

International Women's Day and Commonwealth Day
Joint Statement of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)
and the Commonwealth 8.7 Network

8 March 2021

The **Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)** and the **Commonwealth 8.7 Network**¹ urges Commonwealth governments to fulfill their commitments to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery by 2030.

Every year on 8 March, **International Women's Day** is celebrated globally to recognise women's achievements, raise awareness for women's equality, and lobby for accelerated gender parity.² This year's International Women's Day coincides with **Commonwealth Day** and is centred around the theme 'Choose to Challenge', which is a call on all to choose to challenge gender biases and inequalities, and help create an inclusive world.

Contemporary forms of slavery disproportionately affects women and girls, who make up 71% of over 40 million victims globally. As of 2018, 50% of all detected human trafficking cases were victims of sexual exploitation and 92% of these victims were women and girls. In addition, 88% of victims of domestic servitude are women and girls.³ On an equally heavy note, in 2016, 96% of forced child marriage victims were girls.⁴ These disproportionate rates emphasise the high risk to which women and girls are subjected and their vulnerability to becoming victims of modern slavery. The fact that an estimated 40% of the total 40.3 million victims worldwide reside in the Commonwealth⁵, warrants a firm call for Commonwealth States to take immediate action towards addressing and eradicating contemporary forms of slavery.

CHRI and the Commonwealth 8.7 Network urges all Commonwealth states to adhere to their commitment to achieving UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.7 to implement '*effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking, and secure the*

¹ Launched in 2019, the Commonwealth 8.7 Network is a global member-driven network comprised of 60+ local civil society organisations who share a common vision to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery and human trafficking. Since its establishment, members have worked collaboratively to raise awareness, strengthen skills, share good practices, provide support to survivors, and advocate for change to laws and policies.
<https://www.commonwealth-87.org/>

² International Women's Day, 2021. [About International Women's Day](#).

³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021. [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020](#), 10,26,98.

⁴ The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and Walk Free (2020). [Eradicating Modern Slavery: An assessment of Commonwealth governments' progress on achieving SDG Target 8.7](#), 39.

⁵ Ibid. 8,10.

*prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour in all its forms by 2025, including the unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers.*⁶

On this occasion of International Women's Day and Commonwealth Day, CHRI and the Commonwealth 8.7 Network members continue to advocate for women, urging Commonwealth governments to address the numerous risk factors that increase women and girls' vulnerability to modern slavery. These include discriminatory norms, conflict, poverty, and lack of access to healthcare, social support, and education.⁷

2021 is the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour. It is estimated that girls without an education are three times more likely to be forced into marriage before the age of 18. Providing a girl with an education, not only reduces the likelihood she will become a child bride, but can also lift her out of poverty and make her less likely to be exploited in forced labour.⁸ School closures due to COVID-19, combined with the possible loss of livelihoods and food shortages, may result in girls not returning to school when they reopen, and a rise in forced child labour and child marriages.⁹

Another crucial risk factor is weak criminal justice systems. Two-thirds of Commonwealth member States have not criminalised forced marriage, and 23 fail to criminalise commercial sexual exploitation. In sectors where women are over-represented, such as domestic work, protection for workers is limited. Only five countries in the Commonwealth have ratified the 2011 ILO Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189).¹⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated vulnerabilities to modern slavery. Widespread job losses, restrictions on movements, the shutdown of schools, and the closure of regular migration pathways have created the ideal circumstances for modern slavery to thrive. Especially as millions of migrant workers are stranded in destination countries, unable to support themselves, and excluded from national health plans.¹¹ The impact of the pandemic is also felt throughout international business supply chains, with many global brands defaulting on payments to suppliers, for which the most vulnerable workers - many of whom are women - bear the brunt of the cost, losing their livelihoods.

⁶ Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) [Communiqué](#) (2018), 9.

⁷ The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and Walk Free (2020). [Eradicating Modern Slavery: An assessment of Commonwealth governments' progress on achieving SDG Target 8.7](#), 39,47.

⁸ Ibid. 39,45.

⁹ Human Rights Council, 2020. [Impact of the coronavirus disease pandemic on contemporary forms of slavery and slavery-like practices](#), 7-8.

¹⁰ The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and Walk Free (2020). [Eradicating Modern Slavery: An assessment of Commonwealth governments' progress on achieving SDG Target 8.7](#), 8.

¹¹ Ibid. 2.

To achieve SDG Target 8.7 and the eradication of contemporary forms of slavery, which disproportionately impacts women and girls, CHRI and the Commonwealth 8.7 Network calls on Commonwealth countries to:

- Criminalise all contemporary forms of slavery, including forced marriage, forced labour, and sexual exploitation.
- Ratify and domesticate relevant international instruments in line with international legal standards, including the ILO's 2011 *Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189)* and the ILO *Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930*.
- Put in place adequate and effective national laws, policies and resources to facilitate and ensure that victims have access to justice.
- Raise the legal age of marriage to 18 to protect girls from forced marriage and exploitation.
- Provide access to essential social protections such as education, healthcare, and government financial assistance for all populations, including women and children.
- Strengthen victim support services, ensuring all women and girls have access to services such as emergency shelters and healthcare, as well as longer-term support services, including financial assistance and housing.
- Strengthen laws and policies applicable to international business supply chains, including by implementing mandatory transparency requirements and mandatory human rights due diligence.