

Produced with Child Labor

- India

Produced with Forced Labor

- Uzbekistan

Where is silk reportedly produced with trafficking and/or child labor?

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's 2018 *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor*, silk is produced using child labor in India and forced labor in Uzbekistan.[1] Silk fabric and silk thread are produced with child labor in India, while silk cocoons from silkworms are produced with forced labor in Uzbekistan. According to the U.S. Department of State 2020 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, there have been isolated reports that silk is produced with forced labor in Uzbekistan.[2]

The U.S. Department of State 2020 *Trafficking in Persons Report* lists India as a Tier 2 country. Uzbekistan is listed on the Tier 2 watch list.[3]

What does trafficking and/or child labor in silk production look like?

According to the ILO, there are about 10 million workers aged 5 to 14 in India.[4] In the urban sector, children work in small and home-based industries such as silk production, reeling, and weaving.[5] Silk thread and fabric, particularly saris, may be produced using bonded child labor. Bonded child labor occurs when the labor of a child is pledged to an employer in exchange for a payment or loan.[6] Once these children are bonded to employers, they are obliged to remain working for an indefinite amount of time.[7] The caste system renders Dalits and low-caste Hindus especially vulnerable to this practice.[8] Parents who exchange their child's labor as a commodity to an employer are often destitute, with no other options for obtaining credit, and may use their loan to pay for medical treatment, a wedding or funeral, to pay off another loan, or to feed their family. While poverty does contribute to bonded child labor in India, other vital elements include lack of access to credit, inaccessible or discriminatory schools, lack of employment and living wages for adults, a corrupt government, and economic status influenced by the caste system. In addition, bonded children are more likely to live in poverty as adults and bond their own children in order to survive.[9] Children's wages often go directly towards the repayment of loans and workers may not know the status of their debt. Often the debt cannot be repaid during a worker's lifetime and is ultimately passed down to their children.[10] Children work 12- to 14-hour days and are exposed to hazardous conditions,[11] such as dipping their hands into boiling water in order to unravel silk cocoons.[12]

In Uzbekistan, the government controls the country's silk industry and relies on local officials to meet production targets or quotas.[13] Additionally, authorities in Uzbekistan have consistently relied on workers from the public sector for unpaid forced labor unrelated to their public sector work; this includes silk cocoon harvesting and production, among other forms of agricultural work, predominantly among farmers in the south of Uzbekistan and other families living in rural areas.[14] Public sector employees often pay for the costs associated with their (forced) labor, including but not limited to: food, transportation, construction supplies, and tools.[15] Officials may threaten farmers with loss of land, loss of needed agricultural supplies such as fertilizer and equipment, and prosecution.[16] Because farmers must pay for additional labor and specialized equipment to meet quotas, the cost of silkworm cultivation incurred by the farmers

often exceeds their payment from the government.[17] According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the strict government quotas imposed on each farmer and neighborhood councils by regional- and district-level officials are reinforced with threats of fines, the loss of farmers' leased farmland, or physical violence, which may indicate forced labor. Additionally, farmers must sell silk cocoons back to the government, often leading to payments that are too low to offset the cost of cultivating them, and farmers may receive delayed payments or no payment.[18] This may contribute to the use of child labor as farmers rely on low-wage labor. In Uzbekistan, reports indicate that child labor is found in the cultivation of silkworms.[19] Children in Uzbekistan tasked with cultivating silkworms may work from 4 a.m. until midnight, picking mulberry leaves and caring for the silkworms. This can lead to sleep deprivation and interfere with childhood education. In one report, several children and adult laborers described children being taken out of schools to harvest silk cocoons under threat of penalty.[20]

Silk Production and Supply Chain:

