



The Role of Labor Inspections in Identifying Victims of Trafficking in Workplaces

SHIVEKSHA TIWARI

B.A. LL.B. (Hons.) Amity Law School, Lucknow

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the critical role of labor inspections in identifying victims of human trafficking within workplaces, particularly in contexts characterized by labor exploitation. Human trafficking remains a pervasive global problem and is often concealed within industries that rely on the exploitation of vulnerable workers, including migrants, informal laborers, and those employed in precarious conditions. In this context, labor inspectors function as a frontline mechanism for detection, as they are uniquely positioned to identify violations of labor laws and recognize indicators of trafficking such as forced labor, coercion, deception, and abuse. The paper explores the core responsibilities of labor inspectors, the legal and institutional frameworks governing their work, and the practical challenges they encounter in identifying trafficking victims, especially in informal, unregulated, and remote sectors of the economy. It further highlights the importance of inter-agency cooperation, systematic data collection, and effective monitoring mechanisms, as well as collaboration with civil society organizations and workers' associations, in strengthening the overall effectiveness of labor inspections.

Drawing on international conventions, national labor legislation, and selected case studies, the paper illustrates how targeted inspections and strengthened enforcement mechanisms can contribute to the identification and rescue of trafficking victims while simultaneously improving working conditions and labor standards. Finally, the paper examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on labor trafficking and inspection systems, emphasizing the need for adaptive, innovative, and resilient approaches to combating trafficking in the post-pandemic context. Through these insights, the paper underscores the vital role that labor inspections play in promoting decent work, safeguarding workers' rights, and contributing to the global effort to eradicate human trafficking.



1. INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking is a global phenomenon that affects millions of individuals, many of whom are exploited for labor across diverse economic sectors. Victims of trafficking are frequently subjected to coercion, deception, and abuse, and are compelled to work under highly exploitative conditions. Despite sustained international and national efforts to prevent and combat trafficking, it continues to remain a largely hidden crime, particularly within workplaces where exploitation may be disguised as legitimate employment. In this context, labor inspections play a crucial role in identifying victims of trafficking and ensuring their protection. Through routine and targeted inspections, labor inspectors are able to detect irregularities in working conditions, employment documentation, and other indicators that may suggest the presence of trafficking. This paper examines the role of labor inspections in identifying victims of trafficking in workplaces, while highlighting the challenges inspectors face and the strategies required to strengthen this vital mechanism.

1. Human Trafficking and Labor Exploitation: A Global Problem

Human trafficking is defined by the United Nations as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation can take various forms, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, and practices akin to slavery. Labor trafficking, in particular, involves the exploitation of individuals under conditions of coercion, deception, and control. Victims are commonly employed in sectors such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and domestic work, where they are exposed to poor working conditions, excessively long hours, little or no wages, and severe restrictions on their freedom of movement.¹

Labor trafficking is a complex and deeply entrenched issue, often embedded within informal sectors and global supply chains, which makes detection particularly challenging. Victims are frequently isolated—either geographically, socially, or linguistically—and are commonly under the control of traffickers or employers who use threats of deportation, violence, or harm to family members as means of control. Moreover, many victims lack awareness of

¹**United Nations.** (2000). *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (General Assembly resolution 55/25).



their legal rights or access to support mechanisms, further increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.²

2. The Role of Labor Inspections in Combating Trafficking

Labor inspections are a critical tool in combating labor exploitation and human trafficking. Labor inspectors are responsible for ensuring employer compliance with labor laws and regulations, including standards governing wages, working hours, occupational health and safety, and employment contracts. Through systematic workplace monitoring, labor inspectors are able to identify indicators of human trafficking and intervene to protect victims from further exploitation.³

The role of labor inspections in identifying trafficking victims is multifaceted. First, inspectors are in a unique position to observe working conditions firsthand and assess whether workers are being exploited. They can investigate complaints from workers or third parties and ensure that labor laws are being upheld. Second, inspectors can examine employment documentation to ensure that workers are legally employed and that their contracts meet the required standards. In cases where documentation is missing, falsified, or withheld, this can be a strong indicator of trafficking. Third, inspectors can conduct interviews with workers, either individually or in groups, to gather information about their working conditions and treatment⁴

2. Challenges in Identifying Trafficking Victims through Labor Inspections

Despite their crucial role, labor inspectors face several challenges in identifying victims of trafficking in workplaces. These challenges include the hidden nature of trafficking, limited resources, legal and jurisdictional constraints, and the need for specialized training.

