

Article

Human Trafficking and Gender Inequality: How Businesses Can Lower Risks and Costs

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Abstract: Human trafficking continues to be a profitable multi-billion dollar business. People are either callous toward human rights or they are unaware of the crime occurring. Many businesses may unknowingly facilitate human trafficking by providing services, such as transportation, hotels, or haircuts, or purchasing products from unfamiliar sources that secretly use forced labor. To be socially responsible, a business must establish effective enterprise governance policies that help prevent and detect trafficking. A business can incur legal fines, damage to its reputation, incur lost business, and be subject to litigation, all as a result of human trafficking. Worldwide, estimates are that 50 million people are being trafficked. Human trafficking is especially harmful to females, both adult women and girls, who comprise about 70 percent of all trafficking victims. Gender theory helps explain this disproportionate impact on women. This study provides an overview of human trafficking, an empirical analysis of the relationship of gender inequality to trafficking, and specific steps that a business can take to help prevent this crime, protect its reputation, and avoid fines and lost business.

Keywords: business; human trafficking; gender inequality; corporate social responsibility; gender theory



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1. Introduction

Even though human trafficking is an egregious violation of human rights, this criminal activity still persists. Human trafficking remains one of the three biggest areas of criminal activity; the other two are the unlawful drug trade and illegal arms dealing (Smith et al. 2014). About 50 million people worldwide are victims of trafficking, also known as modern-day slavery (Migration Data Portal 2024). Criminals are making lavish profits through the exploitation these victims. According to the United States (U.S.) State Department, total profits from human trafficking are estimated to exceed USD 150 billion for traffickers and others who facilitate this crime (USDS 2022).

Government entities and legislation alone have not been able to stop human trafficking. The eradication of this gross injustice requires the help of multiple parties in a civilized society: people, government, and business (Smith and Betts 2015). If a company does not have safeguards in place, it may unknowingly provide products and services to people involved in human trafficking. As supply chains become more complex with outsourcing, a company could unknowingly buy supplies from someone using forced labor. Even though unwittingly, this company is enabling human exploitation. To avoid this scenario, a company can educate its employees to identify high-risk circumstances, industries, and locations. In addition, a company can institute anti-trafficking standards for its business partners. This study offers an overview of human trafficking and specific steps that a business can take to help prevent this crime. Taking these steps will reduce the associated risks and costs facing businesses around the globe.

Human trafficking is an important area of research, as evidenced by numerous past studies in multiple disciplines, from business (cf., Burger et al. 2020; Russell et al. 2017; Smith and Betts 2015; Linnhoff et al. 2014) to public policy (cf., Martin and Smith 2015),

and from legal (cf., [De Vries and Farrell 2023](#); [Jurek and King 2020](#); [United Nations 2009](#)) to social and psychological (cf., [Chambers et al. 2024](#); [Novotney 2023](#)). In August 2024, a Google Scholar search of “human trafficking” yielded 1,820,000 results, indicating the importance of the topic based on the sheer volume of prior research. The current study offers an update to prior research and a new analysis examining the relationship between human trafficking and gender inequality. Approximately 70 percent of trafficking victims detected globally are female, 50 percent adult women and 20 percent girls ([Novotney 2023](#)). Since females are more affected by human trafficking than males, the issue is a gender issue.

When differences exist between treatment of females and males, this is generally referred to as gender inequality. The Oxford Reference defines gender inequality as a “social process by which people are treated differently and disadvantageously, under similar circumstances, on the basis of gender” ([Oxford Reference 2024](#)). A measure has been developed to measure this difference. According to the World Health Organization ([WHO 2023](#)), “the Gender Inequality Index is a composite measure reflecting inequality in achievements between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market” ([WHO 2023](#), p. 1, para. 2). The Gender Inequality Index is used in this study to determine if the level of gender inequality in a country is associated with the level of human trafficking. Two research questions are posed:

RQ1: Is the rate of human trafficking significantly related to the level of gender inequality, as measured by the Gender Inequality Index?

RQ2: What are ways that a business can deter human trafficking and lower associated risks and costs?

2. Related Literature on Human Trafficking

Human trafficking has been examined over a myriad of research areas, including its impact on business and society (e.g., [Khan et al. 2023](#); [Van Buren et al. 2021](#); [Martin and Smith 2015](#)). While there are many governmental and non-governmental organizations working to eradicate human trafficking, these efforts have been only partially successful, and human trafficking persists (cf., [De Vries and Farrell 2023](#); [Burger et al. 2020](#)). This section on related literature includes Laws, Fines, and Lost Business; Business Organization Efforts to Counter Trafficking; Background on Human Trafficking; High-Risk Industries and Products; and Gender-Related Research.

2.1. Laws, Fines, and Lost Business

Around the world, business firms are expected to maintain effective corporate governance, caring for all their stakeholders, which includes investors, employees, suppliers, customers, and society (cf., [Adhikari Parajuli et al. 2023](#); [Farah et al. 2021](#)). Corporate governance “... is the combination of rules, processes and laws by which businesses are operated, regulated and controlled. ... Good corporate governance involves establishing principles of security, transparency, equity, compliance, reliance and accountability. ... Demonstrating good corporate governance is important for maintaining a company’s reputation” ([Lutkevich 2022](#)). Having a reputation as an ethical, well-run, socially responsible business is important to long-term success (cf., [Blazovich and Smith 2011](#)). If a business is connected to human trafficking, then its reputation as being socially responsible is severely damaged. A business’s reputation is directly linked to business sustainability ([Smith and Smith 2019](#); [Smith et al. 2010](#)). To be socially responsible, a business firm should develop enterprise governance policies that help prevent and detect trafficking.

Around the world, people and organizations involved with human trafficking are subject to criminal penalties, fines, and incarceration ([Onufer 2022](#); [United Nations 2009](#)). In many countries, major efforts have been made to deter human trafficking. For example, in the UK, efforts to end human trafficking have attained international policy consensus. The recent UK legislation, the 2015 Modern Slavery Act (MSA), includes, among other aspects, harsher prison sentences for perpetrators and the establishment of an anti-slavery commissioner to manage its implementation ([Hodkinson et al. 2021](#)). A study by [Xia](#)

[et al. \(2020\)](#) examined legal efforts in China to prevent human trafficking, specifically by analyzing court sentencing documents. The authors mapped court data with geographic information and then conducted a network analysis. Their study shows a “comprehensive picture of intra-provincial, inter-provincial, and international trafficking patterns” (p. 238).

