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Contemporary Trends and Features of the Manifestation of Slavery in the Context of Globalization and Digitalization

Komila Rashidova,[1*]

[1]University of Public Safety of the Republic of Uzbekistan

* kamilarash27@gmail.com

DECLARATIONS

Ethical Statement:

This research was conducted in accordance with the COPE Core Practices and principles of academic integrity, transparency, and responsible research.

Data Availability Statement:

Data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, where applicable.

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Abstract

Contemporary slavery persists despite its universal legal prohibition, and its forms are changing under the pressure of globalization and digitalization. This article examines how these processes transform the recruitment, control, and organization of exploitation, and how international law classifies the resulting practices. Using qualitative doctrinal and document analysis of treaties, case law, official reports, and scholarship, the study distinguishes slavery in the strict legal sense from servitude, forced labour, debt bondage, trafficking in persons, and forced criminality. The results identify six interrelated trends: concealment of ownership-like control behind formal consent, transnational and supply chain exploitation, digital recruitment and control, remote exploitation, persistent structural vulnerability, and the growing need for precise classification. The article concludes that technology changes the means of exploitation without creating a new legal category, and it recommends precise classification, victim non-punishment, platform accountability, and stronger cooperation on electronic evidence.

Keywords: Contemporary Slavery, Modern Slavery, Human Trafficking, Forced Labour, Globalization, Digitalization, Debt bondage

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I. INTRODUCTION

Slavery is prohibited by every major instrument of international human rights law, and no State today openly claims a legal right of ownership over a human being. Yet the practices that the prohibition was meant to eradicate have not disappeared from economic and social life. They have adapted to a world of formally free labour markets, integrated supply chains, large-scale labour migration, and communication networks that reach almost every household. According to the joint global estimates of the International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), about 50 million people were living in situations of modern slavery in 2021, of whom roughly 28 million were in forced labour and 22 million in forced marriage. It is a global phenomenon connected with inequality, vulnerability, and the way in which labour and social relations are organized. At the same time, the figures are modelled estimates and must not be read as a precise count of cases of slavery in the strict legal sense.

Contemporary slavery differs from the historical models in which the law openly treated a person as property that could be bought, sold, and inherited. Today exploitation is usually exercised through economic coercion, abuse of a vulnerable position, restrictions on movement, debt dependence, and psychological pressure. A worker may consent to a job or to a journey abroad and only later discover that the promised conditions do not exist, that wages are withheld, that identity documents have been taken, or that leaving is practically impossible. Economic integration, cheaper transport, and cross-border migration enlarge opportunities for mobility, but they also allow exploitation chains to stretch across several jurisdictions. Digital communication, in turn, widens access to information and employment, while giving recruiters and exploiters new ways to deceive, monitor, and coerce people at a distance. The central problem of this article is therefore how these two processes change the manifestation of slavery without dissolving the legal criteria by which slavery and related forms of exploitation must be identified.

This problem has both a practical and a conceptual side. Conceptually, the expression "modern slavery" is used in public debate for a wide range of abuses, from forced labour and trafficking to forced marriage and abusive employment practices. Such a broad use may be helpful in sociology and advocacy, yet it creates difficulty in legal analysis because each category has its own elements, its own treaty source, and its own consequences for criminal liability and victim protection. If every serious labour violation is described as slavery, the legal concept loses precision and the principle of legal certainty is weakened. If, on the other hand, the legal definition is read too narrowly, serious forms of control that do not look like ownership at first glance may escape an effective response. The challenge is to keep the legal categories clear while recognizing that their factual settings are changing quickly.

The legal understanding of slavery has been shaped decisively by the definition in Article 1(1) of the Slavery Convention of 1926, under which slavery is the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised. Allain (2012) and the contributors to the volume that he edited trace how this definition was

drafted for a world of legal ownership but has been applied to de facto situations of control. In a further monograph, Allain (2013) examines the relationship between slavery, the slave trade, and human trafficking in international law and argues that these categories should not be merged. The Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines on the Legal Parameters of Slavery (2012) offer a practical restatement, explaining that the powers attaching to the right of ownership should be understood as forms of control that amount to possession, and listing the factors that indicate such control. Allain and Bales (2012) add that a precise legal definition is essential if empirical research on slavery is to be comparable and credible. Together these works establish that the legal concept of slavery is narrower than the popular idea of modern slavery, but also flexible enough to capture ownership-like control.

A second body of literature approaches slavery from sociology and political economy. Bales (2012) argues that the new slavery in the global economy is driven by the pursuit of profit and by the vulnerability of people who are poor, uneducated, or excluded, and that it is characterized by violent control rather than by legal ownership. Crane (2013) analyses modern slavery as a management practice and identifies the conditions and capabilities that allow organizations to exploit people. LeBaron (2020) shows that the labour governance tools used by companies and States, including audits and certification, have often failed to prevent exploitation in global supply chains. New (2015) questions whether corporate social responsibility can address slavery in supply chains without deeper changes in purchasing and contracting practices. These studies explain why exploitation persists, yet they usually treat the term slavery as a descriptive label rather than as a legal category.

A third group of works concerns trafficking in persons and its relationship with slavery. Gallagher (2010) offers the leading treatment of the international law of human trafficking, covering the Palermo Protocol, the obligations of States, and the protection of victims. Chuang (2014) warns of "exploitation creep", meaning the gradual expansion of the trafficking concept to cover a broad range of labour and migration problems, and argues that this expansion risks weakening the legal framework. Questions of measurement are examined by Landman (2020), who discusses the use of law, human rights standards, and new forms of data in measuring modern slavery, and by Gallagher (2017), who criticizes the methodology of the Global Slavery Index. These contributions are directly relevant to this study because estimates of prevalence depend on the legal and statistical definitions that are used. They also remind the reader that the categories used for counting are not always identical with the categories used by courts.