Cultivating silkworms is a long process, which takes place during the entire month of May. During this time, the silkworms must be painstakingly cared for and fed every few hours or they may starve. This process requires constant hands-on work; mulberry leaves must be hand-harvested, and the silkworms require constant supervision. Because this part of the cultivation process is so labor intensive for a relatively short amount of time, children are asked to help. The area in which silkworms are held must also be kept at a certain temperature. After the silkworms have eaten mulberry leaves for about 25 days, they enclose themselves in cocoons for two to three hours. When they are placed in hot water, "the silkworm pupae dies and approximately 1,000 yards of silk filament per cocoon are obtained." [21]

Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, Italy, and India all purchase silk, and the demand for silk often exceeds the supply, especially in India where silk is necessary for traditional clothing. The United States has a smaller market for raw silk, but a higher demand for finished silk products. Twenty percent of the global silk supply is produced in India.[22] Seventy percent of the silk produced in Uzbekistan is exported.[23]

How do trafficking and/or child labor in silk production affect me?

Raw silk is made into silk thread, which is then used to make silk fabric. Silk fabric is used in a variety of products including clothing, accessories, upholstery, rugs, bedding, wall hangings, and many other decorative uses.[24] There has also been a rise in silk blend fabrics, such as silk-cotton blends, due to the increasing price of raw silk.[25] Although silk currently represents only 0.2 percent of the total volume of global textiles trade, there are signs that the demand for such luxury goods is increasing.[26]

Examples of what governments, corporations, and others are doing:

In partnership with Karnataka state, the ILO implemented the Self-Help Group program in 2009, which trains the mothers of child laborers in the silk industry. Mothers are taught about saving and managing money, as well as how to avoid worst forms of child labor. Mothers are also taught how to seek microloans to invest in their own businesses, providing them with livelihood opportunities.[27]

In 2015, the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) expressed concern over the increased use of forced labor in Uzbekistan's silk and cotton sectors. In 2016, the CEACR acknowledged that the Uzbekistan Government had taken action to reduce forced child labor in cotton and encouraged the State to continue its efforts in the silk sector.[28]

In 2019, the organization International Justice Mission assisted in helping six adult laborers and a 4-year-old boy escape conditions of forced labor and bondage on a silkworm farm in India.[29]

Uzbek Forum for Human Rights is an NGO based in Berlin dedicated to improving human and labor rights for civil society in Uzbekistan. Their work has brought attention to forced labor conditions in the production of silk and cotton. As a result of their advocacy work, several companies have signed a pledge to stop sourcing Uzbek cotton.[30]

Where can I learn more?

[Read](#) an article by The Washington Times about child labor in Uzbekistan.

[See](#) how an NGO has created self-help groups for child laborers in the silk industry.

[Read](#) about how the economic crisis that followed the spread of COVID-19 has caused child labor to spike in India.

Endnotes:

[1] U.S. Department of Labor. *2018 List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor*. 2018. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/reports/child-labor/list-of-goods/>.

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[3] U.S. Department of State. *Trafficking in Persons Report*. 2020. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-TIP-Report-Complete-062420-FINAL.pdf>

[4] Daily Sabah. Death of 12-year-old Indian farmworker spurs child labor probe. April 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/death-of-12-year-old-indian-farmworker-spurs-child-labor-probe>

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[7] Jacob, Joshua and Misra, Reeva. "In South India, nearly 13,000 bonded laborers identified but still not free." Reuters News. August 4 2016. <http://news.trust.org//item/20160804111304-dicku/>.

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- [13] Uzbek Forum for Human Rights. *Silk Loop for Uzbek Farmers*. September 15, 2015. <https://www.uzbekforum.org/report-silk-loop-for-uzbek-farmers/>
- [14] Solidarity Center & Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights. *Forced Labor of Public Sector Employees in Uzbekistan*. 2019. <https://www.solidaritycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Uzbekistan.Forced-Labor-in-Public-Sector-Report.English.1.2019.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Labor. *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor*. 2018. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/reports/child-labor/list-of-goods-print>.
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[29] IJM. Enslaved to Harvest Silk Thread — Now Free. 2019. <https://www.ijm.org/news/enslaved-to-harvest-silk-now-free>

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