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# Gender Inequality in National Laws Predicts Estimated Prevalence of Modern Slavery Victims across Countries

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## ABSTRACT

Human exploitation is an egregious human rights violation that disproportionately affects women and girls worldwide. Gender inequality, a major risk factor to female exploitation, is sometimes codified into countries' legal systems. We examined the predictive value of gender inequality in national laws on the estimated prevalence of modern slavery across countries. Regression analysis revealed significant results. The model with the largest effect size included predictor variables of constitutional laws protecting women from discrimination, equal citizenship rights for women, laws regarding sexual harassment, gender discrimination in employment, domestic violence laws, equality for women in the court system, and freedom of movement for women. Results suggest that reducing structural gender inequalities in national laws could increase women's safety and security, thereby contributing to solutions aimed at decreasing the overall prevalence of all forms of human exploitation.

## KEYWORDS

Gender inequality; modern slavery; human trafficking; national laws; Global Slavery Index

The United Nations (UN) Palermo Protocol defines human trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by means of the threat or use of force or other form of coercion, abduction, fraud, or deception; abuse of power of a position of vulnerability, or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation” (United Nations [UN], 2000) with other UN definitions including the terminology “for an improper purpose including forced labor or sexual exploitation” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2016). Further, while human trafficking often stands alone as a construct with a unique definition, it is sometimes referred to as a form of modern slavery (Scarpa, 2008).

In the 1926 League of Nations Slavery Convention, slavery was defined as the “status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised” (as cited in Allain, 2015a). Subsequently, *modern* slavery has more recently been defined as “forms of activity associated with ownership including the transfer of persons, using people, managing the use of a person, profiting from the use of a person, transferring a person to an heir or successor, and/or the disposal, mistreatment or neglect or destruction of a person” (Landman & Silverman, 2019, p. 277). Additionally, a key element of modern slavery is victims' lack of agency resulting from power dynamics that prevent victims from leaving coercive conditions (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2017).

Some common definitions of human trafficking and modern slavery have been widely criticized for the lack of methodological transparency and the introduction of ambiguity that may exacerbate mitigation efforts (Crane, 2013; O'Connell Davidson, 2013; Parreñas et al., 2012; Sanghera, 2015; Weitzer, 2015). Additionally, while these definitions address ownership, the transportation of

individuals, and the key elements of fraud, coercion, and exploitation, there has been some concern that they do not directly address individual consent (Parreñas et al., 2012). Complicating matters further, countries often develop definitions of human trafficking and modern slavery aligned with cultural values and legal systems unique to that country (Allain, 2015b). These definitions may further bolster the argument for consensual exploitation as they are heavily influenced by culturally nuanced gender inequalities that primarily affect women and girls. However, we propose that consent and victim status in the trafficking and modern slavery discourse should be placed solidly within an intersectional feminist perspective, thereby rendering the discussion of consensual exploitation obsolete.

Although there is no universally acknowledged definition, “trafficking in persons,” “human trafficking,” and “modern slavery” are terms that have commonly been used to describe many forms of coerced human exploitation (Craig et al., 2019; Walk Free Foundation [WFF], 2018). The term *modern slavery* is used by the WFF, which provided the data for this study’s outcome variable. Additionally, the definitions outlined in the Palermo Protocol are internationally recognized, have directly influenced national legislation, and are broadly used in research (UNODC, 2018), including this study and its underlying data.

## Human Exploitation Prevalence

Some researchers have proposed that the lack of a universal definition of human trafficking and modern slavery has made it difficult to accurately estimate the number of global victims (Chuang, 2014; Kempadoo et al., 2015). However, it is estimated that there are approximately 40.3 million victims worldwide (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018; WFF, 2018). Further, the UN estimates that nearly 24 million individuals are currently victims of sex trafficking (UNODC, 2018). Available evidence suggests that women and girls are disproportionately victimized, comprising 71% of overall trafficking victims and 99% of those trafficked for sex (ILO, 2018; WFF, 2018). Also, emerging research indicates that the current COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated vulnerability to exploitation, possibly contributing to an increase in the overall estimated number of victims, especially for women and girls (Cameron et al., 2021; Todres & Diaz, 2021; UNODC, 2021).

