

STUDY GUIDE UNHRC

TOPIC A: Combating Modern Forms of Slavery, Human Trafficking, and Forced Labour

Introduction to the committee

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), established in 2006 under General Assembly Resolution 60/251, is the UN's principal intergovernmental body responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide. Composed of 47 member states elected on a rotating basis, the Council addresses both thematic human rights issues and specific country situations.

The UNHRC works through mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Advisory Committee, and Special Procedures, including Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups. It also engages with non-governmental organizations and civil society to ensure accountability and inclusivity in its deliberations.

Unlike judicial bodies, the Council does not issue binding rulings but plays a critical role in setting international norms, investigating abuses, and recommending actions to the General Assembly and the Security Council. Its sessions in Geneva serve as a platform for dialogue, cooperation, and urgent responses to emerging crises, making it highly relevant for addressing issues such as modern slavery, trafficking, and forced labour.

Introduction to the topic:

Modern slavery, human trafficking, and forced labour represent some of the gravest human rights violations of our time, affecting an estimated **50 million people worldwide**, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Despite the abolition of traditional slavery, these practices persist in more hidden but equally destructive forms, exploiting the world's most vulnerable populations.

Human trafficking, whether for sexual exploitation, forced labour, or organ trade, thrives due to weak enforcement of laws, corruption, armed conflicts, and lack of economic opportunities. Forced labour remains widespread in industries such as agriculture, construction, mining, and domestic work, often linked to global supply chains.

These abuses disproportionately affect women and children, who make up the majority of victims, and intersect with issues such as migration, armed conflict, and poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing geopolitical instability have further increased vulnerabilities, giving traffickers new opportunities to exploit.

Addressing this issue is urgent not only because it violates fundamental human rights but also because it fuels organized crime, undermines development, and erodes state sovereignty. The UNHRC plays a vital role in drawing attention to these abuses, promoting accountability, and ensuring that human dignity remains at the core of international action.

Historical Context and Current State:

Historical Context

Slavery

Slavery as a legal institution was abolished in most parts of the world by the late 19th century. The **1926 Slavery Convention** and the **1956 Supplementary Convention** were key steps in outlawing practices resembling slavery, including debt bondage and servile marriage. Despite formal abolition, exploitative systems such as colonial forced labour and caste-based bonded labour continued under new forms.

Human Trafficking

Early forms of trafficking were closely linked to migration, prostitution, and wartime exploitation. The **Palermo Protocol (2000)** became the first binding instrument to define and criminalize human trafficking. However historical weaknesses including a lack of international cooperation, weak border monitoring, and limited victim protection.

Forced Labour

Historically forced labour was closely tied to colonial economies, wars, and authoritarian regimes. The **1930 ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29)** and the **1957 Convention (No. 105)** targeted compulsory labour. Nevertheless, practices such as debt bondage, serfdom, and prison labour persisted despite international bans.

Current State

Modern Slavery

An estimated **50 million people worldwide are victims of modern slavery** (ILO, 2022). This includes forced marriage, debt bondage, sexual exploitation, and slavery-like practices. The problem disproportionately affects women, children, and marginalized communities.

Human Trafficking

Victims of human trafficking are exploited primarily for **sexual purposes (50%)**, followed by **forced labour (38%)**, and other purposes (12%). Modern traffickers exploit **online platforms** to recruit, deceive, and sell victims. Vulnerability is further heightened in conflict zones such as the Sahel, Ukraine, and Syria, as well as during major migration crises.

Forced Labour

An estimated **28 million people** are trapped in forced labour globally, many in agriculture, mining, construction, manufacturing, and domestic work. This is strongly tied to **global supply chains** in both developed and developing economies. Migrants are disproportionately exploited due to dependence on recruiters, debt, and lack of adequate legal protection.

Past Actions

Slavery

1926 Slavery Convention, adopted by the League of Nations, was the first multilateral agreement to define slavery as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.” It required states to abolish slavery and the slave trade “as soon as possible.” The **1956 Supplementary**

Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery expanded the definition to cover debt bondage, serfdom, servile marriage, and child servitude, acknowledging that slavery persisted in disguised forms despite formal abolition. Regionally, Africa and the Middle East saw anti-slavery laws emerge slowly, often under colonial influence, but enforcement was inconsistent, allowing exploitation under caste systems, bonded labour, and customary practices to continue.

