

Consuming modern slavery: re-examining the role of consumption in enabling and escaping extreme labour exploitation

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Modern slavery has been identified as one of the most significant, yet intractable, human rights abuses of our time. Estimates suggest that tens of millions of people are currently in some form of modern slavery, defined by the ILO as “situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power”.

Our understanding of the role of consumption in enabling or preventing such practices has tended to focus on whether and how rich consumers in the global North can shift their purchasing behaviour to lower-risk or slave-free goods. Important as such research is, it ignores the Catch 22 situation that modern slavery is often initiated and perpetuated by the consumption behaviour of *victims* themselves. This may be payments to people smugglers, the purchasing of illegal documents to secure work, or constant payments to perpetrators for food, accommodation, transport and other necessities that exacerbate debt bondage and enable exploiters to continue to extort value from vulnerable workers. More positively, the consumption practices of victims can also provide brief moments of human agency, freedom or pleasure when confined to situations of exploitation, for example through the ability to consume valued goods such as clothes, phone calls, or cigarettes.

This research project seeks, for the first time, to analyze the consumption practices of modern slavery victims and explore their role in enabling and escaping extreme exploitation. The goal is to develop new theory around the role of consumption in modern slavery, and develop practical implications for more effective policy, support and guidance for potential victims, as well as new ways of potentially disrupting modern slavery practices.

Applicants interested in this project should prepare a research proposal setting out how they would proceed with engaging with this topic, including a brief review of the relevant literature, the research questions they would like to address, the methods they would apply in answering those questions, and the ethical and other challenges they would likely face in completing the research.