²International Labour Organization.(2021). Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage. ILO Publications.

³International Labour Organization.(2020). Labour Inspection and its Role in Combating Human Trafficking. ILO Publications.

⁴United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime(UNODC).(2020). Global Report on Trafficking in Persons. UNODC Publications.



2.1. The Hidden Nature of Trafficking

One of the most significant challenges in identifying trafficking victims is the covert nature of the crime. Traffickers often go to great lengths to conceal their activities, and victims may be kept isolated or fearful of speaking out due to threats or coercion. In many cases, trafficking victims may not self-identify as such, either because they are unaware that they are being exploited or because they fear retribution. This makes it difficult for labor inspectors to detect trafficking through routine inspections.⁵

2.2. Limited Resources and Capacity

Labor inspection agencies are often underfunded and understaffed, which limits their ability to conduct thorough inspections. In many countries, labor inspectors are responsible for overseeing large geographic areas and multiple industries, making it difficult to conduct frequent or in-depth inspections. Additionally, some industries, such as agriculture or domestic work, may be difficult to access or may fall outside the formal regulatory framework, further complicating efforts to identify trafficking.⁶

2.3. Legal and Jurisdictional Constraints

Labor inspectors may also face legal and jurisdictional constraints that limit their ability to intervene in cases of trafficking. For example, in some countries, labor inspectors do not have the authority to investigate cases of human trafficking directly, as this falls under the jurisdiction of law enforcement agencies. This can create barriers to effective collaboration and coordination between labor inspectors and other agencies involved in combating trafficking.⁷

⁵United States Department of State. (2021). Trafficking in Persons Report. Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

⁶International Labour Organization. (2019). Labour Inspection and the Role of Inspectors in the World of Work. ILO Publications.

⁷Verité. (2019). Labor and Human Rights Risk Analysis of Labor Inspectors' Role in Preventing Trafficking. Verité.



2.4. Need for Specialised Training

Identifying trafficking victims requires a deep understanding of the indicators of trafficking and the ability to recognize subtle signs of exploitation. Many labor inspectors lack specialized training in this area, which can limit their ability to detect trafficking. For example, inspectors may not be familiar with the psychological effects of trafficking, which can cause victims to appear fearful or submissive. Additionally, inspectors may not be trained to identify non-verbal cues or to ask the right questions during interviews with workers.⁸

3. Indicators of Trafficking in Workplaces

To effectively identify trafficking victims, labor inspectors must be aware of the various indicators of trafficking that may be present in workplaces. These indicators can be grouped into several categories: working conditions, employment documentation, control and coercion, and worker behaviour.

3.1. Working Conditions

Trafficking victims are often subjected to exploitative working conditions, including long hours, lack of breaks, and unsafe environments. Inspectors should be alert to signs that workers are being forced to work excessive hours without adequate compensation, or that they are being denied basic rights such as access to food, water, or medical care. Additionally, inspectors should look for signs of overcrowded or substandard living conditions, which may indicate that workers are being housed by their employers in exploitative conditions.⁹

3.2. Employment Documentation

Traffickers often manipulate or withhold workers' employment documentation, such as

⁸International Labour Organization.(2020). Training Manual for Labour Inspectors on Trafficking in Persons. ILO Publications.