Russian-language scholarship has also contributed to the debate. Sakaeva (2017) analyses the way in which international judicial bodies have understood slavery and human trafficking and stresses the need to keep the two concepts coordinated but separate. Lebedinets (2016) examines the genesis of the international legal regulation of the fight against slavery, the slave trade, and other forms of trafficking, which allows contemporary practices to be read against the historical development of the relevant norms. Their approach supports the position taken in this article that new technological circumstances should lead to more careful identification of the elements of each offence rather than to a blurring of cate-

gories. The case law of international and regional courts offers a further and indispensable source, since it translates abstract definitions into factors that can be applied to facts. Decisions such as Kunarac, Siliadin, Rantsev, Chowdury, and the Brazilian ranch workers case of the Inter-American Court show how the definition has been applied to sexual enslavement, domestic servitude, trafficking, agricultural forced labour, and debt-based recruitment.

The digital dimension has attracted a separate stream of research and policy analysis. Latonero (2011) was among the first to document the role of social networking sites and online classified advertisements in trafficking. Mendel and Sharapov (2016) criticize policy debates on trafficking and online networks for relying on assumptions rather than on evidence. Sarkar (2015) studies the use of technology in trafficking networks and sexual exploitation in several countries, and Raets and Janssens (2021) explore how digital communication technologies are used in the Belgian trafficking business. Institutional reports from Europol (2020), the Council of Europe Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2022), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, examine the online and technology-facilitated dimension of trafficking and the tools available to counter it. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021) devoted a thematic part of its 2020 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons to the use of the internet by traffickers, and its 2024 report added an analysis of trafficking for forced criminality, including online scams.

Despite this rich literature, several gaps remain. First, the scholarship on legal definitions of slavery and the scholarship on digital trafficking have developed largely in parallel, so that few studies ask how technology-enabled practices should be classified under the 1926 definition, the 1956 Supplementary Convention, the forced labour conventions, and the Palermo Protocol. Second, the digital literature concentrates on trafficking for sexual exploitation and on online advertising, and it gives less attention to the control of victims through digital means, to remote exploitation, and to forced criminality. Third, the broader debate on globalization and slavery frequently treats globalization as a cause of exploitation, whereas the evidence supports a more careful view in which global integration is an environment that can intensify existing vulnerabilities or help to reduce them. In addition, few studies connect the conceptual analysis with the regulatory instruments that have recently been adopted or revised, such as the European Union rules on trafficking and forced labour products and the new United Nations Convention against Cybercrime. This article seeks to fill these gaps by combining conceptual, empirical, and regulatory analysis in a single framework.

The aim of this study is to analyse the contemporary trends and features of the manifestation of slavery in the context of globalization and digitalization, and to determine how these trends relate to the legal criteria of slavery and related forms of exploitation in international law. It therefore treats globalization and digitalization as factors that change the factual conditions of exploitation rather than as sources of new legal categories. The analysis is limited to practices that fall, or may fall, within the prohibitions of slavery, servitude, forced labour, debt bondage, and trafficking in persons. The geographical scope is global,

with attention to regional systems in Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Southeast Asia, and to the legislation of Uzbekistan as a national illustration. The temporal scope covers instruments and sources available up to October 2026. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

To clarify the legal definition of slavery and to distinguish it from servitude, forced labour, debt bondage, trafficking in persons, forced marriage, and forced criminality.

To describe the scale of contemporary slavery and the limits of the available estimates.

To identify and systematize the main trends in the manifestation of slavery under globalization and digitalization.

To assess how current international, regional, and national legal instruments respond to these trends, and to identify gaps.

To formulate recommendations on legal classification, regulation, and international cooperation.

The study is guided by one principal research question and three sub-questions. The principal question is: How do globalization and digitalization change the manifestation of contemporary slavery, and to what extent do these changes require adjustment of the legal criteria used to identify slavery and related forms of exploitation? The first sub-question asks which elements of the legal definition of slavery remain decisive when exploitation is organized across borders and through digital means. The second asks which features of the recruitment, control, and organization of exploitation are specifically affected by digital technologies. The third asks whether existing legal instruments provide an adequate basis for responding to these features, and where reform or interpretation is needed. The working hypothesis is that technology and global economic integration alter the means and geography of exploitation but do not alter the legal test of slavery, so that the main need is for precise classification and better implementation rather than for a new legal category.

The study is significant for several reasons. For legal scholarship, it clarifies the relationship between several related legal categories at a time when public discourse tends to merge them. For practitioners, including prosecutors, judges, labour inspectors, and lawyers representing victims, it systematizes the indicators that are relevant when exploitation has a digital component. For policymakers, it identifies regulatory gaps and offers recommendations on victim protection, platform accountability, supply chain due diligence, and international cooperation in obtaining electronic evidence. The article is also relevant to Uzbekistan and neighbouring States, whose legal systems are adapting to digital transformation and whose citizens participate in international labour migration.

II. METHODS & METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research design based on doctrinal legal analysis and document analysis. Doctrinal analysis was used to identify, interpret, and systematize the rules

of international law that define and prohibit slavery and related practices, including their interpretation by courts and expert bodies. Document analysis was used to examine official reports, statistical estimates, and policy documents that describe contemporary manifestations of exploitation and State responses. The study is not an empirical field investigation, and no primary data were collected from human participants. The design is therefore suitable for answering questions about how legal categories apply to changing factual circumstances, but it cannot measure the prevalence of exploitation independently. Where numerical data are used, they are reported as published by the originating organizations and are interpreted with attention to their methodology.

