

As a child, she stitched clothes in a sweatshop. Now she sees modern slavery everywhere

By [Hilary Whiteman](#), CNN
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Courtesy Kamal Bista/Nasreen Sheikh

Women are among the people most affected by modern slavery, says Nasreen Sheikh, who works to inform them of their rights.

Brisbane, Australia (CNN) — When Nasreen Sheikh walks down a busy street, she doesn't see the faces of the people walking by — she sees the clothes they wear and the suffering of those who made them.

As a child, Sheikh worked up to 20 hours a day in a sweatshop in Nepal stitching fabric that would become clothes sold to consumers unaware of their true cost.

"Ninety percent of my brain, all the time, still lives in those experiences. It's hard not to be there," she said on the phone from Miami, Florida, one of the many stops on her life's mission to educate the world about modern slavery.

This week, Sheikh is in London as part of a team launching the [Global Slavery Index](#), a report compiled by Walk Free, a non-profit foundation that seeks to end modern slavery.

Since its last edition in 2018, the report estimates another 10 million people have become caught in modern slavery, taking the total to 50 million — including 28 million subject to forced labor and 22 million to forced marriages.

Walk Free says it's a crisis driven by the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, conflict and rampant consumerism, and perpetuated by the failure by governments and business leaders to act.



Courtesy Walk Free Foundation

Nasreen Sheikh speaks at the Bali Process Government & Business Forum in Adelaide this year, alongside Grace Forrest, co-founder of the Walk Free Foundation.

The worst offenders

Not surprisingly, countries with poor records on human rights have the highest prevalence of modern slavery: North Korea, Eritrea, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Tajikistan, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Afghanistan, and Kuwait.

But according to the index, when countries are evaluated on numbers alone, the world's biggest democracy, India, has the most people trapped in modern slavery, followed by China, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Indonesia, Nigeria, Turkey, Bangladesh and the United States.

The report's authors point out that six of those countries are in the G20 — and together they're estimated to import \$468 billion worth of goods potentially made through forced labor each year, including electronics, garments, palm oil and solar panels. That's \$100 million more than the last count in 2018.

"From the cotton on the shirt on your back, to the phone in your hand, to the solar panels that we all want to be put onto our roofs, there is a footprint of extreme exploitation of modern slavery in our world of tens of millions of people," said Grace Forrest, founding director of Walk Free.

"Anyone that tries to tell you that that is something that is normal or OK is wrong."



Courtesy Walk Free Foundation

Katharine Bryant, head of Policy and Programs at the Walk Free Foundation, gathers information for the Global Slavery Index in Recife, Brazil.

Since the last report in 2018, four more countries – Australia, France, Germany, and Norway – introduced modern slavery laws that force larger companies to examine their supply chains and act on slavery when they find it. Another 15 countries criminalized human trafficking, taking the total to 137, and nearly 150 countries now have modern slavery action plans, according to the report.

But while there's been some progress, global crises have pushed millions more into slave labor. For example, the sudden surge in demand for medical products during the pandemic, combined with shutdowns and the sudden loss of jobs, created an environment rich for the exploitation of migrant workers.

Severe economic downturns compelled some families to send their children to work or push their daughters into child marriage, to earn money and have one less mouth to feed. Conflict pushed more people to abandon their homes and support networks, sometimes crossing borders into countries with harsh policies on refugees and asylum seekers.

"Increasing anti-immigrant sentiment in many countries, including Europe, where many seek to start a new life, has led to more restrictive policies, which in turn expose displaced people to even greater risks of exploitation," the report said.



Courtesy Nasreen Sheikh

Nasreen Sheikh worked as a child laborer in a sweatshop in Nepal before starting a business employing women.

A call to action to governments and businesses

Sheikh was in Nepal during the early days of the pandemic and said the crisis showed that governments can spread powerful messages to their people, if they have the will.

"They used their armies, they used the local leaders, they used their religious leaders, they used every source possible to educate people that 'hey, there is Covid and you have to wear a mask.'"

Sheikh thinks they should do the same to educate businesses about modern slavery and inform workers who don't know they're being exploited.

"I did not even know what child labor meant until I came to America. This was such a new thing for me because you see children working all over the place in Nepal and India," said Sheikh, who founded the Empowerment Collective, a US-based nonprofit foundation, to help spread awareness.

Sheikh escaped child slavery after meeting the late Leslie John, an American expat who taught her English and showed her what she could achieve. With a loan, she opened a business in Kathmandu – Local Women's Handicrafts – selling handmade products.

Now, when she's traveling, she avoids shops with clothes of unclear origin – labels that say 'Made in China' or 'Made in India' with no further information – and buys secondhand items, or supports local businesses.

"If it does not tell the story of how was it made, (under) what condition it was made, who made it ... if there is not a story, I see a suffering," Sheikh said.

Forrest from Walk Free said while everyday decisions can make a difference, modern slavery is not a problem that can be fixed by individual shopping choices.

"This index is first and foremost a call to action for governments and businesses," she said. "The largest responsibility and opportunity sits with the countries who are in an economic position to do something about it, who can build supply chains differently and who are engaging with repressive regimes all over the world.

"They need to start talking about human rights in the front of those negotiations, not as an afterthought."