## Gender Inequality

Research supports a strong association between gender inequality and human trafficking (Cameron et al., 2021; Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2017; Sidun & Flores, 2020; Winterdyk, 2020). Additionally, countries with more severe gender inequity, where women have unequal access to academic opportunities and economic resources, are frequent victims of violence, experience a lower standard of living than male counterparts, and report higher rates of human trafficking legal cases than countries with greater gender parity (Cameron et al., 2020). Further, women and girls are often born into sociocultural systems that grant them automatic lower social status based on gender. This lower social status is commonly rooted in ideas that have normalized gender discrimination that oppresses females and favors males (Burke et al., 2020).

One of the most enduring and pervasive forms of gender inequality globally is the unequal treatment of women and men under the law (Hyland et al., 2019). National, state, and local legislation reflect government priorities, which often grant men rights and freedoms that women are implicitly or explicitly denied. Historically, males worldwide have been granted the right to education and work opportunities, property ownership, bodily autonomy, political participation and affiliation, and voting, of which women have frequently been denied (World Bank Group [WBG], 2020). In addition to national legislation failing to grant commensurate equal rights, protections, and freedoms for women, in some countries, legislation has been enacted that directly restricts women’s access to male-dominated domains. Consequently, we argue that the marginalization of women is sometimes codified into law.

The World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report 2021 estimates that gender parity will not be reached globally for another 135.6 years, indicating that gender inequality is most prevalent across areas of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2021). To promote gender equality, institutions should implement equitable laws that protect women's constitutional and citizenship rights, as well as access to education and employment opportunities, and freedom from discrimination and violence. We propose that governance which does not promote equality for women in the legal realm directly contributes to the complex and intersecting factors that increase women's vulnerability to exploitation. To test this assumption, our research examines the predictive ability of gender inequality in selected national laws across the areas of citizenship, politics, freedom of movement for women, employment and education, and protection against all forms of violence against women (VAW) in relation to the estimated prevalence of modern slavery as represented by the Global Slavery Index (WFF, 2018).

## Law, Politics, and Gender Inequality

### *Constitutional Laws*

Constitutions are core documents that define a country's legal and political systems and protect citizens' equal rights across economic, social, political, cultural, and civil domains. However, gender-based discrimination still commonly occurs in constitutional laws, even in highly developed nations. For example, in the United States, the Equal Rights Amendment, initially drafted in 1923 during the Suffrage Movement, has yet to be fully ratified, highlighting the continued disparity of treatment of women (Brown et al., 1971; Siegel, 2001). Under these protections, women would gain the rights to fair employment, wages, education, and autonomy within social and marital relationships (Brown et al., 1971; Siegel, 2001; Wodon & De la Brière, 2018).

The same trend can be seen internationally, although protections worldwide are still weaker for medical access and politics than workplace equality (Latz et al., 2014). International treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have called for the abolishment of gender-discriminatory practices and overtly state that discrimination continues to exist (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [UNOHCHR], 1979). Further, despite anti-discriminatory laws in some countries, gender discrimination is pervasive globally, contributing to women's vulnerability to all forms of exploitation (King & DiNitto, 2019; Patitsas et al., 2014; Sidun & Flores, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2021).

### *Citizenship*

Historically, citizenship has been gendered, with women afforded varying degrees of citizenship rights different from men (Bussemaker & Voet, 1998; Danielsen et al., 2016). Further, feminist theory suggests that women *experience* citizenship differently than men and are at a disadvantage, as citizenship has primarily been shaped by men and for men (Lister, 2012).

For example, feminist citizenship theory posits that the fight regarding women's bodily autonomy in both the private and public sectors reflects just one aspect of the gendered experience of citizenship (Lister, 2009). Additionally, citizenship has historically disregarded the intersectionality of the female experience, thereby neglecting the impact of race, sexual identity, economic status, and other socio-demographic factors that profoundly impact the female realization of citizenship (Lister, 2012).

Citizenship is one of the critical elements that can provide multiple layers of protection, with research indicating that individuals without citizenship are more vulnerable to any form of exploitation (Avis, 2020). In some countries, citizenship implies civil, political, economic, and cultural rights that are not afforded to non-citizens. For example, citizenship often determines voting rights, employment opportunities, and access to education, healthcare, and other social services. However, even

those who gain formal citizenship, especially women, are not always granted equal access to its privileges and protections (Puwar, 2004).