Four categories of sources were examined. The first category consists of binding and authoritative international instruments, including the Slavery Convention of 1926, the Supplementary Convention of 1956, ILO Conventions 29, 105, and 182 and the 2014 Protocol to Convention 29, the Palermo Protocol of 2000, and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ILO, 1930, 1957, 1999, 2014b; Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998; Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, 1956; United Nations, 2000). The second category consists of regional and national instruments and decisions, including European Union legislation, regional human rights case law, and the legislation of selected States, among them Uzbekistan. The third category consists of reports and estimates of international organizations, namely the ILO, Walk Free, the IOM, UNODC, OHCHR, the Council of Europe, Europol, and the OSCE. The fourth category consists of peer-reviewed academic books and articles on slavery, trafficking, supply chains, and technology-facilitated exploitation. Sources were included if they were officially published or issued by a recognized academic publisher, if they were verifiable through a stable reference, and if they addressed the legal definition, scale, or contemporary forms of exploitation. Only instruments that were in force or had been formally adopted at the time of writing were used, and the status of each instrument, including its entry into force or transposition deadline, was checked against an official source or a reliable secondary report.

The analysis was structured around an analytical framework with three dimensions. The first dimension is the legal test: whether the facts disclose the exercise of powers attaching to the right of ownership, a situation of servitude or forced labour, a debt-based relationship, or a trafficking process composed of an act, a means, and a purpose of exploitation. The second dimension is the factual indicator, such as control of movement, control of the physical environment, psychological control, measures preventing escape, use of force or threats, duration, assertion of exclusivity, cruel treatment and abuse, control of sexuality, and forced labour, which were identified by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Kunarac case (Prosecutor v. Kunarac et al., 2001). The third dimension is the contextual driver, meaning the economic, social, or technological factors that shape how exploitation occurs, such as migration, supply chain structure, digital communication, and structural vulnerability. This procedure allowed the study to separate the legal significance

of a trend from its descriptive significance. The resulting trends were then compared with the regulatory responses described in the second and third categories of sources.

Because the study is doctrinal, the notion of sample size applies only to the corpus of documents that was analysed. The corpus comprised more than thirty international, regional, and judicial instruments, about a dozen national legislative acts, and more than thirty official reports and scholarly publications. Data were collected through systematic reading of the primary texts and through searches of official repositories and academic databases using keyword combinations such as slavery, servitude, forced labour, debt bondage, trafficking, digital, online, and platform. No inferential statistical analysis was undertaken, since the data are legal texts and published estimates rather than survey responses collected by the author. Published statistics were used descriptively, and their methodological limitations were noted, in particular the fact that the global estimates of the ILO, Walk Free, and the IOM are produced by modelling and not by a census of cases. Each interpretive claim was cross-checked against at least one primary source and one secondary source wherever possible.

III. RESULTS& FINDINGS

A. The Legal Concept of Slavery

The first result concerns the legal boundaries of the central concept. Article 1(1) of the Slavery Convention of 1926 defines slavery as the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia held in Kunarac that the definition reflects customary international law and that the decisive question is whether the accused exercised powers attaching to ownership, which are assessed through factors such as control of movement, psychological control, and measures taken to prevent escape (Prosecutor v. Kunarac et al., 2001, 2002). The Rome Statute adopts a similar approach in defining enslavement as the exercise of any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership, and it adds that this includes the exercise of such power in the course of trafficking in persons, in particular women and children. The Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines (2012) confirm that the definition applies to de facto control and that ownership should be understood in terms of control tantamount to possession. Slavery in the strict legal sense is thus a demanding category, because it requires control of a degree that amounts to ownership, which is more than severe exploitation or an abusive employment relationship.

Neighbouring categories are legally distinct. The Supplementary Convention of 1956 requires States to abolish debt bondage, serfdom, servile forms of marriage, and certain forms of child exploitation, which it treats as institutions and practices similar to slavery. Forced labour is defined in ILO Convention 29 as all work or service that is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the person has not offered himself voluntarily. The 2014 Protocol to that Convention reaffirms the obligation to suppress forced labour and requires effective measures of prevention, protection, and remedy, and ILO

Recommendation 203 provides supplementary guidance. Servitude, which is prohibited together with slavery in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is understood in the case law of the European Court of Human Rights as an especially serious form of forced labour that involves a feeling that one's condition is permanent and cannot be changed (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966; Siliadin v. France, 2005; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). These categories overlap in practice, but they do not coincide, and the choice among them determines which treaty obligations and criminal provisions apply.

Trafficking in persons is a different type of legal concept because it describes a process rather than a status. Article 3 of the Palermo Protocol defines it as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons, by means such as threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits, for the purpose of exploitation. Consent of the victim is irrelevant where any of the listed means has been used, and in the case of children no means need be shown at all. The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings and Directive 2011/36/EU follow the same structure, and the Directive expressly includes the exploitation of criminal activities among the forms of exploitation. Directive (EU) 2024/1712 further extends the notion of exploitation to forced marriage, illegal adoption, and the exploitation of surrogacy. Trafficking and slavery are therefore connected, because slavery is one of the purposes of trafficking and enslavement can be committed in the course of trafficking, but a trafficking offence can be complete without any proof that ownership-like powers were exercised.

The case law shows how these concepts are applied to concrete facts. In Siliadin v. France, the European Court of Human Rights found that a minor held as a domestic worker was subjected to forced labour and servitude but not to slavery in the strict sense, because those exploiting her had not exercised a genuine right of legal ownership, and it held that France had failed to provide effective criminal-law protection (Siliadin v. France, 2005). In Rantsev v. Cyprus and Russia, the Court held that trafficking in human beings falls within Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights and that States have positive obligations to investigate, to protect potential victims, and to cooperate across borders. In Chowdury and Others v. Greece, migrant workers on a strawberry farm, whose wages were withheld, who lived in poor conditions, and who worked under armed supervision, were held to be victims of forced labour and trafficking (Chowdury and Others v. Greece, 2017). In S.M. v. Croatia, the Grand Chamber confirmed that trafficking and the exploitation of prostitution fall within Article 4 whether or not a cross-border element is present (S.M. v. Croatia, 2020). Outside Europe, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in the Hacienda Brasil Verde Workers case applied the 1926 definition to workers recruited through deceit and held in debt-based conditions on a cattle ranch, and the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice found Niger responsible for failing to protect a woman who had been held as a slave (Hacienda Brasil Verde Workers v. Brazil, 2016; Hadijatou Mani Koraou v. Republic of Niger, 2008).