Human Trafficking

Early international efforts against trafficking included the **Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (1949)**, though criticized for its narrow focus on prostitution-related trafficking. The 1979 **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** called on states to suppress all forms of trafficking and exploitation of women. The 2000 **Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography** strengthened protections for children as the most vulnerable group. That same year the **UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000) & Palermo Protocol** became the cornerstone treaty on trafficking, providing for the first time a comprehensive definition of trafficking in persons and obligating states to criminalize it, cooperate internationally, and assist victims. Then the **Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005)** enhanced victim-centered approaches, focusing on human rights protection beyond law enforcement.

Forced Labour

The **ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29, 1930)** prohibited forced or compulsory labour, with limited exceptions such as military service, civic duties. The **ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (No. 105, 1957)** outlawed the use of forced labour as punishment for political views or as a means of economic development. The **ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (No. 182, 1999)** prohibited child slavery, debt bondage, trafficking, and hazardous work. The **ILO Protocol of 2014 to Convention No. 29** modernized the framework by linking forced labour to trafficking and mandating victim protection and due diligence in supply chains. Finally, the **Sustainable Development Goal 8.7 (2015)** set a global commitment to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking by 2030, and secure prohibition of the worst forms of child labour by 2025.

Treaties

The **1926 Slavery Convention** was the first treaty to define and prohibit slavery, followed by the **1956 Supplementary Convention**, which outlawed practices like debt bondage, child servitude, and servile marriage. The **ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29, 1930)** and the **Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (No. 105, 1957)** banned forced labour in almost all forms. Later, the **Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182, 1999)** targeted child slavery and trafficking and in 2014, the ILO strengthened protections through a Protocol addressing supply chains and victim support.

On trafficking, early efforts included the **1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons**, which was limited to prostitution. Broader protections followed with **CEDAW (1979)**, and especially with the **Palermo Protocol (2000)**, which comprehensively defined trafficking and emphasized prevention, prosecution, and victim protection. The **Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (2000)** provided specific protections for minors. Regionally, the **Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking (2005)** pushed for a victim-centered approach.

Finally, the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 8.7, 2015)** committed the global community to end forced labour, human trafficking, and modern slavery by 2030, and child labour by 2025.

State and Non-State Actors

State Actors

Governments play a dual role in addressing slavery and trafficking. Some actively combat slavery and trafficking through national laws, task forces, and cooperation with the UN, while others enable or ignore abuses due to corruption, conflict, or lack of resources. Examples include states with weak border controls where trafficking thrives, or those where forced labour exists in **state-run industries, military use of child soldiers, or prison labour**. Moreover many states are also criticized for benefiting indirectly from forced labour in **global supply chains**, while failing to properly enforce

labour standards.

Non-State Actors

Criminal networks including trafficking rings and organized crime groups profit directly from smuggling and exploitation. **Armed groups and terrorist organizations** use slavery, child soldier recruitment, and trafficking to finance operations as seen with Boko Haram and ISIS while **corporations** both knowingly or unknowingly, profit from forced labour in supply chains such as agriculture, textiles and mining.

Furthermore **Recruitment agencies** often exploit migrant workers through debt bondage and false contracts. On the positive side, **NGOs and civil society organizations** act as non-state actors providing victim rescue, rehabilitation, and advocacy.

Impacts and Effects

Human Rights Violations

Modern slavery involves the denial of basic freedoms, including the freedom of movement, choice of work, and personal autonomy. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by **sexual exploitation, forced marriage, and domestic servitude** while children are subjected to **child soldiering, hazardous labour, and trafficking for adoption or begging rings**. Modern slavery undermines the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** and violates core human rights treaties.

Health and Psychological Impact

Victims of modern slavery face severe physical harm from dangerous working conditions, violence, and lack of medical care. Trafficked persons often experience **HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, and reproductive health issues**. Survivors suffer long-term trauma, including **PTSD, depression, and social isolation**, making reintegration extremely difficult. Children in forced labour miss education, causing lifelong

developmental and psychological damage.