### ***Politics and Law***

Equal access to political rights is paramount for equality. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action outlined the need for female involvement in policymaking as necessary to advance women's rights and equality (United Nations Department of Social Economics Affairs [UNDSEA], 2003). Constitutional inclusion of women's political rights remains inconsistent and often not specific to women but instead applies to women from a more general legal perspective (Freeman et al., 2012; Latz et al., 2014; Law Library of Congress [LLC], 2020). Although more recently adopted, constitutions appear to include more women-specific political inclusions than older adopted constitutions (Latz et al., 2014). Likewise, voting rights are often guaranteed by universal or suffrage rights specific to women (Latz et al., 2014; Smith, 1998).

Women's right to hold political office or governmental leadership positions and be involved in all decision-making processes is essential for furthering global gender equality (UN Women, 2021). While many countries protect this right through gender-based anti-discrimination laws, approximately 20% of countries do not provide protections for a woman's right to serve in political office (Latz et al., 2014; LLC, 2020). Further, as of 2020, women held only 26.1% of global seats in parliament, and as of January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021, 81 countries had never had a female head of state (WEF, 2021). Further, in countries where women are permitted to serve in legislative positions, the degree to which they may serve often varies greatly and is inconsistent between countries, making it challenging to identify risk factors for modern slavery based on political inclusion for women. However, past research has noted a significant relationship between a higher number of women who hold seats in parliament and increased rates of human trafficking legal cases and more stringent anti-trafficking laws (Cameron et al., 2020; Wittmer & Bouché, 2013), which may reflect women's ability to enact stronger anti-trafficking legislation when they are included in governmental arenas.

### ***Freedom of Movement***

Freedom of movement, or mobility rights, are core human rights that maintain that all individuals have the right to travel within and between countries, including both temporary visits and permanent relocations (Mcadam, 2011). Mobility rights are recognized internationally, including Article 15 of the CEDAW (UNOHCHR, 1979) and Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR; UN, 1948). Despite such long-standing legal protections, as of September 2019, over one-third of the world's nations placed some form of legal limitation on women's physical freedom and mobility rights (WBG, 2020). Passport restrictions are the most common limitation to women's freedom of movement, with some countries preventing women from applying for or renewing a passport in the same way as men. Even in countries where restrictions to women's mobility are not explicitly codified into law, freedom of movement may be limited as a matter of sociocultural practice, with some countries still requiring married women to obey their husbands with respect to their movement (WBG, 2020). Freedom of movement is an important indicator of empowerment by increasing women's access to resources and educational and employment opportunities.

### ***Employment and Education***

Research indicates that a lack of educational and employment opportunities contribute to poverty and are risk factors for exploitation, especially for women and girls (Jani & Felke, 2017; Jespersen, 2019; Razavi & Turquet, 2016). Poverty, in particular, has been identified as a root cause of economic migration (Aronowitz, 2009; Ratha et al., 2016), with a further lack of support resources increasing motivation to travel intra- and internationally to improve quality of life which may increase

vulnerability to exploitation (Cho, 2015; Jespersen, 2019; Vijayarasa, 2012). For some women, these risks may be due to higher dependency rates on a marital partner or male family member resulting from the lack of autonomy of personal finance (Cho, 2015; Noyori-Corbett & Moxley, 2016; Vijayarasa, 2012). Additionally, in countries where women and girls are not afforded access to the same educational opportunities as men and boys, rates of rape, trafficking, and violence are higher for women (Barner et al., 2014; Cho, 2015). Notably, when women and girls attempt to escape poverty and inequality, they may become more vulnerable to all forms of violence and exploitation (Jespersen, 2019; Martin et al., 2006; Vyas & Heise, 2016).

### ***Discrimination regarding Pregnant and Nursing Women in the Workplace***

Even when women find adequate employment, they may experience pregnancy discrimination, which is the unfavorable treatment of an individual based on pregnancy, childbirth, or a medical condition related to pregnancy or childbirth (Perrewé et al., 2019). Pregnancy employment discrimination may take the form of inequitable hiring or firing practices, job assignments, promotions, training opportunities, and benefits eligibility, including eligibility for health insurance, as well as other terms of employment (Schlanger & Kim, 2013). International legislation shows that many countries have implemented protections for pregnant women, with 152 countries upholding legislation prohibiting dismissal based on pregnancy. However, in 93 countries, maternity leave benefits are not administered by the government in full, suggesting a widespread deprioritization of women's rights and health (WBG, 2020).