In the United States, approaches to deterring human trafficking, prosecuting traffickers, and safeguarding trafficking victims and survivors were established by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 ([American Bar Association 2024](#)). As a result of this law, human trafficking and related offenses became federal crimes. In the U.S., the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2003 (TVPRA of 2003) made human trafficking a chargeable crime under the Racketeering Influenced Corrupt Organizations (RICO) statute ([American Bar Association 2024](#)). TVPRA established a civil right of action enabling human trafficking victims to file lawsuits against their traffickers.

TVPRA requires that the U.S. Attorney General report annually to Congress on U.S. government actions to combat trafficking. The TVPRA has been amended multiple times to reauthorize, change, and expand its programs. One such amendment, the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2017 (S. 1862), states that businesses in the private sector need to take steps to detect human trafficking and help federal law enforcement combat this crime ([Polaris 2019](#)). Another amendment that impacts the private sector is the Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2018 (H.R. 2200), which requires that airlines with government contracts must provide anti-trafficking training to their employees and submit reports detailing the number of trained personnel and the number of reported incidents involving potential victims ([Polaris 2019](#)).

Before TVPRA, human trafficking victims had limited legal routes. Criminal prosecution of human traffickers was often difficult due to elusive aspects of the crime and the problem of accumulating sufficient evidence. TVPRA gave trafficking victims additional legal choices, notably, the opportunity to file civil lawsuits against the businesses that profited from or facilitated trafficking. Thus, victims are now able to seek monetary damages from a business entity that monetarily benefited from their exploitation. For example, major hotel chains, such as Hilton, Marriott, and Wyndham, have been sued by trafficking survivors nationwide. The lawsuits alleged that hotel firms either had or should have had knowledge regarding sex trafficking and exploitation at the business locations and benefited financially from those criminal activities. In several cases, large financial settlements resulted ([Miller 2024](#)).

In addition to potential legal consequences associated with human trafficking, involvement with human trafficking negatively affects a company’s reputation ([Russell et al. 2017](#); [Linnhoff et al. 2014](#)). Building a good corporate reputation, by doing business in an ethically upright way, is essential for modern-day businesses. This is meaningful to employees, customers, suppliers, investors, and other stakeholders ([Russell et al. 2023](#); [Smith and Smith 2019](#); [Blazovich et al. 2013, 2014a](#); [Blazovich and Smith 2011](#); [Smith et al. 2010](#)). People are more likely to support companies that are practicing social responsibility by giving back to their community, the environment, and people around the globe ([Du et al. 2010](#)). Being active in socially responsible issues, such as combating human trafficking, has a positive effect on a company’s reputation and customer loyalty ([Abdeen et al. 2016](#); [Verboven 2011](#)). Loyal customers have a positive effect on sales and are vital for a company’s prolonged existence ([Smith 2012](#)).

Typically, people do not want to work for an unethical company. Employees value an employer with a good reputation ([Blazovich et al. 2014a](#)). Research shows that socially responsible companies have an easier time acquiring competent employees. A company’s socially responsible activities have a positive impact on the company’s appeal as an employer ([Albinger and Freeman 2000](#); [Greening and Turban 2000](#)).

2.2. Business Organization Efforts to Counter Trafficking

While large multinational corporations may encounter human trafficking more frequently than smaller firms, any firm can encounter human trafficking. All firms can do their

part to reduce the risk of being associated with human trafficking. Numerous firms have established anti-trafficking policies in their efforts to detect and prevent human trafficking. A number of the largest corporations worked together to establish the Global Business Coalition Against Human Trafficking (gBCAT). The Coalition was created to organize efforts to prevent human trafficking. Among the major corporations that have served on the Coalition's board are ExxonMobil, Ford, Coca-Cola, and Microsoft. The Coalition provides businesses with information regarding human trafficking and its effect on business operations. Business firms in gBCAT orchestrate interactions among businesses, international organizations, not-for-profits, and government agencies to counteract trafficking (Martin and Smith 2015).

Another organization that is making efforts to combat human trafficking is the Anti-Human Trafficking Cryptocurrency Consortium (ATCC). This relatively new organization has the goal of "equipping organizations to better identify risks related to human trafficking, child exploitation, and child sexual abuse material (CSAM) within cryptocurrency transactions" (ATCC 2024). Cryptocurrency is defined as "a type of digital currency in the form of tokens, or 'coins,' that can be purchased as an investment or used to purchase goods or services from vendors that accept cryptocurrency" (Kerr et al. 2023, p. 51). Cryptocurrency has become the subject of extensive research in business and other fields (cf., Aye et al. 2023; Almeida and Gonçalves 2023; Kerr et al. 2023; Yadav et al. 2022; Fauzi et al. 2020).

2.3. Background on Human Trafficking

At its core, human trafficking is a crime against society. Human trafficking typically involves coercion, fraud, and force for purposes of forced labor, sexual exploitation, and organ trade. Trafficking occurs when people take control and ownership of other people by treating them as property. When people engage directly or indirectly in human trafficking, their purpose is to take what they desire, whether it is via forced labor, sexual exploitation of adults or children, or organ removal. Trafficking occurs when people place higher value on their personal pleasures, profits, or conveniences than on the dignity and well-being of others.

This study uses the definition of human trafficking that is provided by The United Nations: "[Human trafficking is] ... the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs" (United Nations 2023b).

Every person and organization can do their part to identify and stop human trafficking. For individuals, stopping trafficking requires not buying products and services derived from trafficking. For a business firm, stopping trafficking requires not using forced labor directly and not allowing forced labor to be used by other businesses in the firm's supply chain. Anti-trafficking efforts will help make the world a better place for all people (cf., Burger et al. 2020; Linnhoff et al. 2014; Smith et al. 2014). Research on human trafficking is typically difficult because it is "challenging to research hidden economies and actual illegal activities" (Abu Alfoul et al. 2022, p. 2031434).