The results of the doctrinal analysis can be summarized in a comparative table of legal categories (Table 1). The table shows that each category has a different legal nature, namely status, practice, work relationship, or process. It also shows that the key distinguishing feature of slavery is the degree of control, whereas the key feature of forced labour is the absence of voluntariness under menace of penalty, and the key feature of trafficking is the combination of act, means, and purpose. The term modern slavery does not appear as a separate offence in the principal international treaties. It functions as an umbrella label used in research and policy, and in some national statutes, to cover forced labour, servitude, slavery, trafficking, and, in the ILO global estimates, also forced marriage. This distinction between the legal definition of slavery and the broader research concept of modern slavery is one of the central difficulties of the field (Allain & Bales, 2012). In what follows, the term slavery is used in the strict legal sense, the term modern slavery as an umbrella expression, and the more specific terms wherever the legal elements of a particular category are discussed.

Table-1. Legal Categories and Their Distinguishing Features

Category	Principal source	Distinguishing feature
Slavery	1926 Slavery Convention, Art. 1(1); Rome Statute, Art. 7	Exercise of powers attaching to the right of ownership (control tantamount to possession)
Servitude	UDHR, Art. 4; ICCPR, Art. 8; ECHR, Art. 4	Coerced service combined with a sense that the condition is permanent
Forced labour	ILO Convention 29, Art. 2(1); 2014 Protocol	Work exacted under menace of penalty and not offered voluntarily
Debt bondage	1956 Supplementary Convention, Art. 1(a)	Personal services pledged against a debt that is not liquidated or not limited and defined
Trafficking in persons	Palermo Protocol, Art. 3	Act, means, and purpose of exploitation (a process, not a status)
Forced criminality	Directive 2011/36/EU, Art. 2(3)	Exploitation of criminal activities as a purpose of trafficking

B. Scale and Measurement of Contemporary Slavery

The second result concerns the scale of contemporary slavery and the limits of its measurement. The 2022 global estimates indicate that 49.6 million people were in modern slavery on any given day in 2021, including 27.6 million in forced labour and 22 million in forced marriage, which represents an increase compared with the estimates for 2016. Most forced labour, about 86 percent, was imposed by private actors, while a smaller part was imposed by State authorities, and a substantial number of those in forced labour were exploited in commercial sexual exploitation or in sectors such as services, manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and domestic work. The estimates also show that migrant workers are significantly more likely to be in forced labour than non-migrant workers. The ILO has

further estimated that forced labour generates about 236 billion US dollars in illegal profits per year, which indicates the strength of the economic incentives behind exploitation. These numbers support the conclusion that exploitation remains a structural feature of the global economy and not an isolated problem.

The measurement of slavery is, however, subject to important qualifications. The ILO, Walk Free, and IOM figures are produced through statistical modelling that draws on national surveys and on data about victims assisted by organizations, and they use the umbrella concept of modern slavery, which is wider than the legal definition of slavery. For that reason, the figure of about 50 million cannot be read as the number of persons held in slavery within the meaning of the 1926 Convention. Gallagher (2017) has criticized the methodology of the Global Slavery Index, in particular its reliance on extrapolation, while Landman (2020) argues that measurement should be anchored in legal definitions and complemented by new sources of data. Data on detected victims are a different type of evidence, since UNODC reports that the number of victims detected in 2022 was 25 percent higher than in 2019, which shows the recovery of detection after the pandemic years but does not identify how many cases remain unseen. In the same report, forced labour accounted for 42 percent of detected victims and exceeded sexual exploitation, which accounted for 36 percent, for the first time, while forced criminality accounted for 8 percent.

C. Trend-1: Transformation of the External Forms of Exploitation

The first trend is the transformation of the external forms of exploitation while its essential features are preserved. Historical slavery was characterized by open appropriation, sale, and hereditary status. Contemporary exploitation more often exists in conditions of formal contractual freedom and apparent legality of labour relations. A person may voluntarily accept a job or agree to move to another State and later face deception about the nature of the work, withholding of wages, confiscation of documents, threats, debt bondage, or the practical impossibility of ending the relationship. The legal consequence is that initial consent to work or to travel does not amount to consent to subsequent coercion, a principle that is reflected in the Palermo Protocol rule on the irrelevance of consent where coercive or deceptive means are used. International practice treats such features as indicators that a relationship may be one of forced labour or slavery, and the factors applied in Kunarac, including measures to prevent escape and psychological control, serve this purpose (Prosecutor v. Kunarac et al., 2001).

It is equally important to state what this trend does not mean. Not every breach of an employment contract, delay in payment of wages, or unfavourable working condition amounts to slavery, servitude, or forced labour. The legal qualification depends on establishing the elements prescribed by the applicable rule, whether control tantamount to possession, the menace of a penalty combined with absence of voluntariness, or the elements of trafficking. The case law of the European Court of Human Rights illustrates this threshold, since the Court has distinguished between situations of mere exploitation, forced labour, servitude, and slavery on the basis of the degree of coercion and control (Chowdury and

Others v. Greece, 2017; Siliadin v. France, 2005). The analysis of the actual position of the person, including autonomy, the nature of the control exercised, and the real possibility of refusing the imposed conditions, is therefore decisive. This approach avoids an unjustified expansion of the concept while still capturing cases in which formal voluntariness hides real dependence.