### **Violence Against Women**

The UN Declaration of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993) became the first international resolution to directly address the epidemic of violence experienced by women and girls worldwide. This declaration acknowledged that “violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men.” In the intervening years, the role of VAW as both a contributor and a consequence of gender inequality has become increasingly apparent. Violence is consistently used worldwide to enforce the power differential between men and women and maintain female oppression (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017; UNOHCHR, 2014).

A review of national legislation over time reveals a general trend toward increasing the legal protection of women from violence (WBG, 2020). Still, several countries fail to protect female citizens from violence through a lack of legislation criminalizing VAW or the persistence of legislation that explicitly excludes VAW from criminalization. According to recent data provided by the WBG (2020), marital rape remains legal in 48 countries. In six additional countries, the legal status of marital rape is unclear, contradictory, or left up to a judge's discretion. Thirty-five countries have no legislation specifically addressing domestic violence, leaving more than one billion women worldwide without legal protection in this arena. Further, 2.2 billion women live in countries with no legal protections against sexual harassment (WBG, 2020). Additionally, past research has indicated a significant relationship between rape rate and reported human trafficking legal cases and VAW and estimated prevalence of modern slavery across countries (Cameron et al., 2019, 2020).

### **Study Rationale**

While many facets of gender inequality are under study, no known research has examined the complex question of how gender discrimination in national laws impacts women's vulnerability to modern slavery. Our research seeks to address this gap through the quantitative analysis of gender inequality as codified into national law as a structural predictor of the estimated prevalence of modern slavery

victims. Our work aims to contribute to the development of preventative and intervention measures, including widespread policy reform.

Our model conceptualizes vulnerability for modern slavery victimization in terms of gender inequality embedded in national laws as merely one component of a yet unexplained and complex social problem. Our study focused on measures of gender inequality that were informed by a human rights framework of the UN and their mandate that human rights are women's rights as reflected in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; UN, 2020; UNSTATS, 2019), CEDAW, and the UDHR. Gender inequality was operationalized as discrimination based on gender as codified into law or the absence of legal protections against such discrimination. See Table 1 for a comprehensive list of the legal categories, and specific laws analyzed in this study. We hypothesized that gender inequality as represented in selected categories of national laws would be a strong predictor of the increased prevalence of modern slavery victims across countries.

## Method

Publicly available archival data sets pertaining to the existence of selected laws regarding structural equality, safety, and freedom for women were obtained from the Women Business and the Law database (WBG, 2018). This database covers the 198 nations identified by the UN at the time of data collection. Data pertaining to the estimated prevalence of modern slavery across countries was used with permission from the WFF's (2018) Global Slavery Index. A detailed explanation for further understanding the complex technical aspects of the Global Slavery Index can be found at <https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/about/the-index/>

## Procedure

Laws were selected in parallel with a human rights framework indicated by the UN SDGs (UNSTATS, 2019), CEDAW, and the UDHR. Predictors were calculated scores based on the existence of laws in the following 11 selected categories of national laws across 198 countries: constitutional laws protecting women from discrimination, citizenship rights for women, employment and personal finance, sexual harassment, domestic violence, marital rape, discrimination against pregnant and nursing women in the workplace, equality for women in the court system, freedom of movement for women, and the requirement that women obey their husbands. See Table 1 for a summary of selected laws. The outcome variable was the estimated prevalence of modern slavery victims across the same countries, as measured by the Global Slavery Index (WFF, 2018).

## Data Analysis

To test the hypothesis, data sets were combined. Regression analysis with backward removal was conducted to find the best indicators of gender inequality in selected categories of national laws that predicted the estimated prevalence of modern slavery. Descriptive statistics and statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS v.26 (IBM Corp, 2019). A correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the independent and dependent variables (see Table 2). The assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, linearity, and absence of multicollinearity were met.

## Results

The full model was significant,  $F(11, 146) = 2.26, p = .014, \text{adj. } R^2 = .081$ , which accounted for 8.1% of the variance in the estimated prevalence of modern slavery cases across countries. The model with the largest effect size (Model 4)  $F(7, 149) = 3.07, p = .003, \text{adj. } R^2 = .095$  contained the predictors: constitutional laws protecting women from discrimination, equal citizenship rights for women, laws protecting women from sexual harassment, laws protecting women against gender discrimination and