Slavery was practiced in ancient societies (e.g., Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome), medieval societies (e.g., the Byzantine Empire, Arabia, the Incas), early modern societies (e.g., the Ottoman Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, the Russian Empire), and in modern-day societies throughout the world. Persons of all races and people groups have been enslaved (cf., Pargas and Schiel 2023). The Book of Exodus in the Old Testament Bible records the enslavement in ancient time of the Jewish people in Egypt: "And the Egyptians reduced the Israelites to oppressive slavery. They made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar,

brick, and all kinds of work in the field. All their service was with harshness and severity” (Bible Gateway 2023).

Slavery continued from ancient times, through the Middle Ages, and into modern times. The slave trade in the British Empire was banned in 1807, but slavery in British colonies persisted until abolished in 1833 (Allen 2002). Slavery of Africans in the U.S. was practiced in both the North and the South from the beginning of the country, as it was practiced in every major country of the world at the time. The labor-intensive cultivation of market goods, mainly cotton and rice, in the South perpetuated slavery until abolished following the American Civil War in 1865 (Martin and Smith 2015).

During World War 2, in Nazi Germany and occupied Europe, Jews and others were enslaved. For the Jews, slavery was part of the “Final Solution”, Hitler’s efforts to exterminate the Jews. Jews were used as forced labor in various Nazi Schutzstaffel (SS) businesses and were rented to a number of other non-SS wartime businesses. The forced laborers, i.e., slave workers, were given food rations that were below that needed to survive. As a result, the slaves were literally worked to death (Allen 2002). Similarly, American prisoners of war (POWs) in Japanese prison camps were forced to work under brutal conditions. Over 60 Japanese companies used POW slave labor during World War 2. Many POWs were tortured and killed. Of the 27,465 American POWs held by Japan, 40 percent, 11,107, died in captivity, which compares to a one percent death rate for American POWs held by Germany, 1121 of 93,941 (Reynolds 2002).

The roots of slavery include the earliest civilizations, such as Egypt, Babylon, China, Greece, the Roman Empire, the Islamic Caliphate, Hebrew kingdoms in Palestine, and pre-Columbian nations of the Western Hemisphere. In Ancient Rome, about half the city’s population were slaves. The Portuguese started the Atlantic slave trade in 1444, bringing slaves from West Africa to Europe. In the modern era, nothing is more significant than the work of William Wilberforce, who led the abolitionist movement in the British Parliament. Table 1 provides a list of some key events in the history of human trafficking.

Table 1. Timeline of pivotal events in human trafficking.

9000 B.C.	Early cities are found in Ancient Mesopotamia. A major source of slaves are enemies captured in war. Early civilizations, including Egypt, Babylon, China, Greece, the Roman Empire, the Islamic Caliphate, Hebrew kingdoms in Palestine, and pre-Columbian countries of the Western Hemisphere, all practiced slavery.
1720 B.C.	In the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, laws are formed regulating slavery.
1700 B.C.	Ancient Egypt enslaves the Hebrews.
120 A.D.	About half of the people living in Ancient Rome are slaves, half a million of the total one million residents.
500	England is invaded by Anglo-Saxons who enslave native Britons.
1102	The church in London condemns both serfdom and the slave trade.
1444	Slave traders in Portugal begin the Atlantic slave trade, transporting slaves in West Africa to locations in Europe.
1526	Spaniards ship the first African slaves to a settlement in what later is part of the United States.
1641	Massachusetts legalizes slavery, the first British colony to do so.
1807	After almost 20 years of struggles by abolitionists led by William Wilberforce, the British Parliament votes to stop the global slave trade. Britain then plays a crucial part in combating the global slave trade. From 1808 to 1860, the British Navy’s West Africa Squadron apprehends about 1600 slave ships and liberates 150,000 African slaves.
1833	Slavery is ended in all the British Empire.
1830s	The U.S. anti-slavery movement adopts the Liberty Bell as its symbol. On the Bell, a Bible verse is inscribed, Leviticus 25:10: “Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof”. Subsequently, the Bell comes to be an iconic symbol of America’s war for independence.

Table 1. *Cont.*

1848	France ends slavery in all its colonies.
1863	The U.S. Emancipation Proclamation is signed on 1 January 1863, abolishing slavery in the Confederate States. The Proclamation expanded the goals of the Civil War. While slavery was a key issue that led to war, liberating slaves now becomes an official goal of the Union's war against the Confederacy.
1863	The Netherlands ends slavery in all Dutch colonies. To former slave owners, the Dutch government pays 300 guilders for each freed slave.
1888	Brazil abolishes slavery with enactment of the Lei Aurea (Golden Law).
1926	The League of Nations approves the Slavery Convention, which defines slavery as the "status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised". More than 30 nations sign the Convention, which mandates signers suppress all forms of slavery.
1981	Mauritania is last country to abolish slavery. Slavery is now illegal worldwide.
1995	In Switzerland, Christian Solidarity International begins a program of freeing slaves by buying them back in Southern Sudan. This program is controversial, as critics complain the program rewards slavers.
2000	The U.S. enacts the Trafficking Victims Protection Act with the goal to combat human trafficking.
2002	The Polaris Project is started by two seniors from Brown University.
2012	The Global Business Coalition against Human Trafficking (gBCAT) is established by some of largest global corporations.
2024	Human trafficking victims reach an all-time high, exceeding 50 million persons.

Adapted from: L.M. Smith (2023). Timeline of Pivotal Events in Human Trafficking. Available online at <https://bit.ly/3TbC9zH>, accessed on 18 August 2024. Used by permission.

Slavery is now officially illegal in all countries. According to World Population Review (WPR 2023), the last country formally to outlaw this practice was Mauritania in 1981. Nevertheless, slavery has not disappeared. Instead of being a legally sanctioned practice, slavery is now conducted mostly clandestinely throughout the world. The new era of slavery is referred to as human trafficking or modern-day slavery. A recent movie (released in 2023), *The Sound of Freedom*, has brought to the public's attention to the horrors of child sex trafficking, which is only one of the several forms of human trafficking. Human trafficking involves recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring, and receiving people via fraud, force, or deception, with the goal to exploit them for profit (UNODC 2023).