⁹International Labour Organization.(2021).Indicators of Forced Labour. ILO Publications.



passports, visas, or contracts. Inspectors should carefully examine workers' documentation to ensure that it is valid and that workers are aware of the terms of their employment. In cases where workers do not have access to their documentation, this may be a red flag indicating trafficking. Additionally, inspectors should be on the lookout for falsified or fraudulent documents, which may suggest that workers have been trafficked into the country under false pretences.¹⁰

3.3. Control and Coercion

Trafficking victims are often subjected to control and coercion by their traffickers or employers. This can take the form of physical or verbal threats, debt bondage, or restrictions on freedom of movement. Inspectors should be alert to signs that workers are being controlled or coerced, such as workers who are not allowed to leave the workplace or who are accompanied by someone who speaks for them during inspections. Additionally, inspectors should look for signs of debt bondage, such as workers who are being forced to pay off large debts to their employers or recruiters.¹¹

3.4. Worker Behaviour

Trafficking victims may exhibit certain behaviours that suggest they are being exploited. For example, they may appear fearful, anxious, or withdrawn, or they may be reluctant to speak with inspectors. Victims may also be unfamiliar with their rights or the terms of their employment, which can indicate that they have been deceived or coerced into working under exploitative conditions. Inspectors should be trained to recognize these behavioural indicators and to create a safe environment in which workers feel comfortable sharing information.¹²

4. Strategies for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Labor Inspections

¹⁰International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2019). Counter-Trafficking and Victim Protection. IOM.

¹¹UNODC. (2020). Toolkit to Combat Trafficking in Persons. UNODC Publications.

¹²Bales, K. (2012). *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*. University of California Press.



To improve the identification of trafficking victims in workplaces, several strategies can be implemented to enhance the effectiveness of labor inspections. These strategies include strengthening interagency collaboration, providing specialized training for inspectors, increasing resources for inspection agencies, and implementing targeted inspection approaches.

4.1 Strengthening Inter agency Collaboration

Labor inspectors should work closely with law enforcement agencies, immigration authorities, and social service providers to ensure a coordinated response to trafficking. By sharing information and resources, agencies can improve their ability to identify and protect trafficking victims. For example, labor inspectors can refer suspected cases of trafficking to law enforcement for further investigation, while social service providers can offer support to victims once they are identified.¹³

4.2 Providing Specialized Training for Inspectors

Labor inspectors should receive specialized training in identifying the signs of trafficking and responding to cases of exploitation. This training should cover topics such as the psychological effects of trafficking, the legal framework for protecting trafficking victims, and the use of trauma-informed interviewing techniques. By equipping inspectors with the knowledge and skills needed to identify trafficking, inspection agencies can improve their ability to detect and respond to cases of exploitation.¹⁴

4.3 Increasing Resources for Inspection Agencies

To conduct thorough and effective inspections, labor inspection agencies must be adequately resourced. This includes providing inspectors with the tools and technology needed to conduct inspections, as well as increasing the number of inspectors to ensure that all workplaces can be regularly monitored. Additionally, inspection agencies should be provided

¹³UNODC. (2020). Guidelines for Strengthening Cooperation between Labor Inspectors and Law Enforcement Authorities. UNODC Publications.

¹⁴International Labour Organization. (2020). Specialized Training Program for Labor Inspectors on Human Trafficking. ILO Publications.



with the authority to access all workplaces, including those in the informal sector, where trafficking is often more prevalent.¹⁵

4.4 Implementing Targeted Inspection Approaches

In addition to routine inspections, labor inspection agencies should implement targeted inspection approaches that focus on industries and sectors known to be at high risk for trafficking. These targeted inspections can be based on intelligence gathered from law enforcement, civil society organizations, and workers' unions. By focusing on high-risk industries such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work, inspectors can increase their chances of identifying trafficking victims.¹⁶

5. CASE STUDIES: SUCCESSFUL IDENTIFICATION OF TRAFFICKING VICTIMS THROUGH LABOR INSPECTIONS

Several case studies highlight the success of labor inspections in identifying and protecting victims of trafficking. These examples demonstrate the importance of effective inspections and the positive impact they can have on combating trafficking.