**Table 1.** Selected categories of laws.

Domestic Violence Laws	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Is there domestic violence legislation?</li> <li>● If there is no legislation specifically protecting against domestic violence, are there aggravating penalties for crimes against a spouse or family member?</li> <li>● Are there clear criminal penalties for domestic violence?</li> <li>● Does domestic violence legislation cover physical violence?</li> <li>● Does domestic violence legislation cover sexual violence?</li> <li>● Does domestic violence legislation cover emotional violence?</li> <li>● Does domestic violence legislation cover economic violence?</li> <li>● Does domestic violence legislation protect former spouses?</li> <li>● Does domestic violence legislation protect unmarried intimate partners?</li> <li>● Do protection orders for domestic violence exist?</li> <li>● Do protection orders cover prohibition of contact and maintaining distance from the survivor?</li> <li>● Do protection orders provide for removal of the perpetrator from the home?</li> </ul>
Sexual Harassment Laws	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Is there a specialized court or procedure for cases of domestic violence?</li> <li>● Is there legislation that specifically addresses sexual harassment?</li> <li>● Is there legislation on sexual harassment in employment?</li> <li>● Are there civil remedies for sexual harassment in employment?</li> <li>● Are there criminal penalties for sexual harassment in employment?</li> <li>● Is there legislation on sexual harassment in education?</li> <li>● Is there legislation on sexual harassment in public places?</li> </ul>
Laws Protecting Women from Marital Rape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Has legislation provided for the removal of provisions which exempt perpetrators from facing charges for rape if the perpetrator marries the victim after the crime?</li> <li>● Does legislation explicitly criminalize marital rape?</li> <li>● If there is no specific provision that explicitly criminalizes marital rape, can a woman otherwise file a criminal complaint against her husband for rape?</li> </ul>
Court System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Does a woman's testimony carry the same evidentiary weight in court as a man's?</li> <li>● How many justices are on the constitutional court?</li> <li>● Of those, how many are women?</li> <li>● Is the Chief Justice a woman?</li> </ul>
Constitutional Laws	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Does the law establish an anti-discrimination commission?</li> <li>● Does the constitution contain a clause on nondiscrimination?</li> <li>● If there is a nondiscrimination clause in the constitution, does it explicitly mention sex or gender?</li> <li>● Does the constitution contain a clause on equality?</li> <li>● What are the legislative quotas (reserved seats) in place for women representatives in national parliament?</li> <li>● What are the legislative quotas (reserved seats) in place for women representatives in municipal councils?</li> <li>● What are the legislative quotas for women on candidate lists in elections for national parliament?</li> <li>● What are the legislative quotas for women on candidate lists in elections for municipal councils?</li> <li>● Are there sanctions for noncompliance with mandated quotas for women on candidate lists for national parliament elections?</li> <li>● Are there sanctions for noncompliance with mandated quotas for women on candidate lists for municipal council elections?</li> <li>● Are there incentives (e.g., financial) for political parties to include women on candidate lists for national parliament elections?</li> </ul>
Equal citizenship rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Can an unmarried woman confer citizenship to her children in the same way as an unmarried man?</li> <li>● Can a married woman confer citizenship to her children in the same way as a married man?</li> <li>● Can a married woman confer citizenship to a non-national spouse in the same way as a man?</li> </ul>

*(Continued)*

Table 1. (Continued).

Property Laws	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What is the default marital property regime?</li> <li>● Who legally administers marital property?</li> <li>● If the husband administers property, is spousal consent required for major transactions?</li> <li>● Are there special provisions for major transactions concerning the marital home?</li> <li>● Does the law provide for the valuation of nonmonetary contributions?</li> <li>● Do unmarried men and unmarried women have equal ownership rights to property?</li> <li>● Do married men and married women have equal ownership rights to property?</li> <li>● Do sons and daughters have equal rights to inherit assets from their parents?</li> </ul>
Personal finance and entrepreneurship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Do female and male surviving spouses have equal rights to inherit assets?</li> <li>● Can an unmarried woman get a job or pursue a trade or profession in the same way as an unmarried man?</li> <li>● Can a married woman get a job or pursue a trade or profession in the same way as a married man?</li> <li>● Can an unmarried woman sign a contract in the same way as an unmarried man?</li> <li>● Can a married woman sign a contract in the same way as a married man?</li> <li>● Can an unmarried woman register a business in the same way as an unmarried man?</li> <li>● Can a married woman register a business in the same way as a married man?</li> <li>● Can an unmarried woman open a bank account in the same way as an unmarried man?</li> <li>● Can a married woman open a bank account in the same way as a married man?</li> </ul>
Laws protecting women and mothers from discrimination regarding employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work the same night hours as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women do the same jobs as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work in jobs deemed hazardous in the same way as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work in jobs deemed morally or socially inappropriate in the same way as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work in jobs deemed arduous in the same way as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work in mining in the same way as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work in factories in the same way as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work in construction in the same way as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work in agriculture in the same way as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work in water sector in the same way as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work in energy sector in the same way as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work in transport in the same way as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work in metalworking in the same way as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women engage in jobs requiring lifting weights above a threshold in the same way as men?</li> <li>● Can nonpregnant and nonnursing women work in all other jobs in the same way as men?</li> </ul>

*(Continued)*

Table 1. (Continued).