Human trafficking is a global problem with varied estimates of prevalence. The U.S. Department of State, which identifies forced labor (including child labor) and sex trafficking as the two main forms of human trafficking, estimates that in 2021 there were about 49.6 million victims of modern-day slavery (USDS 2023). The International Labour Organization and Stop the Traffik estimate the total number of victims, which includes women in forced marriages, at 44.6 million (STT 2023; ILO 2023). The Global Slavery Index (TGSi) 2023, which ranks countries in five regions based on the estimated prevalence per 1000 population, estimates the total number of modern slavery victims at 49.6 million. The estimated total humans in bondage by region is presented in Table 2.

To meet the worldwide demand for human slaves, traffickers have developed trade routes crossing the globe. Major routes go from Asia and South America to North America, from Africa to the Middle East and Europe, and from Asia to the Middle East and Europe. These world trade routes are shown in Figure 1. Major routes into the United States are from South America and Asia. Major routes into Europe start in South America, Asia, and Europe. While these are the major routes, minor routes of human trafficking can be from anywhere to anywhere.

Table 2. Prevalence of modern slavery by region.

Region	Estimated Total Numbers
Africa	7,025,000
The Americas	5,090,000
Arab States	1,699,000
Asia and the Pacific	29,395,000
Europe and Central Asia	6,421,000
Total	49,630,000

Source: Adapted from TGSi (2023, pp. 78–100).

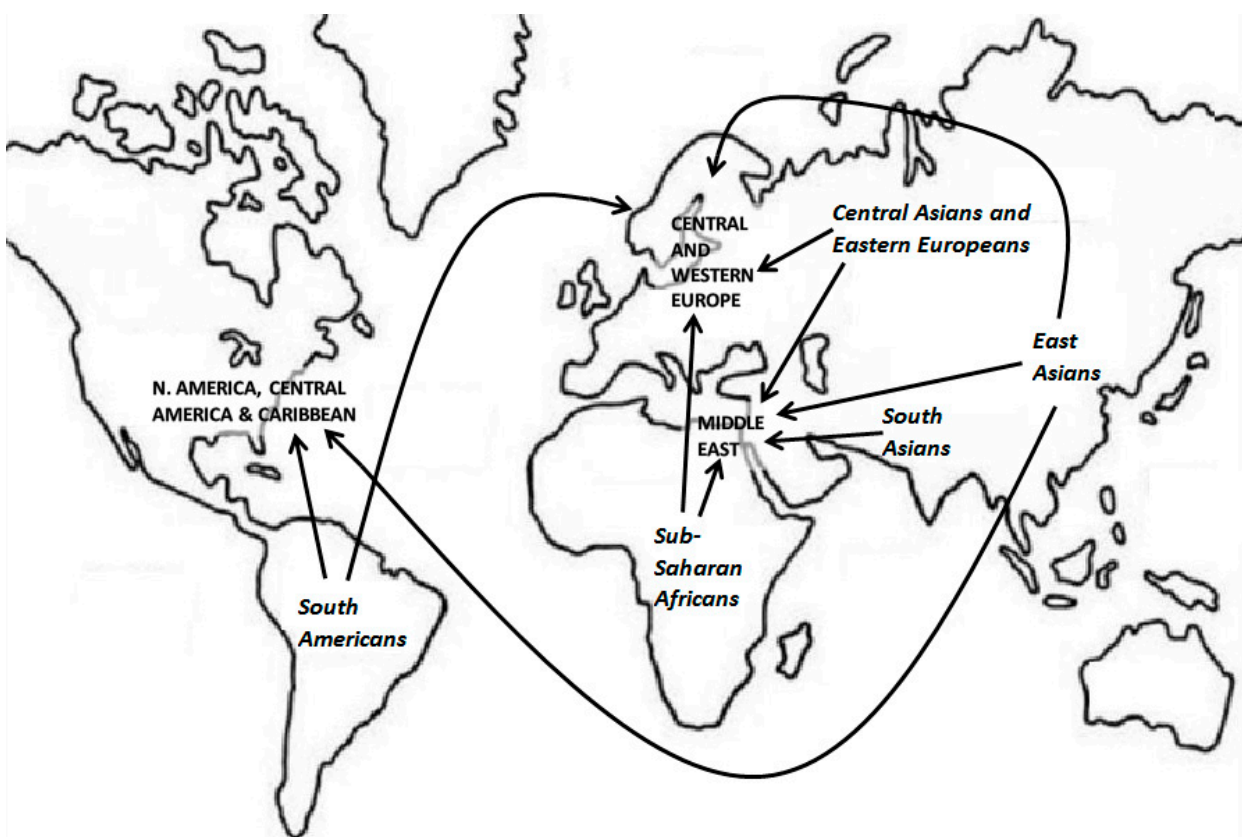


Figure 1. Major flows of human trafficking worldwide. Source: L.M. Smith (2020). Website: <https://bit.ly/traffickingworldmap>, accessed on 18 August 2024. Used by Permission.

2.4. High-Risk Industries and Products

Forced labor occurs in many industries. Forced labor is defined by the International Labour Organization as follows: “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily” (ILO 2024). According to LifeWay Network (Lifeway 2017), labor trafficking is known to be particularly prevalent in the following ten industries: (1) agriculture, animal husbandry, and fishing, (2) domestic service, (3) construction, (4) manufacturing and factory work, (5) hospitality, (6) health and beauty salons, (7) restaurants, (8) traveling sales crews, (9) landscaping, and (10) carnivals. Many of these industries are predominantly composed of small businesses: e.g., agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and hospitality (SBA 2022). Even if a company does not directly use forced labor, a company must consider the risk that their suppliers do.

“The Group of Twenty”, also known as the G20, includes 19 countries and 2 regional bodies. G20 members account for about 85 percent of global GDP, more than 75 percent of global trade, and approximately two-thirds of the global population (G20 2023). G20 member imported products that are high at-risk of having been produced by forced labor (at-risk products) were reported by TGSi (2023). These 14 at-risk products and their value in billions of U.S. dollars are shown in Table 3. The five highest at-risk products in U.S. dollar billions are electronics (243.6), garments (147.9), palm oil (19.7), solar panels (14.8), and textiles (12.7) (TGSi 2023).

Table 3. Total value of top at-risk products imported by G20 countries.

