

# Combating modern slavery: will Canada rise to the occasion in 2021?



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Isobel O'Connell

Opinion

Canada's human rights legacy has historically allowed Canada to "punch above its weight" in the international community with previous leading roles and international achievements in formulating the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Ottawa Land Mines Treaty, to name a few.

But is it simply enough to talk about doing the right thing when human rights insecurity can be a driver of the COVID-19 pandemic?

This year is the right time for Canada to recommit its stance against modern slav-

ery. It is time for Canada to walk the talk and offer genuine leadership and collective action on this ever-growing human rights problem.

For context, Canada was absent for 13 years from the UN Human Rights Committee. In 2016, Marcia V. J. Kran, a Canadian lawyer and former UN senior official, was nominated to the committee to scrutinize other countries' human rights performances.

In November, steps were taken in Canada to enact a Modern Slavery Act (MSA) and amend the Customs Tariff, currently known as Bill S-216. This third attempt at the MSA was introduced in the Canadian Senate and aims to implement Canada's international commitments to contribute to the fight against modern slavery, with a particular focus on forced labour and child labour. Bill S-16 follows a series of recent developments in Canada in this

area, including the 2019 appointment of the Canadian ombudsperson for responsible enterprise. It also reinforces the growing trend of corporate accountability for international human rights abuses and brings Canadian companies into the fight where modern slavery may be occurring completely out of sight, or within "blind spots."

Most Canadian provincial, territorial and city governments have introduced independent advocates for children. Some have undertaken Child Rights Impact Assessments to support assessing their policies and processes as they relate to respecting children's rights.

In December 2020, UNICEF Canada and United Nations Global Compact released the Canada Child Rights and Business Assessment identifying 10 steps companies can take to respect and support child rights, and 10 tools to help companies. It provides snapshots of how Canadian businesses are currently addressing children's considerations issues with three key frameworks: Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being. Practical and actionable steps like this can help to catalyze effective action to address modern slavery.

In February 2021, simultaneously with the U.K., Canada made an announcement to address the rising global concerns over reports of forced labour in Xinjiang, China. A further announcement was made about Canada's inaugural National Human Trafficking Awareness Day, on February 22nd, to acknowledge the importance of the human costs of the crime, was unanimously approved by parliamentarians.

But how will Canada implement any recommendations to tackle modern slavery and exploitation insecurity, including those driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, at any level without proper legislation? It could be a redemptive process, in which all sectors including workers and consumers must be involved. Given the complex causes and manifestations of modern slavery, and its interconnection with other rights violations, a successful strategy for eradication should not make abolition an end in itself. Campaigning and working to end it can also serve to highlight wider exploitation and rights violations. Ultimately, addressing modern slavery, like any other human rights abuses, is not just a single sector issue, nor is it a problem for only one part of the world to solve. It's a collective challenge that requires coordinated leadership. But the question remains, will Canada rise to the occasion in 2021 and show how to operate free of slavery and exploitation? The time has never been so pressing.

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*The Hill Times*



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