

EXPERT VIEWS-Five years on, is the UK's landmark anti-slavery law fit for purpose?

by Molly Millar | Thomson Reuters Foundation

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We asked experts in the sector for their views on the successes and failings of the Modern Slavery Act

By Molly Millar

LONDON, Oct 18 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - From children trafficked to work for drug gangs and women forced into the sex trade to migrant labourers enslaved on farms and factories, modern-day slavery blights Britain in many ways.

FACTBOX-One in 185 a slave: snapshot of today's trade in humans

About 7,000 suspected slavery victims were found in Britain last year - up a third on 2017 - while there are an estimated 136,000 modern slaves across the country, according to the Global Slavery Index by human rights group Walk Free Foundation.

Hailed as a leader in the global drive to end slavery, Britain passed the 2015 Modern Slavery Act to jail traffickers for life, better protect vulnerable people, and force large companies to outline their actions to avoid using forced labour.

Yet a government-ordered review of the world-first law this year found that a lack of convictions, limited awareness among and training of professionals, and problems around data collection have blunted Britain's anti-slavery response.

As Britain marks Anti-Slavery Day on Oct. 18 - a day set by parliament to raise awareness of slavery - we asked experts in the sector for their views on the successes and failings of the Modern Slavery Act nearly five years on. Here are the responses:

PATRICIA CARRIER, MODERN SLAVERY REGISTRY PROJECT MANAGER AT THE BUSINESS AND HUMAN RIGHTS RESOURCE CENTRE

"The Modern Slavery Act was a landmark piece of legislation, but five years on it is failing to live up to its promise. The main problem is still enforcement – the law has no teeth.

Companies face no penalty for not complying with the Act, let alone for weak anti-slavery efforts.

Bizarrely, companies can report having done nothing to prevent modern slavery and still be in compliance with the law.

Our analysis of thousands of company statements finds that just 23% are meeting the Act's minimum requirements.

The UK government should require companies to actively identify and prevent modern slavery in their supply chains."

JAKUB SOBIK, SPOKESMAN FOR ANTI-SLAVERY INTERNATIONAL

"The business reporting requirements have shifted the conversation and companies have started to take notice of slavery in their supply chains. Authorities and the general public are more aware of modern slavery.

The biggest shortcoming is the lack of comprehensive victim protecting measures.

In practice, it means that proper care for identified victims is far from guaranteed and we see survivors being detained, deported, or even sent to jail.

This plays into the hands of traffickers, as their threats to their victims that they would be mistreated by the authorities if they come forward are being proven true."

AHMED AYDEED, DIRECTOR AT DUNCAN LEWIS SOLICITORS

"The Act has contributed to a greater awareness of modern slavery in the public eye, and has also created a minimal level of protection for trafficking victims.

However, there is still a lack of understanding of the legislation and the government has failed, for four years now, to publish statutory guidance.

The courts, in landmark decisions, have highlighted the importance of adequate support for modern slavery victims and the importance of assisting victims as soon as there is credible suspicion of their circumstances.

It seems the courts appreciate our duties to modern slavery victims, enshrined within statute and international conventions, more than the government."

TAMARA BARNETT, HEAD OF OFFICE AT THE HUMAN TRAFFICKING FOUNDATION

"Five years on from the Act, the UK has taken significant strides in tackling modern slavery thanks to the previous prime minister's perseverance to prioritise this heinous crime.

But there is much still to do if we are to create a society hostile to trafficking and supportive to survivors.

While referrals have increased, many people seeking support are still turned away by professionals who cannot recognise modern slavery or simply do not believe their stories are true.

Other challenges continue such as the criminalisation of victims, the lack of support for children ... the failure to put survivors' voices at the centre of policy-making, and the fact that most victims struggle to receive any compensation.

Without which how can true justice be served?"

LUCILA GRANADA, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF FOCUS ON LABOUR EXPLOITATION

"The move to give police-style powers across the whole labour market to the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) the year after the Act passed was a welcome recognition of how exploitation happens in formal sectors of the UK economy.

However, the continuation of 'hostile environment' policies on immigration undermines this step forward: many migrants in high-risk sectors are unable to trust agencies supposed to support them because they fear immigration repercussions.

As our research has found, these fears are well-placed: many victims of trafficking are today being locked up in detention centres."

KEVIN HYLAND, FORMER AND INAUGURAL UK ANTI-SLAVERY COMMISSIONER

"The Act has generated greater global awareness and encouraged other countries, such as Australia, to introduce legislation that goes even further than the UK Act in business supply chains and government procurement transparency.

However, the current failure to implement an effective system of identification and support for victims of this crime is deeply disappointing.

Until such a system is introduced, the Act will fail to meet one of the most important areas it needs to address - supporting and rebuilding the lives of the most affected." (Reporting by Molly Millar, Editing by Belinda Goldsmith Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's and LGBT+ rights, human trafficking, property rights, and climate change. Visit <http://news.trust.org>)

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