successfully led to the emancipation of forced laborers who have been made aware of compensation schemes that they are entitled to.<sup>53</sup>

Australia's ABC network could emulate the model used by the BBC to spread awareness of modern slavery throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Facilitating radio or videographic campaigns could help vulnerable communities with low literacy rates understand their workplace rights and connect them to support programs. Information campaigns distributed among vulnerable communities would provide victims with the necessary knowledge and support services to break the cycle of slavery they are trapped in. However, consumers of at-risk products must be equally aware of negative practices.

Conscious consumerism could be raised among Australian civil society through information awareness campaigns on social media and public advertising. Increasing conscious consumerism could pressurize big corporations to address modern slavery in their supply chains and company operations with consumers "voting" at the checkout.<sup>54</sup> Whilst conscious practices have been known to impose costs on consumers themselves, as well as on actors attempting to follow regulations, it is still important for the general public to understand the processes involved in supply chain operations.<sup>55</sup>

Employing methods of financial influence to induce change within regulatory mechanisms could additionally be exercised through active consumerism. Consumers could provide small contributions to organizations that lobby for environmental regulation, or who participate in research and development initiatives that investigate sustainable technology.<sup>56</sup>

### 4. Increase standards for private sector transparency and accountability

Australia has already taken measures to demand the accountability of private sector organizations through the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act (2018). Almost all reporting entities were transparent about the services and products they provide, as well as basic details about their suppliers. However, non-compliance with a number of reporting requirements and low response rates to modern slavery incidents highlight the need for improvements in transparency and victim support.<sup>52</sup> The Australian government can therefore improve the effectiveness of the Modern Slavery Act at the national level by:

- a. Clarifying ambiguous reporting criteria and provide guidance on approaches to reporting<sup>53</sup>
- b. Introducing financial penalties for corporations who fail to meet reporting requirements
  - The New South Wales government can issue fines up to \$1.1 million AUD for non-compliance or misleading statements<sup>54</sup>
- c. Developing a national victim compensation scheme<sup>55</sup>
- d. Establishing independent oversight mechanisms including:<sup>56</sup>
  - i. Ombudsman
  - ii. Anti-Slavery Commissioner

### 5. Support diversity and inclusion in the workplace

Empowering women at the individual level can be accomplished by Australia continuing to champion gender equality in the workplace. Both national companies and the national government should encourage the appointment of women in managerial and leadership positions.

Delegating women in managerial roles within supply chains could encourage supply chain workers to come forward and report experiences of sexual harassment and exploitation. Seeing women in managerial roles could also help create a safer work environment for lower tier supply chain workers.

Whilst Australia is increasingly appointing women in positions of leadership, this trend must be sustained and increased. Providing women with the opportunity to assume leadership positions in government will enable them to set the agenda for gender responsive solutions to modern slavery. To successfully fulfil the objective of eradicating modern slavery, Australia needs passionate advocates and norm entrepreneurs dedicated to combatting the gendered nature of modern slavery practices.

Appointing women of color to represent marginalized communities will be imperative to ensure that those individuals who are most at-risk of experiencing modern slavery are appropriately represented in the political sphere. Acknowledging the diversity among women and children who are impacted by modern slavery must be reflected in the policy-making process and within political leadership.<sup>57</sup>



## 6. Invest in remote and online services to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19

Ongoing restrictions on movement and travel during the global pandemic continue to affect women and children disproportionately, emphasizing the need to alleviate these impacts on an individual level. Remote and online services are therefore needed more than ever to reach modern slavery victims, particularly at the regional level. A joint regional taskforce should be created to intercept cybercrimes involving predatory online activity which sexually exploits and abuses children. Governments should also partner with third sector organizations to create online platforms and hotlines that provide counselling services for women experiencing gender-based violence. These remote services should also provide medical referrals for female migrant workers that might not have immediate access to healthcare.<sup>58</sup>

## 7. Develop M&E frameworks to better assess policy effectiveness

Australia should build on existing M&E frameworks to assess whether national and regional policy activities are contributing to overarching objectives outlined in the National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery (2020-2025). Policy and program designs which outline the objectives, program activities and intended outcomes can often be too complicated, making it difficult for M&E teams to track a policy's progress towards clear objectives. M&E staff should be employed full-time and possess the expertise and skills to effectively collaborate with management and implementation teams. Simplification of these designs would clarify how M&E officers should be measuring progress.<sup>59</sup> Policy designs should also stipulate information about performance indicators that will be used to measure progress towards achieving program outcomes. Adopting an outcome evaluation procedure in M&E frameworks would assist teams in undergoing a comprehensive evaluation determining a policy's impact on different stakeholders, victims and the wider community.<sup>60</sup> Specific attention should be given to the impacts that policies have on women and children.

## Conclusion

In a period dominated by discourse surrounding the rebuilding of economies in the wake of COVID-19, Australia can strengthen its cooperative efforts with its Asia-Pacific partners to eradicate modern slavery. The region can draw on existing frameworks to address the pandemic's accelerating impact on the causal factors of slavery-like practices. Australia can continue its contribution to policy dialogues and regional engagement projects to explore ways to empower modern slavery survivors and hold those who perpetuate such crimes accountable. Australia can also take the opportunity to evaluate and reflect on the responsive measures it has implemented to determine how it can expand the agenda of policy frameworks.

The agenda for regional forums and policy instruments should emphasize the safeguarding of human rights, whilst expanding beyond border security issues in relation to trafficking and smuggling. Australia can also embrace its championing of gender equality to continuously push gender-responsiveness on these agendas. Modern slavery continues to be a gendered problem, yet this is still not fully reflected in policy and legislative frameworks. Businesses continue to exploit the gendered nature of slavery-like crimes without repercussions. This is where Australia can use its pioneering legislation to demand greater transparency and accountability from the private sector.



## Notes

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Penelope Stavrou is a student at Griffith University currently completing her Honours thesis through the Bachelor of Arts program. After graduating with a Bachelor of Government and International Relations, with a double major in International Relations and Islam–West Relations, Penelope decided to pursue her interest in countering violent extremism and historic Islamic texts by undertaking further research. Her Honours thesis explores the derivation of alternative narratives from historic Islamic documents in response to violent extremism. Penelope is also passionate about foreign relations, migration, and human security.

## ABOUT THE GRIFFITH ASIA INSTITUTE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

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This policy brief was developed as part of a student internship project undertaken with the Griffith Asia Institute. Internships provide the opportunity for students from a range of disciplinary backgrounds to develop and hone transferrable, research-oriented knowledge and skills while gaining valuable professional experience. At GAI we are pleased to support student internships as part of our commitment to equipping Griffith University students with the knowledge, skills and networks that will help them engage confidently and successfully in the world.



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