5.1 Case Study: Trafficking in the Agricultural Sector

In a European country, labor inspectors identified a case of trafficking in the agricultural sector after receiving a tip-off from a workers' union. Upon conducting an inspection, inspectors found that workers were being forced to work long hours in unsafe conditions without proper compensation. Many of the workers were undocumented migrants who had been trafficked into the country and were being housed in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. The labor inspectors referred the case to law enforcement, and the workers were rescued and provided with support services.¹⁷

¹⁵U.S. Department of Labor.(2021).The Role of Labor Inspections in Identifying and Combating Human Trafficking. U.S. Department of Labor.

¹⁶ILO&Walk Free Foundation.(2020). Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Policy Implications for Targeted Inspections. ILO Publications.

¹⁷European Commission.(2020).Combating Trafficking in Human Beings:CaseStudiesand Lessons from European Agriculture. European Commission.



5.2 Case Study: Domestic Work and Trafficking

In a Middle Eastern country, labor inspectors identified a case of trafficking in the domestic work sector after conducting a targeted inspection. The inspectors found that a domestic worker had been trafficked from Southeast Asia and was being forced to work without pay. The worker's passport had been confiscated by her employer, and she was not allowed to leave the house. The labor inspectors were able to intervene and refer the case to law enforcement, which arrested the employer and provided the worker with assistance.¹⁸

6. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR LABOR INSPECTIONS AND ANTI-TRAFFICKING EFFORTS

Labor inspections operate within a broader legal framework that governs labor rights, human trafficking, and workers' protection. To understand the role of labor inspections in identifying victims of trafficking, it is important to examine the legal instruments and mechanisms at both national and international levels that provide the basis for these inspections.

6.1. *International Conventions and Protocols*

International conventions and protocols provide a comprehensive legal foundation for combating human trafficking and ensuring decent working conditions. Two key international frameworks are central to the efforts of labor inspectors in identifying trafficking victims: the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and the United Nations (UN) Palermo Protocol.

- **ILO Conventions:** The ILO has adopted several conventions that establish standards for workers' rights and address forced labor, trafficking, and labor exploitation. For instance, ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labor and Convention No. 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labor prohibit all forms of forced or compulsory labor. These conventions mandate governments to take effective measures to prevent forced labor and trafficking and ensure that victims are protected. Additionally, ILO Convention

¹⁸International Labour Organization.(2019).Domestic Workers and Human Trafficking: Case Studies from the Middle East and Southeast Asia. ILO Publications.



No. 81 on Labor Inspection provides guidance on the duties of labor inspectors in safeguarding workers' rights and improving working conditions.¹⁹

- **UN Palermo Protocol:** The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, commonly known as the Palermo Protocol, supplements the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime ²⁰. It outlines key measures to combat trafficking, including prevention, protection of victims, and prosecution of traffickers. The Palermo Protocol emphasizes the importance of identifying trafficking victims, including in workplaces, and provides a framework for cooperation between countries to address cross-border trafficking.²¹

Labor inspectors, in accordance with these international instruments, are tasked with ensuring that workers are free from coercion and exploitation, making inspections a crucial part of efforts to meet the obligations outlined in these conventions.

6.2. National Labor Laws and Anti-Trafficking Legislation

At the national level, countries implement labor laws and anti-trafficking legislation that govern labor inspections and the protection of workers. National laws establish the rights of workers, set out the duties of labor inspectors, and define the legal consequences of trafficking and labor exploitation.

- **Labor Laws:** Labor laws typically regulate employment contracts, minimum wage requirements, working hours, occupational health and safety, and other key aspects of employment. These laws provide the framework within which labor inspections are conducted. In countries with comprehensive labor codes, labor inspectors have the authority to visit workplaces, review employment records, and ensure compliance with labor standards. Where there are violations of these laws, labor inspectors may issue penalties, demand improvements, or refer cases for criminal investigation.²²
- **Anti-Trafficking Legislation:** Many countries have enacted specific anti-trafficking laws that criminalise human trafficking and provide legal protections for victims.

¹⁹International Labour Organization (ILO). (1930). "C029-Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No.29)." International Labour Organization.



