

Ethikos Volume 38, Number 2. April 01, 2024 On ethics: Matthew S. Friedman

by Matthew S. Friedman and Adam Turteltaub

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AT: By every and all measures, slavery is wrong. It's not a difficult ethical decision to make and unlike issues like corruption, where some people seem comfortable with, "Well, that's how they do things there," it's hard to justify slavery as a local tradition. And yet, we keep finding that it is persistent, and companies periodically find it in their supply chain.

Why? Is it that they don't think to look, that it's well hidden, or that it's inconceivable to many that slavery exists?

MSF: The concept of modern slavery within supply chains is relatively new, and as a result, many companies are only now beginning to grasp its relevance and significance. While traditional forms of exploitation have been widely condemned, the nuances and pervasive nature of modern slavery have only recently come under scrutiny. This lack of historical awareness has meant some companies may not have incorporated adequate safeguards into their supply chain management systems. Thus, the first step towards combating modern slavery is to acknowledge its existence and understand its implications.

Raising awareness is critical in this context. Many business leaders remain unfamiliar with the intricacies of modern slavery and its potential presence in their supply chains. Educational initiatives, workshops, and training programs can play a pivotal role in enlightening leadership about the risks and consequences associated with this issue. These initiatives should not only focus on legal aspects but also emphasize the moral imperative and reputational risks for companies associated with exploitation in their supply chains.

AT: Regionally, are there parts of the world where slavery and human trafficking are more common?

MSF: While different forms of modern slavery and human trafficking can be found everywhere, it disproportionately prevails in regions grappling with high poverty rates, deficient governance structures, and inadequate enforcement of human rights. Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and specific areas in South Asia stand out as particularly afflicted regions. Within these areas, countries such as India, China, Bangladesh, and Pakistan confront formidable challenges in combating and eradicating modern slavery. Additionally, conflict zones in the Middle East have become breeding grounds for exploitation.

Industries notorious for instances of forced labor and human trafficking include fishing—where workers on vessels are vulnerable to abuse; agriculture—marked by labor-intensive practices; construction—notorious for hazardous working conditions; and manufacturing—often marred by the exploitation of vulnerable labor forces. The intricate dynamics of global supply chains further contribute to the perpetuation of modern slavery, necessitating comprehensive efforts to address underlying socioeconomic issues and strengthening regulatory frameworks on a global scale.

AT: What about economic sectors? I must admit, I was more than a bit surprised to learn it even occurs in relatively sophisticated areas like solar cells. I was feeling very virtuous about having installed solar panels on my roof, and then I learned that many are produced using forced labor.

MSF: While the actual production of solar panels is not inherently linked to modern slavery, concerns arise in the supply chains of raw materials and manufacturing processes. Mining of minerals crucial for solar panels (like cobalt) has faced allegations of exploiting workers—especially in regions with lax labor regulations, such as Africa. Additionally, the production of solar components involves intricate supply networks that may inadvertently involve forced or child labor. In addition, some media reports have highlighted instances of labor rights abuses in the production of polysilicon (a key material in solar panels) in certain regions, including China. To counter these issues, the solar industry has been making efforts to ensure ethical sourcing and sustainable practices. Transparency initiatives and certifications are being put in place to better trace the origin of materials to ensure fair labor conditions.

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