Laws protecting women and mothers from discrimination regarding employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Are mothers guaranteed an equivalent position after maternity leave?</li> <li>● Does the law mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value?</li> <li>● Does the law mandate nondiscrimination based on gender in employment?</li> <li>● Does the law mandate nondiscrimination based on gender in hiring?</li> <li>● Does the law mandate nondiscrimination based on gender in promotions?</li> <li>● Does the law mandate nondiscrimination based on gender in dismissal?</li> <li>● Is it prohibited for prospective employers to ask about family status?</li> <li>● Is dismissal of pregnant workers prohibited?</li> <li>● Are employers required to provide break time for nursing mothers?</li> <li>● Can parents work flexibly?</li> </ul>
Laws pertaining to freedom of movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Can an unmarried woman apply for a passport in the same way as an unmarried man?</li> <li>● Can a married woman apply for a passport in the same way as a married man?</li> <li>● Can an unmarried woman obtain a national ID card in the same way as an unmarried man?</li> <li>● Can a married woman obtain a national ID card in the same way as a married man?</li> <li>● Can an unmarried woman travel outside the country in the same way as an unmarried man?</li> <li>● Can a married woman travel outside the country in the same way as a married man?</li> <li>● Can a married woman travel outside her home in the same way as a married man?</li> <li>● Can an unmarried woman travel outside her home in the same way as an unmarried man?</li> <li>● Can an unmarried woman choose where to live in the same way as an unmarried man?</li> <li>● Can a married woman choose where to live in the same way as a married man?</li> </ul>
Obey Husbands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Are married women required by law to obey their husbands?</li> </ul>

employment, domestic violence laws, equality for women in the court system, laws protecting women from marital rape, and laws limiting freedom of movement for women. This set of predictors accounted for 9.5% of the variance in the estimated prevalence of modern slavery victims across countries and reflected the largest effective size across models. Results for both the full model and Model 4 are reported in Tables 3 and 4, respectively. These results were consistent with our hypothesis.

## Discussion

To better conceptualize the factors associated with the rising estimated prevalence of modern slavery across countries, gender inequalities in national laws were examined. Based on previous findings and current theoretical conceptualizations of the role that gender inequality plays in modern slavery victimization, we hypothesized that countries with higher levels of gender inequality in selected laws would also have higher prevalence rates of estimated modern slavery. Regression analysis was used to determine the multifactorial model of gender inequality in selected national laws that best predicts the estimated prevalence of modern slavery victimization at the national level. An effect size of nearly 10% is quite meaningful given that human exploitation is deeply enmeshed in a web of complicated factors influenced by a myriad of natural and anthropogenic causes. Results supported the hypothesis.

While gender inequality across eleven categories of national laws was used to represent several areas of structural equality, safety, and freedom for women, results revealed that the estimated prevalence of modern slavery could be successfully predicted by a model of several *specific* national laws. Although all models were significant, the model with the largest effect size included constitutional laws protecting women from discrimination, and laws regarding equal citizenship rights for women, protection from sexual harassment, protection from gender discrimination in the workplace, domestic violence laws, equality for women in the court system, laws protecting women from marital rape, and laws



**Table 3.** Results of the regression analysis for the full model.

Variables in Full Model	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Overall Model				2.26	11, 146	.014	0.081
Constitutional laws	1.52	.183	-.106				
Employment and personal finance	-1.62	.745	.028				
Citizenship Rights	-1.64	.263	.115				
Discrimination- pregnant and nursing women in the workplace	-2.24	.479	.061				
Equality in the court system	2.40	.026	-.222				
Freedom of movement for women	2.46	.030	.231				
Requirement to obey husband	-.028	.772	.290				
Sexual harassment laws	1.72	.088	.151				
Marital rape laws	-1.03	.303	-.092				
Domestic Violence laws	-2.19	.030	-.216				
Gender discrimination and employment	-2.38	.019	-.224				