Economic Consequences

Forced labour and trafficking generate **over \$150 billion in illicit profits each year (ILO, 2014)**. Exploitation lowers wages and working standards, creating unfair competition for ethical businesses. Victims lose access to legal employment and economic independence, trapping them into **cycles of poverty** while countries with high trafficking rates face reduced productivity and weaker human capital development.

Social and Political Effects

Trafficking and slavery fuel **organized crime, corruption, and money laundering**. In conflict zones, extremist groups and militias use trafficking as a revenue stream as seen in Boko Haram's abduction of girls and ISIS's slave markets. Weak enforcement erodes **public trust in governments** and international institutions, and the exploitation of migrants exacerbates **xenophobia and social tensions** within host communities.

Case Studies

Libya – Migrant Slavery Markets

Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has faced chronic instability, creating fertile ground for traffickers and armed groups. Migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, en route to Europe, are routinely captured, detained, and sold in "slave markets." In 2017, CNN released footage showing migrants being auctioned for as little as \$400. Detention centers, many run by militias, are notorious for forced labour, starvation, sexual abuse, and extortion. The UNHRC, IOM, and Amnesty International have all documented these abuses, making Libya one of the starkest modern examples of slavery fueled by **conflict and lawlessness**.

Bangladesh – Garment Industry Forced Labour

Bangladesh's garment sector employs over 4 million people and accounts for 80% of its export revenue, yet it has been repeatedly linked to forced labour and exploitation. Workers, many of them women and children, endure 14–16 hour shifts in unsafe factories, with wages below living standards. The 2013 Rana Plaza collapse, which killed over 1,100 workers, exposed these conditions to the world. Although reforms were promised, cases of forced overtime, withheld pay, and suppression of unions continue. This case highlights the risks of **unethical global supply chains**, where multinational corporations benefit from cheap labour while workers remain trapped in exploitative conditions.

Nigeria – Boko Haram and Human Trafficking

The extremist group Boko Haram, active in northeastern Nigeria since 2009, has relied on human trafficking and slavery as both a weapon of terror and a source of income. The abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014 brought global outrage, but thousands of women and children have been similarly kidnapped. Victims are forced into sexual slavery, child soldiering, or labour within Boko Haram camps. According to UNICEF, at least 8,000 children have been recruited by the group. This case demonstrates how **terrorism and modern slavery intersect**, with trafficking used to sustain conflict and suppress communities.

India – Bonded Labour System

Despite being outlawed under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1976, bonded labour persists in India, trapping an estimated 8 million people. Victims, often from lower castes or marginalized communities, are forced to work in brick kilns, agriculture, mining, and carpet weaving to repay debts that are often inherited and impossible to settle. Employers use intimidation, violence, and illiteracy to maintain control. NGOs such as the International Justice Mission (IJM) continue to rescue victims, but weak enforcement and poverty perpetuate this system. India remains one of the largest examples of **traditional forms of slavery evolving into modern forced labour**.

Ukraine/Russia – War and Trafficking

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 displaced millions, creating extreme vulnerability among refugees, especially women and children. Human traffickers have exploited chaotic border crossings by offering fake jobs, shelter, or transport, only to traffic victims for sexual exploitation or forced labour. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and UNHCR have reported a spike in trafficking cases across Poland, Moldova, and other neighboring states. Europol has also warned of organized criminal groups targeting Ukrainian refugees. This case underlines how **conflict-driven displacement and humanitarian crises** increase the risk of trafficking, even in regions with strong institutions.

QARMA (questions a resolution must answer)

1. How can the UNHRC ensure stronger enforcement of existing treaties against modern slavery and trafficking?
2. What measures can be taken to hold multinational corporations accountable for forced labour in global supply chains?
3. In what ways can conflict prevention and peacekeeping reduce the spread of modern slavery in unstable regions?
4. How can migration policies be designed to protect vulnerable refugees from trafficking risks?
5. Should international sanctions be used against states or groups complicit in human trafficking and forced labour?
6. What role should NGOs and civil society play in monitoring and reporting cases of modern slavery?
7. How can technology (e.g., blockchain, AI) be used to trace and prevent forced labour in industries?
8. To what extent should countries prioritize rehabilitation and reintegration of victims over punitive justice?

9. How can regional cooperation (e.g., African Union, EU, ASEAN) be strengthened to combat cross-border trafficking?