



02.12.2015 - One of the biggest obstacles to tackling modern slavery is that it's often hiding in plain sight. International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, 2 December, focuses on eradicating contemporary forms of slavery, such as trafficking in persons, sexual exploitation, the worst forms of child labour, forced marriage, and the forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.

“Slavery is often hidden, but we do know that contemporary forms of slavery such as forced labour and debt bondage are present in supply chains in numerous industries and sectors, including agriculture, garments and textiles manufacture, food processing and packaging. Modern slavery is particularly difficult to detect beyond the first tier of complicated supply chains of transnational businesses” [says the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Urmila Bhoola.](#)

She adds, "however, these forms of slavery can be rooted out through a multi-stakeholder and multi-faceted approach ensuring that all business operations and relationships are based on human rights, that those responsible for supply chain-related human rights violations are held accountable and that the victims are guaranteed the right to effective judicial and non-judicial remedy and appropriate and timely assistance aimed at empowering them".

10 ways to recognize modern slavery

To better understand how that happens, here is a list of ten situations that people in forced labour often find themselves in:

1. They've been tricked

Many victims of modern slavery are deceived into accepting what sound like good opportunities at first, but turn out to be lies.

Consider this example from Zambia: a young woman was promised a job as a waitress in Europe, but found out once she arrived that there was no job and that her future boss was a pimp. She was raped, beaten and forced to work as a prostitute with nowhere to turn for help.

2. They've been isolated

Victims can be isolated physically and forced to work in remote locations or simply prevented from communicating with friends, family or anyone else who speaks their own language.

For example, a Chinese housekeeper in France was made to work 365 days a year and was forbidden from leaving the house. The labour inspectors who found out about her situation said that she'd been cut off from her relatives in China and spoke almost no French at all. She had no one to talk to and no way to ask for help.



3. Their passports have been taken away

Confiscating passports or other important documents is a common means of coercing workers into accepting poor living and working conditions.

For example: a man from Nepal who worked as a clear in the Middle East says that he was prevented from leaving his job or returning home by his employer, who seized his passport and refused to give it back. Without it, he couldn't travel home or even go to the police for fear of being arrested for not having a visa.

4. They are working off a debt

Many victims of forced labour are trying to pay off a debt. It's no ordinary debt though—as the victim has no power to negotiate the terms, which can change at the discretion of the “lender” and be passed down from generation to generation. This is called debt bondage and it's especially common in Southern Asia.

Consider this story from Pakistan about a man who wound up in bonded labour after borrowing the equivalent of US\$ 200 from a moneylender. After he'd paid all but \$50 of it back, the moneylender insisted the loan had actually been for \$400. The man couldn't prove the moneylender was lying, so he was forced to work for him in a mine in the hope of working off his debt.



5. They are promised wages, but are never paid

Irregular or late wages don't always point to modern slavery. But when they're deliberately withheld as a means of forcing workers to accept poor conditions or prevent them from changing jobs, it becomes a sign of forced labour.

For example, a young man from Niger went to work on a farm in another part of the country to help his family makes ends meet. He was promised room, board and a good salary—but was never paid. Every time he asked, the farm owner would promise to pay him later. When the young man finally threatened to leave, the farm owner beat him and threatened never to pay him at all.

6. They work extreme hours, but don't earn overtime

A young man from Bangladesh who found a job in construction says that he used to work 19-hour shifts without a break, wasn't paid overtime and never had a holiday. "They treated me like an animal," he said. Extreme work hours seem like an obvious indicator of forced labour, but in practice, establishing whether that's the case can be fairly complex. As a rule of thumb, if an employee is forced to work more overtime than national laws allow—and is under some kind of threat—it's considered forced labour.

7. They live and work in abusive conditions

A labour inspector in Brazil remembers finding workers in a fazenda, or plantation, housed in plastic shacks and drinking contaminated water. "They were kept in holes behind the bushes in order to hide them until we left." People in modern slavery endure living and working conditions that no one would ever freely accept. While not proof of forced labour on their own, poor working conditions are often red flag.

8. They've been threatened or intimidated

Threats and intimidation are a staple of modern slavery, typically exploiting the vulnerability of a person who's already in a weaker position. That was the experience of an Ethiopian maid in Lebanon who'd decided to leave her job. "The woman I worked for threatened me and said that unless I gave her USD \$600, she'd report me to the police and tell them I had no papers. There was nothing I could do because I didn't have papers and knew the police wouldn't help me."