Product	Total Import Value (USD Billions)
Electronics	243.6
Garments	147.9
Palm Oil	19.7
Solar Panels	14.8
Textiles	12.7
Timber	7.4
Fish	6.3
Gold	5.2
Cattle	4.4
Sugarcane	2.5
Coffee	1.6
Cocoa	1.0
Rice	0.8
Coal	0.4

Source: Adapted from TGSi (2023), p. 147.

The Responsible Sourcing Tool (RST) is a collaborative effort between the U.S. Department of State and Verité, a non-profit organization working in over 70 countries to expose labor abuses (Verité 2023). RST’s website includes risk of forced labor information about 11 industries and 43 commodities (Responsible Sourcing Tool 2023). RST recommends ways that companies can perform their due diligence in complying with laws and mandates pertaining to human trafficking in business supply chains.

2.5. Gender-Related Research

Research on gender differences is generally based on gender theory (cf., Githaiga 2024; Smith et al. 2016; Knop 2004; Lee 1996). Regarded as an over-arching theory by Lee (1996), gender theory is a social construction based on biological differences between genders, male and female. In his landmark books, Gray (1992, 1993) describes psychological and physical differences associated with gender, which include blood thickness, bone structure, intuition level, start-up energy, reaction to stress, and relationship building. Due to gender differences, women are more vulnerable to becoming trafficking victims, notably so in countries and cultures where women’s rights and freedoms are more limited than men’s; that is, in countries with higher levels of gender inequality (cf., Russell et al. 2017; Martin and Smith 2015; Linnhoff et al. 2014; Smith et al. 2014). Numerous studies connected to gender theory include a range of issues, such as the behavior of board directors (Githaiga 2024), gender patterns of migration (Lien and Zuloaga 2021), advancing gender equality (Russell and Smith 2018), corporate citizenship (Maxfield 2007), CEO pay (Blazovich et al. 2014b), work–life balance (Smith et al. 2016), and human rights (Knop 2004). This study

adds to the research on gender theory by determining if there is a connection between gender inequality and human trafficking.

Businesses have been the subject of extensive gender-related research. For example, [De Clercq et al. \(2021\)](#) examined work–life balance and job satisfaction among female entrepreneurs. Using a case study approach, [Cochran \(2019\)](#) evaluated gendered experiences of female university students involved in an entrepreneurship program. A study by [Belot and Serve \(2018\)](#), which included 30,476 French firms, found that female-run firms were less involved in earnings management than male-run firms. [Santos et al. \(2016\)](#) examine the interplay of gender differences along with the social environment and the establishment of entrepreneurial intentions. When businesses operate in countries with higher levels of gender inequality, businesses will be affected. Women will likely be more vulnerable to unfair treatment, including vulnerability to potential trafficking. A study by [Cameron et al. \(2023\)](#) examined the predictive value of various indicators regarding gender inequality and violent acts against women as well as legal cases concerning human trafficking. Other examples of gender-related studies include [Byrne et al. \(2019\)](#), [Shanine et al. \(2019\)](#), [Lewis \(2015\)](#), and [Dawson and Henley \(2015\)](#). The current study adds to the gender-related literature by examining the connection between human trafficking and gender inequality.

3. Methodology and Analysis of the Relationship of Human Trafficking to Gender Inequality

The first research question addresses whether countries with higher levels of human trafficking would be associated with higher levels of gender inequality. The Gender Inequality Index is used in this study to determine the level of gender inequality in a country. According to the World Health Organization ([WHO 2023](#)), “the Gender Inequality Index is a composite measure reflecting inequality in achievements between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market” ([WHO 2023](#), p. 1, para. 2).

To evaluate the association of rate of human trafficking in a country to its Gender Inequality Index (GII) level, we use a methodology used in multiple prior studies (e.g., [De Leon et al. 2024](#); [Smith et al. 2019](#); [Broker et al. 2019](#); [Martin and Smith 2015](#)). We compare a subset of 30 countries having the highest human trafficking rates to a subset of 30 countries having the lowest human trafficking rates. The incidence, per 1000 population, of human trafficking by country, as reported on [TGSi \(2023\)](#) and the Gender Inequality Index ([Human Development Reports 2021](#)), is shown in [Table 4](#). The table includes all 152 countries for which all data were available. The GII ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 represents equal treatment and 1 represents extreme inequality ([Human Development Reports 2021](#)).

Table 4. Modern slavery (human trafficking) and gender inequality by country.

	Country	Trafficking per 1000 Population *	Gender Inequality Index **
1	Mauritania	32.9	0.632
2	Saudia Arabia	21.3	0.247
3	Turkey	15.6	0.272
4	Tajikistan	14.0	0.285
5	United Arab Emirates	13.4	0.049
6	Russia	13.0	0.203
7	Kuwait	13.0	0.305
8	Afghanistan	13.0	0.678
9	Ukraine	12.8	0.200
10	North Macedonia	12.6	0.134
11	Myanmar	12.1	0.498
12	Turkmenistan	11.9	0.177
13	Albania	11.8	0.144

Table 4. Cont.

	Country	Trafficking per 1000 Population *	Gender Inequality Index **
14	Belarus	11.3	0.104
15	Kazakhstan	11.1	0.161
16	Azerbaijan	10.6	0.294
17	Pakistan	10.6	0.534
18	South Sudan	10.3	0.587
19	Papua New Guinea	10.3	0.725
20	Bosnia and Herzegovina	10.1	0.136
21	Jordan	10.0	0.471
22	Moldova	9.5	0.205
23	Venezuela	9.5	0.492
24	Armenia	8.9	0.216
25	Kyrgyzstan	8.7	0.370
26	Syria	8.7	0.477
27	Bulgaria	8.5	0.210
28	Haiti	8.2	0.635
29	El Salvador	8.1	0.376
30	Cyprus	8.0	0.123
31	India	8.0	0.490
32	Republic of the Congo	8.0	0.564
33	Georgia	7.8	0.280
34	Philippines	7.8	0.419
35	Columbia	7.8	0.424
36	Guatemala	7.8	0.481
37	Nigeria	7.8	0.680
38	Slovakia	7.7	0.180
39	Ecuador	7.6	0.362
40	Lebanon	7.6	0.432
41	Gabon	7.6	0.541
42	Romania	7.5	0.282
43	Burundi	7.5	0.505
44	Uzbekistan	7.4	0.227
45	Jamaica	7.3	0.335
46	Nicaragua	7.3	0.424
47	Cote d'Ivoire	7.3	0.613
48	Bolivia	7.2	0.418
49	Peru	7.1	0.380
50	Iran	7.1	0.459
51	Bangladesh	7.1	0.530
52	Serbia	7.0	0.131
53	Honduras	7.0	0.431
54	Qatar	6.8	0.220
55	Libya	6.8	0.259
56	Bahrain	6.7	0.181
57	Indonesia	6.7	0.444
58	Hungary	6.6	0.221
59	Mexico	6.6	0.309
60	Dominican Republic	6.6	0.429
61	Oman	6.5	0.300
62	Sri Lanka	6.5	0.383
63	Gambia	6.5	0.611
64	Greece	6.4	0.119
65	Paraguay	6.4	0.445
66	Malaysia	6.3	0.228

Table 4. Cont.

