

SLAVERY IN SUPPLY CHAINS

“HOW BIG IS YOUR SLAVERY FOOTPRINT?”



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Did you know that the clothes you wear, mobile phone you use, chocolate you consume, and even the tea you drink, could very well be tainted by modern-day slavery?

Globally, there is a high demand for cheap goods. This creates a market for cheap labour, which in turn results in exploitation, slavery, and human trafficking.

Many things that we consume and use on a daily basis could be indirectly perpetuating the problem of slavery and human trafficking in other parts of the world.

For example, there is a high chance that much of the clothes we wear – especially those manufactured in poor countries – are the work of children, men and women, many of whom work in deplorable conditions for hours on end to churn out the cheap vestments. Similarly, consumer electronics and chocolate that we use and consume may be tainted by slave labour somewhere along the supply chain.

These are the modern-day slaves.

CLOTHING

Raw materials used to make our clothes might be derivatives of slave labour. For example, Uzbekistan's booming cotton industry, the third-biggest cotton exporter in the world, is reliant on the use of hundreds of thousands of enslaved children during the three-month harvest season each year. They are given daily quotas of cotton to pick, and if they fail to meet them, they can be beaten or detained as punishment. The children may also suffer from extreme exhaustion, ill health and malnutrition after many weeks of arduous labour.

CONSUMER ELECTRONICS

Coltan (short for columbite-tantalite) is an ore used in mobile phones, laptops and game consoles. Coltan smuggling is rampant throughout Africa as it is a major source of income for warring militias. Working for pitifully meagre wages, child miners in Congo often risk death to dig for this ore in narrow tunnels dug into riverbeds that are at constant risk of collapse.

CHOCOLATE

Anti-Slavery International's latest research shows that many cocoa farms in the Ivory Coast (which produces almost 40% of the world's cocoa) employ child labour. Instead of going to school, young boys are forced to spend long hours hacking open cocoa pods with machetes, handling pesticides and carrying heavy loads – all of which are deemed extremely hazardous.

CLOSER TO HOME

These atrocities may seem distant and far removed from life in Singapore, but they are actually closer than you think. In fact, a lot of products tainted by slave labour come from Southeast Asia.

In India, Bangladesh and Thailand, bonded labour is used for much of the shrimp industry where labourers, including children, work for up to 20 hours a day peeling 40 pounds of shrimp. Only the constant threats of violence or sexual assault keep the labourers from attempting to escape.

Other examples of slavery include children working on sugar cane plantations in the Philippines, boys on ‘jermals’ (fishing platforms) off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, as well as other nearby countries such as China, Vietnam, Thailand, Afghanistan and India.



WHAT CAN I DO?

Although Singapore imports almost everything, including those items mentioned above, it is not impossible to make a difference just by changing the way we purchase and consume things.

For starters, we can inform ourselves more about the issue, and raise awareness among our friends and family. There are websites and apps such as *Free2Work: End Human Trafficking and Slavery and Slavery Footprint - Made In A Free World* that provide a wealth of information about this issue and an assessment of your “slavery footprint” (i.e. how many slaves indirectly work for you).

We must also take a stand by using our purchasing power conscientiously. Find out about the origin of products on sale in Singapore, make informed choices and reduce consumption selectively. If we can access certified fair trade products, we should support organisations and companies that ensure its workers treated ethically and paid fairly.

REMEMBER, THERE IS A STORY BEHIND EVERY PRODUCT YOU BUY.

The global slave trade is complex and pervasive, but every action taken against it helps. After all, where there is demand, there will be supply. If the demand for cheap goods decreases, its supply will, too. Every slavery-tainted item we choose not to buy can and will make a difference in the long run.

SEX TRAFFICKING

“THE DEMAND FOR COMMERCIAL SEX IS ALWAYS MET BY A SUPPLY OF GIRLS AND WOMEN, MANY OF WHOM ARE TRAFFICKED AND ENSLAVED FOR MONETARY GAINS.”



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When there is a demand for commercial sex, there will always be culprits who will seize this opportunity to profit from it, and they do so by supplying women and girls who are impoverished, vulnerable, and lured to Singapore on the pretext of being offered ‘real’ jobs.

Once these women and girls from the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand enter Singapore by bus, ferry or plane on social visit passes, they are met by pimps and forced to work as sex slaves. As they often incur huge debts just to make the journey to Singapore, they have no choice but to comply in order to pay off their debts, and this is usually measured in terms of clients served.

There are two kinds of commercial sex workers: the willing ones and the forced sex slaves. These girls work and live side by side with a network of businesses to make the red light districts come to life. They work in plain sight, selling their flesh on the streets in order to survive. In a foreign land where their mobility is restricted, victims are isolated and mentally abused. When their social visit passes expire after 30 days, they are repatriated, often with nothing except nightmares and mental scars.

In 2011, the Singapore Police Force reported 43 cases of sex trafficking. In 2012, this number went up to 52. But for every case that is reported, there are many more that go unreported as these women and girls are made to believe that they are illegal in Singapore to prevent them from going to the authorities.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Singapore’s high demand for foreign workers and ease of entry from ASEAN countries makes it an attractive destination for sex trafficking. If we could reduce the demand for paid sex, the supply will eventually fall. Therefore customers and supporting businesses should get informed, so they do not become complicit in this heinous crime – be it by not actively seeking paid sex from known or suspected sex slaves (i.e. those who have not intentionally made it their occupation), or reporting suspected trafficked sex workers to the authorities.