D. Trend-2: Transnational Processes, Migration, and Supply Chains

The second trend is the growing connection between slavery and transnational economic processes. Globalization has produced international production chains, multinational enterprises, subcontracting, and the employment of migrant workers in many sectors. In such arrangements the direct employer, the labour recruitment intermediary, the transport company, and the final beneficiary of the economic gain may be located in different States. Crane (2013) explains that certain industries and organizational forms create conditions in which exploitation can arise and persist, for example where there is a high demand for cheap labour, weak oversight, and a vulnerable workforce. LeBaron (2020) adds that private governance mechanisms such as audits have a limited capacity to detect abuses that workers cannot safely report, and New (2015) argues that the purchasing practices of lead firms may themselves contribute to risk. These findings explain why recent regulation has shifted attention from the individual exploiter to the conduct of companies at the top of supply chains.

The sectors in which the risk of forced labour is most frequently reported include agriculture, construction, domestic work, hospitality, manufacturing, and various services. Risk increases when work is informal, when the worker depends on the employer for accommodation or migration status, when the worker does not speak the language of the host State, or when reliable information about rights is unavailable. International migration is closely related to this process, but migration is not in itself a sign of slavery. People move in search of work, safety, and better living conditions, and most migrant workers are not victims of exploitation. The risk arises where migrants depend on intermediaries, must repay the costs of travel and documentation, or are told of obligations that differ substantially from those agreed before departure. The ILO estimates that migrant workers are significantly more likely than other workers to be in forced labour, which confirms that migration status is a major factor of vulnerability.

Debt bondage deserves particular attention as a form of dependence that retains its significance in current conditions. It arises when a person must work to repay a debt whose size cannot be determined or whose repayment does not in practice lead to release from the obligation. Under the 1956 Supplementary Convention, debt bondage is an institution or practice similar to slavery that States must abolish. The 2014 ILO Protocol requires measures to protect workers, particularly migrants, from abusive and fraudulent practices during recruitment and placement, and it supports due diligence by both the public and private sectors to prevent forced labour. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights treated debt-based recruitment on a Brazilian ranch as an element of a situation of slavery (Haci-

enda Brasil Verde Workers v. Brazil, 2016). Debt bondage thus links the economic and the legal analyses, since a debt relationship is lawful in itself and becomes a legal concern only where it operates as an instrument of control.

The structure of supply chains raises the question of corporate responsibility, which has been addressed by a growing body of regulation. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights establish that business enterprises should carry out human rights due diligence to identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for adverse human rights impacts. The United Kingdom Modern Slavery Act 2015 requires commercial organizations above a turnover threshold to publish annual statements on the steps taken to prevent slavery and trafficking in their business and supply chains, and the Australian Modern Slavery Act 2018 and the Canadian Fighting Against Forced Labour and Child Labour in Supply Chains Act contain reporting requirements of a similar kind (Fighting Against Forced Labour and Child Labour in Supply Chains Act, 2023; Modern Slavery Act 2015; Modern Slavery Act 2018). France adopted a duty of vigilance law in 2017, Germany adopted a supply chain due diligence act in 2021, and the European Union adopted Directive (EU) 2024/1760 on corporate sustainability due diligence, although the scope and timetable of that Directive were revised in 2026 under the Omnibus I simplification package, with transposition postponed to 2028 and application to 2029 for the companies that remain within the reduced scope. As regards products, Section 307 of the United States Tariff Act of 1930 prohibits the import of goods made with forced labour, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act of 2021 introduced a rebuttable presumption for goods linked to a specific region, and Regulation (EU) 2024/3015 will prohibit products made with forced labour on the Union market from 14 December 2027. These instruments show a shift from voluntary corporate responsibility to legal obligations, but their effectiveness depends on enforcement, on access to information about suppliers, and on the participation of affected workers (LeBaron, 2020; New, 2015).

E. Trend-3 and 4: Digitalization and the Changing Means of Exploitation

The third and most distinctive trend is the role of digitalization in changing communication, recruitment, targeting, control, and the organization of exploitation. The internet, social networks, messaging applications, electronic payment tools, and digital platforms have greatly widened remote interaction among people. The same tools can be used to publish fictitious vacancies, establish relationships of trust with potential victims, transmit threats, and coordinate the actions of participants in exploitation. The research literature supports the view that technology is used at several stages of trafficking, from recruitment and advertising to control and the movement of money. At the same time, empirical studies caution that the extent of online activity in trafficking is not uniform, that many cases combine online and offline elements, and that policy often rests on assumptions that need verification (Mendel & Sharapov, 2016; Raets & Janssens, 2021). In the legal analysis, digitalization is treated as a change in the means and circumstances of exploitation and not as a new legal category of slavery.

1. Exploitation Online Recruitment and Fraudulent Offers

One of the most visible manifestations of digitalization is the transfer of recruitment into the online environment. Potential victims may be offered well-paid work abroad in services, modelling, entertainment, hospitality, or remote activity. Later it becomes clear that the terms of employment differ from those promised, that documents are held by an intermediary, and that attempts to stop working are met with threats, debts, or other pressure. UNODC (2021) reported that digital platforms are used to place advertisements, find potential victims, establish contact, and organize exploitation, and that digital communication can in some cases enable exploitation without the physical movement of the victim. Latonero (2011) and Sarkar (2015) reached similar conclusions in studies of social networking sites and of the use of technology in trafficking networks. From the legal point of view, online deception about the nature of work is relevant as a means under the Palermo Protocol, and it may also be relevant to show that consent was vitiated, but it does not by itself establish slavery.