	Country	Trafficking per 1000 Population *	Gender Inequality Index **
67	Ethiopia	6.3	0.520
68	Lithuania	6.1	0.105
69	Timor-Leste	6.1	0.378
70	Yemen	6.0	0.820
71	Chad	5.9	0.652
72	Cameroon	5.8	0.565
73	Thailand	5.7	0.333
74	Poland	5.5	0.109
75	Iraq	5.5	0.558
76	Cuba	5.4	0.303
77	Croatia	5.2	0.093
78	Lao PDR	5.2	0.478
79	Mali	5.2	0.613
80	Central African Republic	5.2	0.672
81	Zambi	5.1	0.540
82	Brazil	5.0	0.390
83	Cambodia	5.0	0.461
84	Kenya	5.0	0.506
85	Zimbabwe	5.0	0.532
86	Malawi	4.9	0.554
87	Trinidad and Tobago	4.7	0.344
88	Panama	4.7	0.392
89	Madagascar	4.6	0.556
90	Niger	4.6	0.611
91	D. R. of the Congo	4.5	0.601
92	Guinea-Bissau	4.5	0.627
93	Slovenia	4.4	0.071
94	Rwanda	4.3	0.388
95	Egypt	4.3	0.443
96	Czechia	4.2	0.120
97	Argentina	4.2	0.287
98	Guyana	4.2	0.454
99	Uganda	4.2	0.530
100	Estonia	4.1	0.100
101	Vietnam	4.1	0.296
102	Angola	4.1	0.537
103	China	4.0	0.192
104	Mongolia	4.0	0.313
105	Sudan	4.0	0.553
106	Guinea	4.0	0.621
107	Portugal	3.8	0.067
108	Israel	3.8	0.083
109	Burkina Faso	3.7	0.621
110	Eswatini	3.6	0.540
111	South Korea	3.5	0.067
112	Latvia	3.4	0.151
113	Sierra Leone	3.4	0.633
114	Italy	3.3	0.056
115	United States	3.3	0.179
116	Nepal	3.3	0.452
117	Togo	3.3	0.580
118	Chile	3.2	0.187
119	Costa Rica	3.2	0.256
120	Liberia	3.1	0.648

Table 4. Cont.

	Country	Trafficking per 1000 Population *	Gender Inequality Index **
121	Mozambique	3.0	0.537
122	Benin	3.0	0.602
123	Ghana	2.9	0.529
124	Senegal	2.9	0.530
125	Tanzania	2.9	0.560
126	South Africa	2.7	0.405
127	Namibia	2.4	0.445
128	Spain	2.3	0.057
129	Tunisia	2.3	0.259
130	Morocco	2.3	0.425
131	Singapore	2.1	0.040
132	France	2.1	0.083
133	Austria	1.9	0.053
134	Uruguay	1.9	0.235
135	Algeria	1.9	0.499
136	Canada	1.8	0.069
137	United Kingdom	1.8	0.098
138	Botswana	1.8	0.468
139	Austria	1.6	0.073
140	New Zealand	1.6	0.088
141	Lesotho	1.6	0.557
142	Mauritius	1.5	0.347
143	Finland	1.4	0.033
144	Ireland	1.1	0.074
145	Japan	1.1	0.083
146	Belgium	1.0	0.048
147	Denmark	0.6	0.013
148	Sweden	0.6	0.023
149	Netherlands	0.6	0.025
150	Germany	0.6	0.073
151	Norway	0.5	0.016
152	Switzerland	0.5	0.018
	Average	6.0	0.347

Sources: * Source: The Global Slavery Index (TGSi) 2023. ** Source: Gender Inequality Index ([Human Development Reports 2021](#)).

The findings of the comparison of the countries with the highest human trafficking rates to the countries with the lowest human trafficking rates are summarized in Table 5. As shown in the table, the mean Gender Inequality Index (GII) of the top 30 countries, ranked by human trafficking, is 0.331, and the mean of the bottom 30 countries is 0.208. T-test findings indicate this is a significant difference ($p < 0.012$). Greater rates of human trafficking are associated with higher levels of gender inequality. In addition to *t*-tests, the data were analyzed using Spearman’s correlation. The results indicate a positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship between the two variables, affirming the *t*-test results.

Table 5. T-test results regarding human trafficking and gender inequality.

	Trafficking per 1000 Population	Gender Inequality Index
Top 30 Means	12.0	0.331
Bottom 30 Means	1.7	0.208
t Stat	11.6	2.3
Prob. Significance	$p <= 0.000$	$p <= 0.012$

Note: In addition to significant *t*-test results, Spearman’s correlation analysis of the two variables indicates a positive and statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.05$).

While the general relationship is that higher gender inequality is associated with higher levels of trafficking, there are some notable exceptions. For example, the United Arab Emirates has a relatively low GII index of 0.049 (compared to 0.179 for the U.S.) while having an incidence of human trafficking of 13.4 (compared to 3.3 for the U.S.) per thousand population. And there are examples of high gender inequality countries having relatively low incidences of modern slavery. For example, Sierra Leone has a relatively high gender inequality index of 0.633 with an incidence of modern slavery of 3.4 per thousand population. So, the risk of human trafficking being relatively high can occur even in countries with relatively low levels of gender inequality.

