



Anti-Slavery International
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Slavery and what we buy

How is slavery linked to what I buy?

There is evidence of slavery in different stages of the supply chain from the production of raw materials like cocoa and cotton, to manufacturing the goods such as clothes and hand-knotted rugs in factories and even at the final stage when the product reaches the market.

What is the supply chain and how does it work?

Typically the final product you buy has passed through a long chain of producers, manufacturers, distributors and retailers who have all had a hand in its production, delivery and distribution. It is therefore very difficult to track a component of an end product back to a particular producer, for example a T-shirt back to a particular cotton farm. For this reason it is not always possible to certify that a product has or has not been produced using slavery.

How do I know that slavery has not been used to produce my clothes/chocolate/trainers etc?

News stories of forced labour and sweatshop conditions in factories supplying well-known brands surface regularly in the media and consumers are unsure of how to react and question if the products that they buy are made under slavery conditions. Typically the final product you buy has passed through a long chain of producers, manufacturers, distributors and retailers who have all had a hand in its production, delivery and distribution. It is therefore very difficult to track a component of an end product back to a particular producer, for example a T-shirt back to a particular cotton farm. For this reason it is not always possible to certify that a product has or has not been produced using slavery.

Although the Fairtrade scheme and others like Rugmark provide the best available guarantee of a slavery free supply chain, there are no ultimate guarantees that slavery has not formed part of the supply chain for the products that you buy. However the way a company operates can affect the likelihood of slavery being a part of the final product. For example if a UK based company producing clothes gives its supplier in a developing country a large order with a short turnaround time beyond the supplier's capacity, this could increase the likelihood of slavery as the supplier may subcontract work to factories or workers that are not regulated by the same standards as the supplier.

Are people working in sweatshops slaves?

There have been numerous reports of people in the developing world working in factories making products for well known brands being subjected to sweatshop conditions (a working environment with very difficult or dangerous conditions, usually where the workers have few rights or ways to address their situation). Whilst there is gross exploitation and sometimes abuse, there is a distinction between exploitative labour and slavery.

For example is an 18 year old woman who cannot find other employment starts working for x factory making clothes for x UK owned company, working 15 hours a day with little or no breaks in between and takes home the equivalent of £1.50 at the end of the shift a slave?

Legally no, although subjected to illegal and exploitative labour conditions, she is not forced to work by anyone and can theoretically stop working at the factory if she chooses. A slavery situation would be if she was forced to work (through physical harm/threat to herself or any member of her family) and if she could not leave the factory.

What are core labour standards?

Core labour standards are developed agreed and enforced by the International Labour Organisation, which is part of the United Nations. These standards call on governments to end forced labour, child labour and discrimination in employment as well as ensuring workers' right to form and join trade unions. Companies' code of conduct should meet these standards.

What can companies do to eliminate slavery in their supply chain?

There are a number of steps that companies can take to minimise the use of slavery in their supply chain and you can use your consumer power to urge them to take the following actions.

- Join the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) which is an alliance of companies, trade union organisations and non-governmental organisations. The goal of the ETI is to ensure that the working conditions of workers producing for the UK market meet or exceed international labour standards. Anti-Slavery International encourages companies to adopt and implement the ETI's Base code (a set of minimum labour standards) and encourages the business community to develop new responses to eradicate slavery.
- Companies who work in South Asia to adopt the Ambedkar Principles, which is a set of guidelines that can help companies develop affirmative action plans to help tackle caste discrimination which leaves many vulnerable to slavery
- Adopt the minimum standards required for Fairtrade certification and assist suppliers to seek Fairtrade certification
- Refrain from negotiating prices which are so low that they force suppliers to push down the price it pays for the material it needs, which can have a knock on effect on those producing raw material and increasing the likelihood of forced labour.

Should I boycott companies that are accused of using forced labour to produce goods?

In certain situations boycotting specific goods or countries can actually make the situation worse and undermine the economy of an already poor country. A boycott could hurt those in slavery like conditions as well as those employers who are not exploiting their workers and can worsen the poverty that is one of the root causes of the problem. You should use consumer power to encourage retailers and companies to move to the Fairtrade scheme. The Fairtrade scheme is the best available guarantee that a product has not been produced using slave labour as goods can only be Fairtrade certified if they have complied with Fairtrade standards, which incorporate international human rights standards.

You can also use your consumer power to lobby companies to ensure that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is respected across its whole supply chain to ensure that it is not unknowingly supporting slavery.

What is Anti-Slavery International doing to eliminate slavery in the supply chain?

Anti-Slavery International urges companies to consider how adjusting their operations can prevent the use of slavery in their supply chains. We also encourage companies that work in sectors vulnerable to the use of slavery to work together and share methods that tackle slavery. Anti-Slavery International is a member of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) which is an alliance of companies, non-governmental organisations and trade union organisations with the aim of ensuring that working conditions of workers producing for the UK market meet or exceed international labour standards.

What are effective solutions that I can take to eliminate slavery in the supply chain?

There are a number of steps that you can take to help minimise the use of forced labour in the supply chain and urge companies to change their practices that can make workers vulnerable to slavery. These actions are:

- Ask questions when you shop. Does the shop stock fairly-traded products? If not do they have any plans to and where is the nearest shop that does? You may be surprised at how quickly you and others asking these questions results in a shop stocking fairly traded products
- Buy and urge your parents and others to buy fair trade products and Rugmark carpets, which certifies that rugs and carpets have been made without the use of illegal child labour
- Write a letter to retail chains' company headquarters asking what measures the company is taking to identify slavery in their supply chain. Ask if the company is a member of ETI and how it plans to get involved. Again encourage others to join you in a letter writing campaign.