These laws often include provisions for the identification, rescue, and rehabilitation of trafficking victims. Labor inspectors play an essential role in the enforcement of these laws by identifying trafficking victims during workplace inspections and referring cases to law enforcement for further investigation and prosecution. In some countries, specialized units within labor inspection departments may focus exclusively on high-risk sectors prone to trafficking.²³

6.3 Limitations of Legal Frameworks

While international conventions and national laws are essential for combating trafficking, there are limitations to the legal frameworks in many countries. For example, in some jurisdictions, labor inspectors may not have the legal authority to investigate informal or unregistered workplaces, where trafficking often occurs. Furthermore, the lack of harmonised legal definitions of trafficking across countries can complicate efforts to address cross-border trafficking and ensure the protection of victims. Addressing these gaps in legal frameworks is critical to strengthening the role of labor inspections in identifying and rescuing trafficking victims.²⁴

7. THE IMPORTANCE OF DATA COLLECTION AND MONITORING

To enhance the effectiveness of labor inspections in identifying trafficking victims, robust data collection and monitoring systems are crucial. These systems allow labor inspection agencies and policymakers to track trends in trafficking and labor exploitation, assess the impact of inspections, and develop evidence-based strategies to address the issue.

7.1. Data on Inspections and Trafficking

Labor inspection agencies should collect detailed data on inspections conducted, including information on the industries inspected, the number of workers involved, and any violations identified. When trafficking victims are identified, it is essential to record the circumstances of their exploitation, such as the type of work they were forced to perform, their nationality or immigration status, and any indicators of coercion or control. This data can provide valuable



insights into which sectors are most vulnerable to trafficking and inform future inspection efforts.²⁵

Additionally, data on the outcomes of inspections—such as the number of cases referred to law enforcement, the number of victims rescued, and the legal actions taken against traffickers—can help measure the success of labor inspections in combating trafficking. In many countries, this data is compiled into national reports that are used to evaluate the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts and guide policy decisions.²⁶

7.2. Use of Technology in Labor Inspections

Advances in technology can significantly improve the ability of labor inspectors to collect and analyse data related to trafficking and labor exploitation. For example, digital inspection tools can streamline the process of recording information during workplace visits and allow inspectors to quickly flag potential indicators of trafficking. Geographic information systems (GIS) can help inspectors map high-risk areas for trafficking, such as remote agricultural regions or urban centers with large migrant populations.²⁷

Furthermore, data-sharing platforms that facilitate communication between labor inspection agencies, law enforcement, and social service providers can enhance coordination and ensure that trafficking cases are handled efficiently. These platforms can also be used to track the provision of support services to victims and monitor their recovery and reintegration.

7.3. Monitoring and Evaluation of Anti-Trafficking Strategies

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are essential components of any anti-trafficking strategy. Labor inspection agencies should regularly review the effectiveness of their inspection programs and make adjustments based on the findings. For example, if data reveals that certain industries or regions are particularly prone to trafficking, inspection efforts can be intensified in those areas. Additionally, M&E can help identify gaps in labor laws or enforcement practices that may be hindering the identification of trafficking victims.²⁸

M&E processes should also include feedback from victims and survivors of trafficking to ensure that their needs are being met and that inspection agencies are responding effectively



to their concerns. By incorporating survivor voices into the evaluation process, labor inspection agencies can improve their practices and better protect vulnerable workers.²⁹

8. THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND WORKERS' ORGANIZATIONS

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and workers' organizations play an essential role in supporting labor inspections and identifying trafficking victims in workplaces. These organizations are often the first point of contact for workers experiencing exploitation and can provide crucial information to labor inspectors about potential trafficking cases.