4. Ways That Business Firms Can Detect and Prevent Trafficking

The second research question concerns ways that a business can deter human trafficking and lower associated risks and costs. One way that business firms can combat human trafficking is by setting up standards that suppliers and business associates are required to follow. Doing this will have a positive effect on social issues (United Nations 2023a). Business firms can and should investigate and stop human trafficking found in the operations of suppliers and business associates. Failure to do so enables human trafficking to continue. Both anti-trafficking organizations and national governments require assistance from business firms to detect and stop human trafficking in the global marketplace (Burger et al. 2020).

Business supply chains can be incredibly complex; consequently, a business firm can become unknowingly linked with a supplier involved with human trafficking. While organized crime operations can usually be readily identified, detecting trafficking inside outsourced operations can be especially challenging. A business firm might acquire goods or services from a supplier that clandestinely uses forced labor. Nevertheless, such a business is guilty of enabling human exploitation since it carries out business with human traffickers (Smith and Betts 2015). According to Burger et al. (2020), the detection and prevention of human trafficking is a three-step process: (1) develop standards; (2) enforce the standards; and (3) call for backup (Burger et al. 2020).

Step 1: Anti-trafficking Principles. A business firm must first develop anti-trafficking principles required to be followed by the firm's employees and suppliers. This step starts with establishing a formal definition of trafficking. A firm can use the formal definition, given by the United Nations, which was shown above. Anti-trafficking principles should include a requirement that employees know the basics of human trafficking, such as how to identify and report suspected incidents. Anti-trafficking principles should encompass fair pay, reasonable work hours, freedom of movement, and the ability to voice complaints. Anti-trafficking principles will have no effect unless the business firm mandates implementation and ongoing adherence to the principles (Burger et al. 2020).

To assist companies in developing trafficking-free supply chains, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC (United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, Twenty-Third Session) 2013) developed "red flag" questions—Benchmarks and Indicators for Ensuring Trafficking-free Supply Chains—for promoting trafficking-free supply chains (Appendix A). Of these, there are several questions that businesses should ask themselves regarding their supply chain compliance framework. These questions include the establishment of an anti-forced labor policy and code, management support for implementation of anti-trafficking policies, and ongoing anti-trafficking due diligence.

Human trafficking rates vary greatly by country and can vary greatly among regions of the same country. Business firms should be aware of high-risk areas in their supply chains. Not-for-profit organizations, such as the Polaris Project, have estimated risks of human trafficking according to industry, culture, and region (Smith and Betts 2015). A firm's anti-trafficking standards could require that suppliers be examined for human trafficking by an external auditor or by a firm's internal auditors. Further, a surprise audit could be conducted at business locations of high-risk suppliers (Burger et al. 2020).

Step 2: Administer the Principles. Enforcing standards is the second step that should be part of anti-trafficking standards. Firms are accountable for making sure their suppliers are following anti-trafficking standards of their own. A supply chain audit is an effective way to detect worker exploitation and human trafficking (Russell et al. 2017). How often audits are conducted can be determined according to the risk level connected to a specific supplier. To prompt a supplier to carry out anti-trafficking efforts, a business firm can setup a score card that incorporates the supplier's human trafficking risk level and supply chain audit results. These score cards could be used when determining which suppliers to do business (Smith and Betts 2015).

Detecting human trafficking is a difficult process, even for veteran auditors. In addition to examining physical property, an auditor needs to obtain information directly from a supplier's employees to assess whether they are treated properly. If employees are exploited, then they are often unwilling to speak openly to the auditor, as they may fear physical maltreatment to themselves or to loved ones (Russell et al. 2017). Consequently, auditors must be careful to look beyond the surface. If signs of human trafficking are noted by an auditor, then a private meeting with an employee is the preferred approach to evaluate whether the employee is a trafficking victim. Auditors should consider indicators of human trafficking that have been identified by Homeland Security (2022). These indicators are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Indicators of Human Trafficking.

• Is the person disconnected from family, friends, community, or houses of worship?
• Has a child stopped attending school?
• Is a juvenile engaged in commercial sex acts?
• Is the person confused or showing signs of mental or physical abuse?
• Is the person fearful or submissive?
• Does the person have bruises in various stages of healing?
• Is the person living in unsuitable conditions?
• Has the person been denied food, water, sleep, or medical care?
• Is the person often in the company of someone to whom he or she defers?
• Does the person appear to be coached on what to say?
• Does the person have freedom of movement on where they go or live?
• Does the person lack personal possessions and a stable living situation?

Adapted from: Homeland Security (2022). Indicators of human trafficking. U.S. Homeland Security. Available at <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/indicators-human-trafficking>, accessed 20 December 2023.

Detecting and preventing human trafficking in supply chains is a socially responsible business practice, which aids people who otherwise would be exploited. By doing so, a business firm joins the fight against this humiliating form of human injustice. When William Wilberforce first brought the evil of slavery to the attention of the British Parliament, change did not occur for many years. During the political battle to end slavery, Wilberforce famously said "You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know" (Wilberforce International Institute 2021). Now that modern-day slavery, also known as human trafficking, is increasingly publicized, people in a business firm cannot say that they did not know about trafficking. When a supply chain audit reveals that trafficking is or may be occurring, then a firm must take steps to confront traffickers and stop their work.

Step 3: Call for Backup. Taking action is the third and final step in opposing trafficking. When suppliers fail to follow a business firm's anti-trafficking principles, then business relationships must be stopped until the supplier takes appropriate corrective action.

In addition to rescuing human trafficking victims, there are organizations that help heal and restore them. The International Justice Mission (IJM) works around the world

to offer victims counseling, safe housing, food, education, and medical care. IJM takes care of victims until they are completely restored (IJM 2023). A second organization is the U.S.-based Polaris Project, which works to enable rescued victims of trafficking to begin a new life (Polaris 2023). These organizations are available to assist business firms in establishing anti-trafficking standards, both for employees and suppliers. The battle against human trafficking cannot be won by law enforcement by itself; business firms must play their part.

In the U.S., if a business owner suspects the occurrence of human trafficking or forced labor, it can be reported on the National Human Trafficking Hotline (888-373-7888), which is open 24 h a day (NHTH 2023). The website for the hotline is [humantraffickinghotline.org](https://www.humantraffickinghotline.org). The hotline is managed by the Polaris Project. People who answer the hotline are trained to gauge the magnitude of the exploitation and know whether to contact local, state, or federal authorities. Signals received by the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH) provide an indication of the ongoing problem of human trafficking. Since its inception in 2007, and up until 2022, the NHTH received 399,494 signals, which included hotline calls, SMS reports, online reports, emails received, and web chats (NHTH 2023).