LABOUR TRAFFICKING

“SINGAPORE’S EMPLOYMENT AND LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORKS FOR FOREIGN WORKERS AND FOREIGN DOMESTIC WORKERS CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT COULD LEAD TO UNINTENTIONAL LABOUR TRAFFICKING.”



Unlike sex trafficking, which is commonly perpetrated by organised transnational crime syndicates, labour trafficking of foreign domestic workers and foreign workers could be widespread in Singapore as it usually takes place under the cover of activities that seem legal or enjoy widespread social acceptance.

Employers and employment agencies will often not realise that they are complicit in the trafficking process.

As of end-2012, Singapore has 950,000* foreign workers, of which about 200,000 are foreign domestic workers (FDW), 300,000 are construction workers, and 450,000 in other sectors.

In 2011, the Ministry of Manpower reported 67 cases with elements of labour trafficking. In 2012, this number went up to 72. Not unlike sex trafficking, these numbers do not paint a clear picture of the situation in Singapore, as it is severely under-reported.

FOREIGN WORKERS	DEC 2010	DEC 2011	DEC 2012 ^P
FOREIGN DOMESTIC WORKER	201,400	206,300	209,600
CONSTRUCTION	248,100	264,500	293,400
OTHERS	421,700	437,800	449,100
TOTAL	871,200	908,600	952,100

*Source:

<http://www.mom.gov.sg/statistics-publications/others/statistics/Pages/ForeignWorkforceNumbers.aspx> ^PPreliminary

UNINTENTIONAL LABOUR TRAFFICKING OF FOREIGN DOMESTIC WORKERS



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According to referencing indicators for identification of trafficking provided by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), these characteristics of FDW employment in Singapore makes FDWs vulnerable to be trafficked into domestic servitude:

EXCLUSION FROM SINGAPORE'S EMPLOYMENT ACT

Unlike other foreign workers, FDWs are only protected by the less rigorous requirements of the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act and its secondary legislation. Also, they work in private homes, where work is less visible and are hence more vulnerable to abusive practices and discrimination in terms of work and employment conditions.

RECRUITMENT AGENT MALPRACTICE

Some agents withhold their clients' passports or deceive them about work conditions. These FDWs eventually enter into arrangements that result in their exploitation as 'willing parties', because their main goal is to earn money for their families back home.

DEBT BONDAGE

FDWs often owe their employer or agent a considerable sum for the initial cost of the air ticket and recruitment fees. They are expected to work this debt off through salary deductions over a few months, sometimes more.

It forces them to be bonded to a single employer for a long period, and makes the FDW think she has no choice but to continue working, even under exploitative conditions – all in the hope that she will be able to avoid negative repercussions and eventually earn some money to send home.

EXPLOITATION OF VULNERABILITY

Most FDWs are lowly educated and have little or no understanding of contracts. Their financial difficulty and family problems also contribute to their vulnerability and willingness to accept whatever employment arrangements are made, even if the terms and conditions are not favourable to them.

Even the introduction of a mandatory day off every week beginning in January 2013 has not changed the situation very much, as a survey of recruitment agents revealed. Over 70% of employers opted for compensation in lieu, which means most FDWs do not have the power to negotiate with their employers for a day off, largely due to their indebtedness on arrival.

COERCIVE PRACTICES

The imposition of debt obligations upon FDWs is itself a means of coercion, as they are led to believe that they are not able to leave their employment prior to complete repayment of the debt.

Additionally, some FDWs are also subjected to the following coercive practices in terms of their working and living conditions:

- *Wide-ranging yet non-defined duties, i.e. the worker is essentially at the employer's disposal*
- *Long working hours – some women are even on duty 24 hours a day!*
- *Inappropriate work management techniques, including verbal violence and restriction of movement*
- *Non/low payment, or withholding of wages*
- *Accommodation that lacks comfort and privacy*
- *Inadequate food*
- *Restrictions on social life and cultural habits, sometimes intended to prevent FDWs from forming relationships that may cause problems (e.g. boyfriends, pregnancy)*

In more serious cases, some FDWs have even been:

- *Threatened with police reports, repatriation or blacklisting to prevent future employment*
- *Forced to give massages to employers or work illegally in multiple locations*
- *Made to adopt unsafe work practices, such as cleaning the outside of windows on high floors without any safety precautions*
- *Confined and kept under watch, with restricted phone and face-to-face communication*

This happens because FDW employers have to post a security bond, which they will lose if their FDW violates the terms of their work permits. This is also what causes employers to confiscate their passport, impose restrictions on their movement and offer compensation in lieu of a day off.

source : "Behind Closed Doors: Trafficking into Domestic Servitude in Singapore" (The Equal Rights Review, Vol. Ten (2013)), Libby Clarke



UNINTENTIONAL LABOUR TRAFFICKING OF FOREIGN WORKERS

A similar situation exists for other foreign workers. Most of the abovementioned situations that contribute to unintentional labour trafficking, namely recruitment agents' malpractices, debt bondage, abuse of vulnerability, exploitation are also present in the employment of some foreign workers in Singapore.

Though Singapore's Employment Act covers "... every employee who is under a contract of service with an employer except foreign domestic workers, seamen...", many foreign workers do not have a contract of service, which makes them very vulnerable to becoming a trafficked victim. Just like FDWs, their position of indebtedness, lack of understanding of employment situation in Singapore creates the belief that they have no choice but to continue to work despite the exploitative conditions.

WHAT CAN I DO?

If you encounter a situation where possible labour trafficking or foreign worker exploitation is taking place, you could help by asking questions, finding out more about the situation and/or reporting it to the authorities. These workers are no different from us, with families back home to take care of. Every little bit of help rendered makes a difference.