2. Targeting, Anonymity, and Distributed Organization

Digital environments allow recruiters to address individuals directly. Publicly available information about professional interests, financial difficulties, family circumstances, and life events can be used to design personalized offers. In contrast with traditional recruitment, online communication allows contact to be maintained at a distance, several false profiles to be created, and emotional dependence to be built gradually. Anonymity also plays a role, since fictitious names, multiple accounts, encrypted channels, and cross-border services make it harder to identify organizers and to reconstruct the sequence of events. Anonymity is nevertheless an ordinary feature of the communication environment and is not unlawful in itself, so legal analysis must distinguish technological possibilities from their specific unlawful use for deception, threats, and coercion. The distributed character of online organization, in which first contact, recruitment, payment, and management of the victim may take place in different jurisdictions, makes it difficult to establish links among organizers, intermediaries, and direct perpetrators and to determine the place of commission of particular acts.

3. Digital Forms of Control and Coercion

Digitalization also changes the character of control over victims. Traditional exploitation often involves physical isolation, guards, or direct restriction of movement. Modern forms of control may include threats to distribute private photographs or recordings, blackmail, continuous monitoring of the activity of the person online, control of mobile phones and bank accounts, and pressure on family members. These forms of control correspond to several of the factors identified in Kunarac, notably psychological control, measures to prevent or deter escape, and control of the physical environment (Prosecutor v. Kunarac et al., 2001). It is therefore possible in principle that digital control forms part of the evidence of ownership-like control, and it is certainly relevant to the means of coercion under the Palermo Protocol. However, digital control should not be equated automatically with slavery,

because the legal qualification requires a set of legally relevant circumstances and a determination of whether the actual dependence reaches the level required by the applicable norm.

4. Remote and Technology-Enabled Exploitation

A further trend is the development of remote forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation through webcams and live streaming. Digital infrastructure allows organizers to interact with customers and to distribute income among participants located in different States. The legal framework has begun to respond, since Directive (EU) 2024/1712 treats the use of information and communication technologies to disseminate sexual images or videos of a victim as an aggravating circumstance and requires Member States to address the online dimension in prevention. The presence of an online broadcast or the circulation of digital content does not in itself prove slavery or trafficking. What is decisive is how consent was obtained, whether coercion was present, the age of the person, and the other elements required by the applicable law. In the case of children, the Palermo Protocol dispenses with proof of means, which makes the age of the victim a central element in the legal assessment.

5. Forced Criminality and Online Scam Operations

A development that illustrates the creation of new fields of exploitation is the forced involvement of people in online fraud. UNODC (2024) discusses the rise of trafficking for forced criminality, in which victims are recruited through apparently legitimate job offers, moved to another State, and then compelled to take part in online scams or other illegal operations. The OHCHR (2023) estimated that at least 120,000 people in Myanmar and about 100,000 in Cambodia may be held and forced to carry out online scams, and it identified further countries in Southeast Asia as destinations or transit points. A later UNODC (2025) analysis reported that scam centre operations were expanding beyond Southeast Asia to other regions of the world. The legal assessment is complex because forced criminality can overlap with trafficking, forced labour, and in extreme cases slavery, but these concepts are not interchangeable. The central protective rule is the non-punishment principle, under which victims compelled to commit offences should not be prosecuted for acts that are a direct consequence of their situation, as recognized in the Council of Europe Convention and in the EU Directive.

6. Digital Traces and Electronic Evidence

The digital environment creates risks, but it also produces evidence. Electronic messages, job advertisements, records of money transfers, and other digital traces can be important for reconstructing events and establishing the nature of dependence. Access to such information must nevertheless respect legality, confidentiality, and the protection of personal data, and digital evidence needs to be verified for authenticity, context, and attribution to specific persons. UNODC (2024) notes that digital evidence complicates prosecutions in some cases, which shows that technology presents challenges for investigators as well as opportunities. The Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime and its Second Additional

Protocol on enhanced cooperation and disclosure of electronic evidence provide procedural tools for obtaining data across borders. The United Nations Convention against Cybercrime, adopted by the General Assembly in December 2024 and opened for signature in Hanoi in October 2025, offers a global framework for cooperation in obtaining electronic evidence of serious crimes, but it will enter into force only after 40 States have become parties.

F. Trend-5: Vulnerability, Gender, and Age

The fifth group of results concerns the relationship between digitalization and socio-economic vulnerability. Access to the internet does not mean an equal ability to use digital resources safely. Differences in digital literacy, education, language skills, and access to reliable information affect the ability to recognize a fictitious job offer or to assess the risk of dealing with an unknown intermediary. Vulnerability should not be presented solely as an individual characteristic of the victim. It is shaped by structural conditions such as poverty, discrimination, lack of stable employment, limited access to education, armed conflict, and forced displacement. Digital technologies act in these circumstances as an additional channel that reaches existing vulnerability, and it is the combination of social and economic factors with technological possibilities that explains why some people are more exposed to deception and exploitation (Bales, 2012; Davidson, 2015). The UNODC data for 2022 show that women and girls account for 61 percent of detected victims and children for 38 percent, yet the character of exploitation depends on circumstances and not on membership of a social group, so that victim identification must rest on individual assessment.

G. Trend-6 and Synthesis: The Need for Precise Classification

The analysis allows the trends to be systematized in six interrelated directions, which are summarized in Table 2. First, the external forms of exploitation are transformed, so that open appropriation is replaced by concealed mechanisms of dependence including deception, debt, threats, and a practical inability to end the relationship. Second, exploitation acquires an increasingly transnational character, since recruitment, movement, labour, profit, and control may be distributed among participants in different States. Third, digital technologies become an additional instrument for finding and recruiting potential victims, maintaining contact, spreading threats, and organizing certain forms of exploitation. Fourth, remote forms of exploitation expand, including some forms of online sexual exploitation and forced participation in fraud, in which physical movement may not be needed at certain stages. Fifth, the link between exploitation and socio-economic factors persists, and digital tools can strengthen the effect of these factors but do not replace them as causes. Sixth, the importance of precise differentiation between slavery and related legal phenomena increases, since the greater the variety of methods of exploitation, the more important it is to establish the actual character of dependence, the presence of coercion, and the purpose of the acts.

