

Towards a national policy framework to end child slavery

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1. Summary of impact

Researchers at Anti-Slavery Australia are developing the first-ever policy framework to protect the rights of children in Australia who experience or are at risk of modern slavery.

With funding from a UTS Social Impact Grant, the research team conducted a series of roundtables with stakeholders from government, academia, civil society and community who are key to identifying and mitigating the threat of modern slavery. These roundtables revealed challenges in coordination, collaboration and data collection among key stakeholders and frontline service providers and drew attention to the issue of modern slavery as it relates to children in Australia. The findings will lay the foundations for a future policy framework that will safeguard the rights of children across the country.

2. The problem

Children are particularly vulnerable to the threat of modern slavery, a term that encompasses a vast range of exploitative practices that impinge on people's right to freedom. In Australia today, an estimated 1,900 people are victims of servitude, human trafficking, debt bondage and forced marriage, among other forms of modern slavery,

but only 1 in 5 will ever be detected. Overcoming the scourge of child trafficking and slavery requires a national approach; however, a lack of coordination and cross-sector collaboration, as well as limited awareness of the extent, risk factors and warning signs of exploitation among key stakeholders, means that many children experiencing or at risk of modern slavery continue to fall through the cracks.

3. Beneficiaries

Child victims and survivors of modern slavery, as well as those at risk, will be the key beneficiaries of a national policy framework. Government agencies and service providers in community and social services settings will also benefit from a coordinated approach that clearly spells out their roles, responsibilities and clear steps towards action.

4. Approach to impact

This project, called Seeking Freedom, draws together key stakeholders working to eradicate modern slavery in Australia. As the first step towards a national policy framework, the research team led four roundtables over the last 12 months. Each roundtable focused on one key aspect of a child-rights modern slavery response (prevention, identification, protection and participation). Discussions elicited the input of government, academic, civil society and community representatives, revealing significant gaps in coordination and collaboration across Australia and a lack of empirical data to support current modern slavery mitigation strategies. They also assisted in increasing awareness and understanding of modern slavery and its impacts on children.

The next step of the work will be producing a policy and guidance paper that captures the key findings from the stakeholder consultations and articulates a path towards a national policy framework. A suite of co-developed resource materials, including practical advice for frontline workers and an advocacy campaign, among others, is also forecast.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

To date, Seeking Freedom has highlighted the key challenges involved in safeguarding the rights of children in the context of modern slavery among those best placed to prevent it. Project activities have also facilitated the early building of vital professional networks that will be key to the success of a future policy framework. In November 2023, the research team presented the project to the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the sale, sexual exploitation, and sexual abuse of children. This engagement highlighted the necessary work required to protect the rights of Australian children in or at risk of modern slavery and shone a spotlight on Seeking Freedom as an important step towards a solution.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

An expert Steering Committee comprised of five representatives with extensive expertise in child rights and protection, youth engagement and modern slavery in Australia has guided this work. Between August 2022 and February 2023, committee members participated in four meetings to discuss, design and evaluate the consultation framework that shaped the roundtable discussions.

7. Challenges

The complexity of developing a national policy framework means that this project is likely to continue for some years. It will eventually include contributions from child survivors of modern slavery and communities identified as being most at risk; as such, it can only progress in line with participants' capacity and availability. The research team is seeking longer-term funding to support this ongoing work.