

In-depth look at Supply Chains

Background

The right to be free from enslavement is one of the most fundamental human rights and yet slavery continues to exist in modern society. Approximately 13,000 people in the UK are the victims of slavery and trafficking, often working in nail salons, takeaway restaurants or as domestic and agricultural workers.

Although individual cases vary, slavery usually involves being owned or controlled by an 'employer' who coerces victims into working through physical or mental threat. Victims are subsequently dehumanized by being treated as a commodity and may also be physically constrained. Closely linked to slavery is human trafficking, which involves transporting and trading people and often aims to subsequently force people into conditions of slavery.

Slavery and trafficking are illegal in the UK and the Modern Slavery Act of 2015 was pioneering in its attempt to tackle modern slavery. Provisions within the Act include an increase in maximum sentences for trafficking offenders, assured protection of victims and the establishment of the UK's first ever Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. Despite the number of identified victims having risen by 40% and an increase in prosecutions for slavery offences, there is still room for significant improvement in a number of areas.

Supply Chains

The Modern Slavery Act includes a 'Transparency in Supply Chains' (TISC) clause which requires UK businesses with an annual turnover over £36 million to publish an annual 'slavery and human trafficking statement'. The statement sets out what the company is doing to address slavery within their supply chains and must be published in a prominent position on their website.

The issue with supply chains arises in the fact that they are often exceedingly long and complex because of the nature of production of goods in a globalised marketplace. Numerous layers of contractors and sub-contractors are often involved, meaning that there are plenty of moments when the use of slaves can be overlooked even in the supply chains of prominent high street shops.



The TISC clause was intended to ensure that businesses take a more active role in rooting out slavery within their own supply chains, rather than just turning a blind eye to it or choosing not to investigate too thoroughly. Response from companies to the TISC, however, has been patchy and has led to claims that the Act is not effectively addressing the issue of slavery in supply chains.

A major issue with the clause is that there are no fixed monetary or criminal penalties for those who fail to comply, relying instead on the goodwill of the companies. The Equal Times also found that, as of October this year, only 720 of the more than 12,000 companies affected had published reports, and a mere 27 of the FTSE 100 companies. What is more, the TISC clause does not legally require companies to act on any instances of slavery which they have found within their supply chain, or to ensure that they are slave-free, but merely to report whether slavery has been found. British companies which operate exclusively outside of the UK are also not required to publish the report.

The TISC clause is therefore a key step in putting slavery high on the agenda, however it must now be built upon to ensure that companies are being proactive in ensuring that slavery does not form any part of their supply chains. The rationale that the consumer will choose to avoid companies known to employ slaves, falls short of stamping out slavery and leaves the onus of preventing slavery on the consumer rather than the business.

Have a look through our other resources in this pack to read about the other specific areas we are campaigning for change in. We work across Jewish denominations in schools, youth movements and Synagogues to get the Jewish community engaged on this issue and we'd love you to join us.

Thank you for taking part in Human Rights Shabbat 5777 – the biggest one that René Cassin has ever run and please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions about the resources at info@renecassin.org

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