Table-2: Six Trends in the Manifestation of Contemporary Slavery

Trend	Typical manifestation	Legal significance
1. Transformation of external forms	Consensual recruitment, then deception, debt, and retention of documents	Initial consent is not decisive; test of control and coercion
2. Transnational organization	Recruiters, employers, and beneficiaries in different States	Jurisdiction, cooperation, corporate due diligence
3. Digital instruments	Fraudulent online offers, false profiles, encrypted channels	Means of deception or coercion; electronic evidence
4. Remote exploitation	Webcam exploitation; forced participation in online fraud	Trafficking and forced labour; non-punishment of victims
5. Structural vulnerability	Poverty, migration status, limited digital literacy	Abuse of a position of vulnerability as a means
6. Need for precise classification	Overlap of slavery, forced labour, and trafficking	Legal certainty; correct treaty basis

IV. DISCUSSION & ANALYSES

The results support the working hypothesis that globalization and digitalization transform the manifestation of slavery without changing the legal test by which slavery is identified. This finding is consistent with the position of Allain (2012, 2013) and the Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines (2012) that the 1926 definition, with its focus on powers attaching to the right of ownership, is capable of application to new factual settings because it is based on control and not on legal title. It also agrees with the observation of Bales (2012) that contemporary slavery is characterized by violent control for economic gain, even where no legal ownership is claimed. The study adds that digital technologies extend the repertoire of control, but that the legal significance of those techniques lies in how they contribute to the factors identified in Kunarac. The finding is also consistent with the work of Sakaeva (2017), who emphasizes the need to keep slavery and trafficking conceptually coordinated but distinct in international judicial practice. It extends that work by showing why this need becomes more pressing when recruitment and control occur online.

The findings engage with the concern raised by Chuang (2014) about exploitation creep. Digitalization could intensify this risk, because online fraud, coercive relationships, and abusive digital work arrangements are diverse and invite broad labels. The present analysis suggests that the way to avoid creep is not to ignore new phenomena but to examine them against the elements of the relevant legal category. For example, the forced participation of persons in online fraud may fall within trafficking for the exploitation of criminal activities where the elements of act, means, and purpose are present, and it may be forced labour where service is exacted under menace of penalty. It will constitute slavery only if the degree of control amounts to the exercise of powers attaching to the right of ownership. It also prevents a situation in which the use of the label slavery is regarded as rhetorical and therefore weakens the force of the prohibition.

The results also qualify the argument that globalization is a cause of slavery. The sources do not support the claim that global integration directly produces exploitation. They support a more nuanced view in which social and economic inequality, discrimination, weak labour protection, corruption, armed conflict, and limited access to legal assistance are the underlying drivers, and globalization is an environment that can amplify or reduce them (Bales, 2012; LeBaron, 2020). Globalization also creates opportunities for detecting exploitation, spreading information, and increasing transparency, as shown by the emergence of reporting and import-control regimes. This duality implies that regulation should not target technology or integration as such, but should target the specific practices through which they are misused. It also suggests that digital literacy, accessible legal aid, and safe migration channels are as important as criminal enforcement.

A. Responses and Remaining Gaps

At the international level, the existing treaty framework is broadly adequate in substance but uneven in implementation. The prohibitions of slavery, servitude, and forced labour are universally accepted, and the Palermo Protocol, ILO Convention 29 with its 2014 Protocol, and the Rome Statute together cover the main categories of conduct. However, none of these treaties was drafted with digital circumstances in mind, and they do not contain specific provisions on the use of technology. The courts have shown that such interpretation is possible, as in Rantsev and S.M. v. Croatia, where the European Court of Human Rights read the prohibition in Article 4 as imposing positive obligations that adapt to the forms of modern exploitation (Rantsev v. Cyprus and Russia, 2010; S.M. v. Croatia, 2020). The more serious gap lies in procedural cooperation, since online exploitation depends on evidence located in other jurisdictions and held by private service providers. The Budapest Convention and its Second Additional Protocol, and in the future the United Nations Convention against Cybercrime, are important instruments for closing this gap, but their effectiveness will depend on the number of States that join them and on safeguards for human rights and data protection.

Regional systems have gone further in addressing the digital dimension. The European Union has revised its anti-trafficking framework through Directive (EU) 2024/1712, which extends the definition of exploitation, introduces an aggravating circumstance for the online dissemination of sexual images of victims, strengthens the liability of legal persons, and provides for the criminalization of the knowing use of services of trafficking victims. The Directive had to be transposed by Member States by 15 July 2026, so that its practical impact is only beginning to emerge. Together with the Digital Services Act and Regulation (EU) 2024/3015 on forced labour products, it forms a layered regime that addresses criminal conduct, platform responsibilities, and market access. The Council of Europe system adds the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings with its monitoring body, whose report on online and technology-facilitated trafficking provides detailed recommendations. In Southeast Asia, the problem of scam compounds shows the difficulty of regional response, since countries of origin, transit, and destination differ in capacity and the opera-

tions can be displaced from one country to another, which is why OHCHR (2023) and UNODC (2025) call for coordinated action.