5. Summary and Conclusions

Human trafficking is a major global issue, with about 50 million people worldwide victims of trafficking. Another major global issue is gender equality; that is, whether females and males are treated in a consistent and fair way. This study examines the relationship between trafficking and gender inequality. Further, this study provides a brief overview of human trafficking and specific steps that a business can take to help prevent this crime, protect its reputation, and avoid fines and lost business. Taking these steps will reduce the risks and costs associated with trafficking.

Human trafficking is partly a gender issue, with females more affected than males. Females are more susceptible to being taken advantage of by traffickers, who often use coercion, fraud, or force. Females account for about 70 percent of people trafficked, 50 percent adult women and 20 percent girls. Findings of the study show that higher levels of gender inequality in a country are associated with higher levels of human trafficking. Consequently, business firms should be especially wary of human trafficking when conducting business with firms in countries where gender inequality is high. Of course, efforts by firms to prevent human trafficking should be carried out in all countries of operations, as some human trafficking occurs in all countries, regardless of gender inequality levels.

People are increasingly aware that human trafficking occurs in their country and in all countries around the globe. Human trafficking, also known as modern-day slavery, has been reported in news, movies, TV shows, professional journals, websites, and general media. Nevertheless, there remain numerous people who do not understand the severity of the problem or who do not know practical ways to combat trafficking. Business firms, large and small, can play their part to detect and prevent human trafficking. This benefits the firms by reducing their risks and costs, but also benefits society at large, protecting people from human trafficking.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by the time period covered. Future studies could use additional time periods. This study is limited by sources of data and variables examined. Future studies could examine other data sources and variables. This study was limited by data showing rates and types of human trafficking available at the time of the study, which change over time, and by the prior research examined. Future studies can use other time periods, which might show different rates and types of human trafficking, and the potentially changing impacts based on gender. Future studies could review additional prior studies.

The current study is limited to only a few examples of specific national laws and fines. Future studies could include specific laws and fines of additional countries. In identifying ways that a business can deter human trafficking and lower associated risks and costs, this study was limited to ways described in prior studies. Future research might use other approaches, such as interviews of key informants or meeting with business managers who are tasked with preventing human trafficking in their company operations.

Another limitation of the current study is that there is not universal agreement among governments and academics on the precise definition and quantification of human trafficking. Future studies might use other definitions or quantifications from other sources than the ones used in the current study.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Benchmarks and indicators for ensuring trafficking-free supply chains. United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council *.

Voluntary recruitment and employment
1. Is all work voluntary and do workers have the freedom to terminate their employment with reasonable notice?
Recruitment fees
2. Are workers charged fees for recruitment, including costs associated with travel and processing documents?
3. Are workers required to lodge security deposits or payments of any kind, including non-cash deposits?
Contracts of employment
4. Are workers fully briefed on the terms and conditions of their employment in a language they understand?
5. Are legal written contracts of employment provided to workers in their native language?
6. Where prospective workers can neither read nor write, are measures taken to ensure they understand and agree to all clauses in the contract?
7. Are migrant workers provided their contract of employment prior to any formal agreements or plans being made?
8. Do you prohibit supplemental agreements and the practice of contract substitution?
9. Are changes to contracts of employment prohibited that diminish original wages, benefits or conditions of work?
10. Do you monitor subcontractors and the contractual agreements they hold with their workforce?
Passport confiscation
11. Is the confiscation or withholding of worker identity documents (e.g., passports) strictly prohibited?
12. Where employers maintain workers’ documentation for legal reasons, do workers have access to their documentation at any time upon request?
Humane treatment
13. Is the use or threat of physical and sexual violence, harassment, and intimidation prohibited?
14. Are there effective procedures of redress in place to address such incidents if they occur?

Table A1. Cont.

Equality at work
15. Are workers treated fairly and equally, with no discrimination based on factors including sex, gender, nationality, ethnicity, trade union affiliation, political affiliation, beliefs, disability, and residence status?
Wages and benefits
16. Are workers held in debt bondage or forced to work to pay off a debt of any kind, including non-monetary debt?
17. Are workers paid in legal tender and provided written, itemized pay slips/receipts in language they understand, indicating wage rates, hours worked, total pay and any legally authorized deductions made by the employer?
18. Are workers paid at least the minimum wage required by law and provided all legally mandated benefits?
19. Are wage payments made at regular intervals directly to the worker and/or their bank account?
20. Are deductions made from workers' wages lawful, authorized, and not excessive?
21. Are wage advances or loans provided to workers, including interest rates and repayment terms, compliant with the law, advised to workers in their own language and agreed in advance by both parties?
22. Do workers retain full and complete control over their earnings?
Freedom of movement
23. Are workers physically confined to the workplace or are there restrictions on their movement outside of work?
Freedom of association and collective bargaining
24. Do all workers, irrespective of their nationality or residence status, have the right to join unions?
Compliance framework and monitoring
25. Do you have in place a policy or code of conduct that explicitly prohibits all forms of human trafficking?
26. Do you have an effective management system to support the implementation of anti-trafficking policies?
27. Are you aware of the process of sub-contracting in your company and supply chain?
28. Do you conduct comprehensive supply chain assessments and due diligence to monitor recruitment and employment conditions in your supply chain, including subcontractors?
29. Are your relevant staff trained on risks and signs of human trafficking and company anti-trafficking policies?
30. Where cases of human trafficking are discovered, are the well-being and best interests of the affected worker(s) considered first and foremost, with referral mechanisms that provide services and compensation to victims?
31. Have you established effective and credible grievance mechanisms to enable workers to voice concerns, including whistleblower policies to protect the confidentiality of workers wishing to remain anonymous?
32. Do you publicly report and communicate regularly with stakeholders about company policies, programs, performance, and impacts against human trafficking?
33. Do you engage other stakeholders to translate your corporate anti-trafficking commitments into action?
34. Do you engage governments and other public actors, including international organizations, to advocate for progressive legal, regulatory, and policy reform to support anti-trafficking measures?

* Source: [UNHRC \(United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, Twenty-Third Session\) \(2013\)](#).

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