**Table 4.** Results of the regression analysis for model 4.

Variables in Model 4	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Overall Model				3.07	8, 149	.003	0.095
Constitutional laws	1.62	.154	-.112				
Citizenship rights	-1.63	.239	.116				
Sexual harassment laws	-1.69	.058	.163				
Gender discrimination and employment	-2.30	.018	-.223				
Domestic violence laws	2.57	.031	-.205				
Equality in court system for women	2.69	.027	-.217				
Freedom of movement for women	2.19	.021	.231				
Marital rape laws	-.092	.307	-1.03				

limiting freedom of movement for women. Gender inequality across laws regarding employment, the court system, and VAW were consistently the strongest predictors across all models, suggesting that laws protecting women's rights in these areas may be essential in decreasing women's vulnerability to modern slavery victimization.

### **Constitutional Rights**

Countries with constitutional legislation to protect women from gender discrimination were found to have a lower estimated prevalence of modern slavery. Although constitutional laws are evolving rapidly to increase protections for women, many areas are still deficient. For instance, constitutional restrictions on women's and girls' access to education remain a significant impediment to academic and professional development commensurate to male peers (LLC, 2020). Additionally, research has indicated that when women are given equal voting rights, overall spending increases for public health, which benefits society (Miller, 2008). Constitutional gender inequality has also been associated with fewer girls attending secondary school, fewer women who are employed or who own a business, and higher gender wage gaps (WBG, 2021). While the United Nations and other international organizations have implemented numerous policies that address gender equality, without oversight and consequences for non-implementation, effects are limited.

### **Citizenship Rights**

The number of constitutional laws pertaining to equal citizenship rights was found to have a significant negative relationship to the estimated prevalence of modern slavery. Similar to the constitutional protections granted for women and girls, citizenship rights vary significantly among nations and can severely restrict the movement and autonomy of women, such as in Nepal (LLC, 2020; Richardson et al., 2016; UNDSEA, 2003), where women do not have equal citizenship rights to men, particularly women who have been trafficked (Richardson et al., 2016). These restrictions continue to

increase female vulnerabilities to exploitation, especially when faced with poverty, with research noting a significant connection between the feminization of poverty and exploitation (John, 2019; Winberg, 2003). In some countries, the lack of autonomy over citizenship rights has contributed to gender oppression and vulnerability to exploitation with control of citizenship rights granted solely to male spouses (LLC, 2020). Women who are single, divorced, or subject to cultural or patriarchal gender oppression may not realize the full protections granted by citizenship rights.

### ***Equality in Court Systems***

The number of laws pertaining to women's equality in the court system was found to have a significant negative relationship with the estimated prevalence of modern slavery. Equality in the legal system, including the prosecution of crimes against women, is vital to overall equality and women's risk reduction. Consistent with our findings, under-representation of marginalized populations is a demonstrated risk factor for victimization, likely due to a lack of legal ramifications for perpetrators (Aronowitz, 2009; Latz et al., 2014). When legal consequences for crimes against women are not present, women are less likely to report victimization to authorities, including instances of exploitation (Barner et al., 2014; Cho, 2015; Fawole, 2008).

### ***Gender Discrimination in Employment***

Results indicate that countries with more legislative protections against gender-based employment discrimination experience a lower estimated prevalence of modern slavery. Increased female participation in the formal labor market reflects women's academic and professional opportunities and increased economic independence (Razavi & Turquet, 2016).

In contrast, discriminatory practices that limit women's ability to engage in academic, training, and employment opportunities are well-established and significant contributors to the feminization of poverty (Cameron & Newman, 2008; Chuang, 2006; Kligman & Limoncelli, 2005). Without educational and economic opportunities, women may be lured into human trafficking or choose to migrate for sex or domestic work in an attempt to escape impoverished situations (Jani & Felke, 2017; Jespersen, 2019; Razavi & Turquet, 2016). Enacting legislation protecting women from discriminatory practices in the workplace and economic sectors may foster women's economic independence and stability, serving as a protective factor against modern slavery victimization.