National legislation illustrates how the international rules are implemented and where difficulties remain. In Uzbekistan, the Law on Combating Trafficking in Persons of 17 April 2008 (No. ZRU-154), restated in a new edition by the Law of 17 August 2020 (No. ZRU-633), defines trafficking by reference to recruitment, movement, or receipt of persons for exploitation through coercion, fraud, abuse of authority, or similar means, and treats forced labour and practices similar to slavery as forms of exploitation (Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. ZRU-154, 2008; Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. ZRU-633, 2020). The Criminal Code establishes liability for trafficking in persons in Article 135, with higher penalties for aggravated forms, such as offences involving minors or organized groups. The experience of Uzbekistan in the cotton sector is also significant, because it concerned state-organized forced labour, which the ILO treats as a distinct category in its global estimates. After reforms and third-party monitoring, the ILO reported in March 2022 that the cotton harvest was free from systemic child labour and forced labour, which shows that sustained reform, monitoring, and international cooperation can change practice. For the digital era, the same combination of legal clarity, monitoring, and cooperation is needed, particularly because citizens of Uzbekistan participate in international labour migration and may be exposed to deceptive online offers of work abroad.

Platform accountability is an area in which the law is developing unevenly. In the European Union, the Digital Services Act adopts a different approach, imposing notice-and-action procedures, obligations on very large platforms to assess and mitigate systemic risks, and cooperation with authorities, without establishing a general duty to monitor all content. The ILO Convention on decent work in the platform economy, adopted in June 2026, addresses a different problem, namely the working conditions of people who work through digital labour platforms, with provisions on transparency of algorithmic management, review of adverse decisions, and protection of personal data (Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr, 2026). These instruments do not concern slavery directly, but they affect the environment in which exploitation may occur, because transparent and accountable platforms make abusive practices more detectable. It is important not to equate precarious platform work with forced labour, since the two raise different legal questions, yet the vulnerability of platform workers who depend on a single platform for income and migration status may become relevant in individual cases. Future research should therefore examine whether and how platform-mediated recruitment and management can in certain circumstances fulfil the elements of forced labour or trafficking.

B. Recommendation

On the basis of the analysis, several recommendations can be formulated. First, legal classification should be precise, so that prosecutors and courts identify whether the facts disclose slavery, servitude, forced labour, debt bondage, trafficking, or a combination, and apply the appropriate provisions without extending any one category beyond its elements.

Second, States should ensure that national criminal law covers all relevant categories, including servitude and forced labour as separate offences and not only trafficking, since the case law of the European Court of Human Rights shows that gaps in specific criminalization can amount to a violation of positive obligations (C.N. v. the United Kingdom, 2012; Siliadin v. France, 2005). Third, the non-punishment principle should be incorporated into national law and practice, with particular attention to persons forced to commit online fraud and other offences. Fourth, authorities should be trained to recognize digital indicators of exploitation, such as the use of electronic means to control movement and communication, the manipulation of online accounts, and the use of fraudulent online advertisements. Fifth, States should join and implement instruments for cooperation in electronic evidence, with safeguards for privacy and fair trial rights. Sixth, companies and platforms should carry out risk-based due diligence consistent with the United Nations Guiding Principles, and States should provide the legal basis for enforcing it. The prevention programmes that combine digital literacy with information on how to verify employers, victim support that does not depend on cooperation in criminal proceedings, and data collection aligned with legal categories should accompany these legal reforms (Landman, 2020).

C. Limitations and Direction for Future Research

The conclusions must be read in light of several limitations. The study relies on published sources, official statistics on detected victims reflect detection capacity as well as occurrence, and some instruments discussed, such as the European Union rules on forced labour products and the United Nations Convention against Cybercrime, were not yet applicable or in force at the time of writing. Because the study is doctrinal, it also cannot determine how often digital technologies are involved in cases of slavery. Future research could use case-law databases and prosecution files, with appropriate ethical safeguards, to study how courts treat digital evidence and digital coercion. Comparative analysis of national criminal provisions on servitude, forced labour, and trafficking in Central Asia would show how closely national law follows the international categories. Studies of the implementation of the European Union Directive of 2024 and of the forced labour products regulation, once these have been applied, would show whether the layered approach is effective. Research on emerging technologies, such as generative artificial intelligence used for impersonation in recruitment, is also needed, although such risks should for now be treated as plausible concerns and not as established findings.

V. CONCLUSION

This article has examined contemporary trends and features of the manifestation of slavery in the context of globalization and digitalization. It found that modern slavery is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that preserves the traditional features of exploitation and at the same time adapts to new economic and technological conditions. The analysis identified six trends, namely the transformation of external forms, transnational organization, the growing use of digital tools, the expansion of remote forms of exploitation, the

persistence of structural vulnerability, and the increased need for precise legal differentiation. The decisive criterion, however, remains neither the use of digital technologies nor participation in global economic processes, but the actual position of the person and the presence of the legally significant features of slavery or of another prohibited form of exploitation. The legal concept of slavery in the 1926 Convention, as interpreted by courts, is sufficiently flexible to reach ownership-like control that is exercised through digital as well as physical means, and the broader categories of forced labour and trafficking cover many other situations. The working hypothesis was therefore confirmed, since new circumstances call for a more precise application of existing categories and for better implementation, and not for a new category of slavery.

The findings have implications for law, policy, and research. For law and policy, States should ensure comprehensive criminalization, respect the non-punishment principle, strengthen cooperation on electronic evidence, and regulate corporate and platform responsibility in proportionate and effective ways. For practice, investigators and courts should use the factual indicators developed in the case law to evaluate digital forms of control, while avoiding the automatic equation of digital pressure with slavery. For research, the main need is for empirical studies that connect legal definitions with data on digital exploitation, together with comparative studies of national implementation. The article also shows the value of treating terms precisely, since the expression modern slavery is useful as an umbrella term but legal responses depend on the specific category. In summary, the strongest response to contemporary slavery combines socio-economic analysis, legal precision, and international cooperation. Such a combination provides the theoretical and practical basis for further study of the international legal regulation of contemporary forms of slavery and of the practice of combating them.

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