8.1. Collaboration with Civil Society Organizations

CSOs, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advocacy groups, and shelters for trafficking survivors, are key allies in the fight against labor trafficking. They often work directly with vulnerable populations, such as migrant workers or informal sector labourers, and can alert labor inspectors to potential cases of trafficking. Many CSOs also provide legal assistance, psychological support, and shelter to trafficking victims once they are identified, ensuring that victims receive comprehensive care.³⁰

Labor inspection agencies can benefit from establishing formal partnerships with CSOs to improve the identification and protection of trafficking victims. For example, CSOs can help labor inspectors conduct outreach in remote or informal sectors where trafficking is prevalent. They can also provide inspectors with training on trauma-informed approaches to interviewing workers and detecting the subtle signs of trafficking.³¹

8.2. The Role of Trade Unions and Workers' Organizations

Trade unions and workers' organizations are another critical resource in identifying and addressing trafficking. These organizations advocate for workers' rights and monitor working conditions within industries where exploitation may occur. Through collective bargaining, unions can negotiate better working conditions and ensure that employers are complying with labor laws, reducing the risk of trafficking.³²



Unions and workers' organizations also serve as a voice for workers, particularly in cases where individual workers may be too afraid to report abuse. By raising awareness about workers' rights and providing a platform for workers to share their experiences, unions can help identify instances of trafficking that might otherwise go unnoticed. Labor inspectors can work in partnership with unions to gather information on labor conditions and target inspections in high-risk sectors.³³

9. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LABOR TRAFFICKING AND INSPECTIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on labor trafficking and the ability of labor inspectors to identify and protect victims. The economic downturn caused by the pandemic has exacerbated vulnerabilities for workers, particularly migrant workers and those in informal sectors, making them more susceptible to trafficking and exploitation.

9.1 Increased Vulnerability to Trafficking

As businesses closed or scaled back operations due to the pandemic, many workers faced job losses and reduced incomes. Migrant workers, in particular, were disproportionately affected, as they often lack access to social safety nets and may have been stranded in foreign countries without legal status or financial support. This increased vulnerability created opportunities for traffickers to exploit desperate workers by offering them fraudulent job opportunities or coercing them into forced labor.³⁴

Additionally, the shift to remote work and the closure of borders during the pandemic made it more difficult for labor inspectors to access workplaces and conduct in-person inspections. As a result, trafficking may have gone undetected in some sectors, particularly those that moved to more informal or underground operations during lockdowns.³⁵

9.2 Adapting Labor Inspections During the Pandemic

In response to the challenges posed by the pandemic, many labor inspection agencies adapted their practices to continue identifying and protecting trafficking victims. For example, some agencies implemented virtual inspections or relied on digital platforms to collect information



from workers remotely. In sectors where in-person inspections were still possible, labor inspectors took precautions to ensure the safety of both workers and inspectors by following public health guidelines.³⁶

Labor inspectors also worked more closely with civil society organizations and unions during the pandemic to gather information on potential trafficking cases. By leveraging the networks of these organizations, inspectors were able to continue monitoring high-risk sectors and intervening in cases of exploitation.³⁷

10 CONCLUSION

Labor inspections are a vital tool in the fight against human trafficking, particularly in the context of labor exploitation. By conducting routine and targeted inspections, labor inspectors can identify victims of trafficking and ensure that they are protected from further harm. However, to be effective, labor inspection agencies must be adequately resourced and equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to detect trafficking. Additionally, strong interagency collaboration is essential to ensure that trafficking cases are handled appropriately and that victims receive the support they need. Through these efforts, labor inspections can play a critical role in combating human trafficking and promoting decent work for all.

Labor inspections are an essential mechanism for identifying victims of human trafficking in workplaces and ensuring that their rights are protected. Despite the challenges associated with detecting trafficking, particularly in hidden and informal sectors, labor inspectors have a unique ability to intervene directly in workplaces, assess working conditions, and identify indicators of trafficking. Through effective collaboration with law enforcement, civil society, and workers' organizations, labor inspectors can play a key role in rescuing trafficking victims and bringing traffickers to justice.

To enhance the effectiveness of labor inspections, governments must invest in strengthening inspection agencies, providing inspectors with specialized training, and ensuring that inspections are supported by robust data collection and monitoring systems. Additionally, labor inspection agencies must remain adaptable in the face of emerging challenges, such as those posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, to continue protecting vulnerable workers.

Ultimately, labor inspections are a critical component of a comprehensive approach to combating human trafficking. By ensuring that workplaces are free from exploitation and that workers' rights are upheld, labor inspectors contribute to the global effort to eradicate trafficking and promote decent work for all.



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