### ***Freedom of Movement for Women***

Our findings demonstrate that the number of laws upholding freedom of movement for women is positively correlated with the estimated prevalence of modern slavery, suggesting that women's vulnerability to modern slavery is increased in countries where their freedom of movement is protected. Although freedom of movement is a critical indicator of empowerment and a fundamental human right, some forms of movement increase women's risk of exploitation (WBG, 2020). In particular, migrant women and girls are frequently the targets of violence, harassment, sexual abuse, and sexual and labor exploitation (Banford & Froude, 2015; Benería et al., 2012; Danailova-Trainor & Laczko, 2010; Kuźma & Pietrzak, 2019). Further, women who are not legally allowed to leave their residence without their husband or male chaperone may be less likely to fall victim to trafficking for the simple reason that they lack the freedom to interact with other people independently.

### ***Violence Against Women***

The relationship between VAW and modern slavery is supported by the finding that the number of laws protecting women from domestic violence and marital rape is negatively correlated with the estimated prevalence of modern slavery. Thus, countries that enact more laws to protect female

citizens from violent victimization experience fewer estimated victims of modern slavery. One explanation for these findings is that a greater number of laws protecting women from violence reflect a country's commitment to promoting and protecting women's overall fundamental human rights (UNOHCHR, 2014).

Additionally, results indicated that the number of laws protecting women from sexual harassment is positively correlated with the estimated prevalence of modern slavery, indicating that countries that enact more laws to protect female citizens from sexual harassment have a higher estimated prevalence of modern slavery. This unexpected finding may be an artifact of countries implementing legislation that protects women from some forms of mistreatment, such as harassment, but failing to protect women from more heinous forms of violence, such as human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. These findings highlight the need for further study regarding the complex relationship between national legislation pertaining to VAW and vulnerability to exploitation.

### **Limitations**

Limitations include variations in the definition of modern slavery and human trafficking as well as problems with victim identification and reporting practices across countries. Additionally, there may be significant variations in how countries implement or enforce national laws. Further, while the WFF and the UN have methods to standardize data analysis procedures, statistics derived from individual countries may be unreliable or incongruent. Furthermore, the Global Slavery Index examines the estimated prevalence of modern slavery at the national level and does not distinguish between international and intranational victims. Therefore, attributing specific inequalities across national laws as push and pull factors for exploitation to specific sending and receiving countries may not be possible based on these results. Notwithstanding these limitations, the results of the current study support a causal link between structural gender inequalities as codified into national laws and the estimated prevalence of modern slavery.

### **Implications for Policy and Future Research**

Women's constitutional rights, equality across all sectors of society, political protections, and government representation continue to vary widely across countries. While equal rights for women within national constitutions have increased (King & DiNitto, 2019; Latz et al., 2014), inequalities are prevalent. Widespread underrepresentation of women within government organizations has been one factor in the slow rate of legislative change. Additionally, when protections for women are included in national laws, they are often limited, covering a more general area of interest that can then be applied at the discretion of government officials (Kimmel, 2018; Siegel, 2001). Therefore, the inclusion of women-specific laws and political representation is paramount for gender equality, which is a driving factor for modern slavery victimization. As such, inconsistencies or lack of inclusive policy for women to hold legislative positions may be a prominent feature of the presence or exclusion of other constitutional rights for women and girls (King & DiNitto, 2019; Patitsas et al., 2014). Therefore, the protection of citizenship rights and voting equality is a vital first step for increasing equality in other areas of government and promoting widespread fair and equitable legislative change.

### **Conclusion**

Modern slavery is a growing global human rights crisis that disproportionately affects women and girls, particularly in the form of sexual exploitation. Inequality in national laws is a significant contributor to overall inequality, which has been established as a push factor for modern slavery. The present study indicates that equality in national laws pertaining to VAW, employment, and the court system are of particular importance. These results offer critical insights for the development of social policy and practice regarding women's equality across all facets of society. Reducing inequalities

in national laws could increase women's security, thereby decreasing vulnerability to exploitation in all forms and reducing the overall prevalence of modern slavery.

These findings highlight the potential for implementing significant and lasting change at the national and international governmental and policy levels to reduce women's overall vulnerability for exploitation. Modern slavery is an ethical, legal, public health, and human rights issue that requires ongoing research to understand how inequality in the legal realm contributes to vulnerability to exploitation. Additionally, research has indicated that sustainable development, including democratic institutions that promote equality, may contribute to a reduction in the estimated prevalence of modern slavery (Landman & Silverman, 2019). Finally, a cultural and gender-informed human rights framework that addresses the intersectionality of the female lived experience is essential for revising all areas of policy, governance, and law.

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