

PLEASE CITE THIS PAPER AS “Alzoubi, Y., Locatelli, G., & Sainati, T. (2023). Modern Slavery in
Projects: A Systematic Literature Review and Research Agenda. *Project Management
Journal*, 54(3), 235-252.”

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Modern Slavery in Projects:

A Systematic Literature Review and Research Agenda

Abstract

It is estimated that 40.3 million individuals are victims of modern slavery, including those exploited in projects. In project studies, there are growing research streams on topics, such as ethics, sustainability and fairness, yet modern slavery is vastly ignored. This article presents a systematic literature review on modern slavery. After summarizing the main forms and consequences of modern slavery, it focuses on construction projects explaining the structural conditions making construction projects prone to modern slavery, the kafala system, and what can be done to address modern slavery. Lastly, the article introduces propositions, research agenda, and implications for practice.

Keywords

forced labor, debt bondage, critical management studies, dark side, human resources

Introduction

In project studies, there is a growing number of articles published about ethics (Müller et al., 2013, 2014; Sarhadi & Hasanzadeh, 2022) and social sustainability (Kivilä et al., 2017; Martens & Carvalho, 2017; Sabini et al., 2019; Sabini & Alderman, 2021). However, project studies literature is mostly silent on a relevant phenomenon: modern slavery. Modern slavery is one of the “dark side” phenomena of projects, which concerns “any illegal or unethical phenomena associated with projects” (Locatelli et al., 2022a, p. 4). Unfortunately, the dark side of projects in general, and modern slavery in particular, has received limited consideration in project studies with Locatelli et al. (2022b) calling for more attention and publications on such phenomena.

The modern slavery literature is scattered across disciplines outside project studies literature, such as law (Fudge, 2018), geography (Cheer, 2018), public health (Such et al., 2020), and gender studies (Vijayarasa, 2020). In project studies, project management scholars have published papers on ethics in projects (Helgadóttir, 2008; Müller et al., 2013, 2014), sustainability in projects (Banihashemi et al., 2017; Gilbert Silvius et al., 2017), and Critical Management Studies (CMS) (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Hodgson & Cicmil, 2008), which can inform the research and discussion around modern slavery. In this article, addressing the recent call for further research on the dark side phenomena (Locatelli et al., 2022a, 2022b), the authors contribute to the field of project studies by introducing modern slavery in projects, particularly in the context of construction projects. This article paves the way for a wider discussion regarding modern slavery in projects by leveraging a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Similarly to Aarseth et al. (2017) and Martens and Carvalho (2017), the authors are in a situation in which the topic is highly relevant for project scholars yet the literature on project studies is scant, with most SLR references coming from outside traditional project-based journals.

Modern slaves are employed in agriculture (Quayson et al., 2021), food production, warehousing/logistics, manufacturing, cleaning, construction, and related service industries

(Gangmasters & Labour Abuse Authority [GLAA], 2020). Among the project-based sectors, construction is the most affected by modern slavery, as evidenced by (Phase 1) of the SLR in the methodology. Modern slavery affects construction projects in virtually every country, as reported in the United Kingdom (Cockbain & Brayley-Morris, 2018; Trautrimis et al., 2020), Nepal (Daly et al., 2020), and Qatar (Amnesty International, 2016; Millward, 2017). Moreover, modern slavery is present in construction supplies (Liu et al., 2022), for example, child exploitation for brick production in low-income countries (Larmar et al., 2017). The authors decided to focus on construction projects, given its relevance to both modern slavery and project studies.

Modern slavery is becoming an area of study, with academics across disciplines developing a relevant body of peer-reviewed scientific literature (Caruana et al., 2021). A relatively small fraction of those articles, such as those written by Cockbain and Brayley-Morris (2018), Gutierrez-Huerter O et al. (2021), Jones and Comfort (2022); Liu et al. (2022), and Trautrimis et al. (2020), deal with modern slavery in construction projects. There is also a body of gray literature dealing with modern slavery (which will be discussed separately in the following section), including books (Bales et al., 2011; Emberson, 2019), reports produced by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (Amnesty International, 2016), or industrial associations (Chartered Institute of Building [CIOB], 2018). A fraction of this gray literature considers modern slavery in construction projects (Contractors Health and Safety Assessment Scheme [CHAS], 2021; CIOB, 2016, 2018).

This article aims to organize and present the body of knowledge and start a discussion about modern slavery in construction projects. In particular, the article answers the following Research Questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the main forms of modern slavery and the associated literature (as an embryonic field of study)?

RQ2: Which key elements of modern slavery are significant for construction projects?

RQ3: How can we move forward the discussion about modern slavery in the context of construction projects?

Methodology

Following Tranfield et al. (2003), this article leverages a SLR structured in two main phases as shown in Figure 1. Phase 1 is an SLR aimed at providing a general overview of modern slavery and identifying its main forms. Furthermore, Phase 1 allows the authors to establish that the construction industry is, from a literature perspective, the most relevant project-based industry for modern slavery. The results of Phase 1 are also used to generate the keywords for Phase 2, which is focused on construction projects. Furthermore, to integrate the scarce literature about modern slavery in construction projects in Phase 2, the authors leveraged relevant gray literature published by leading institutions reporting about modern slavery in construction projects.

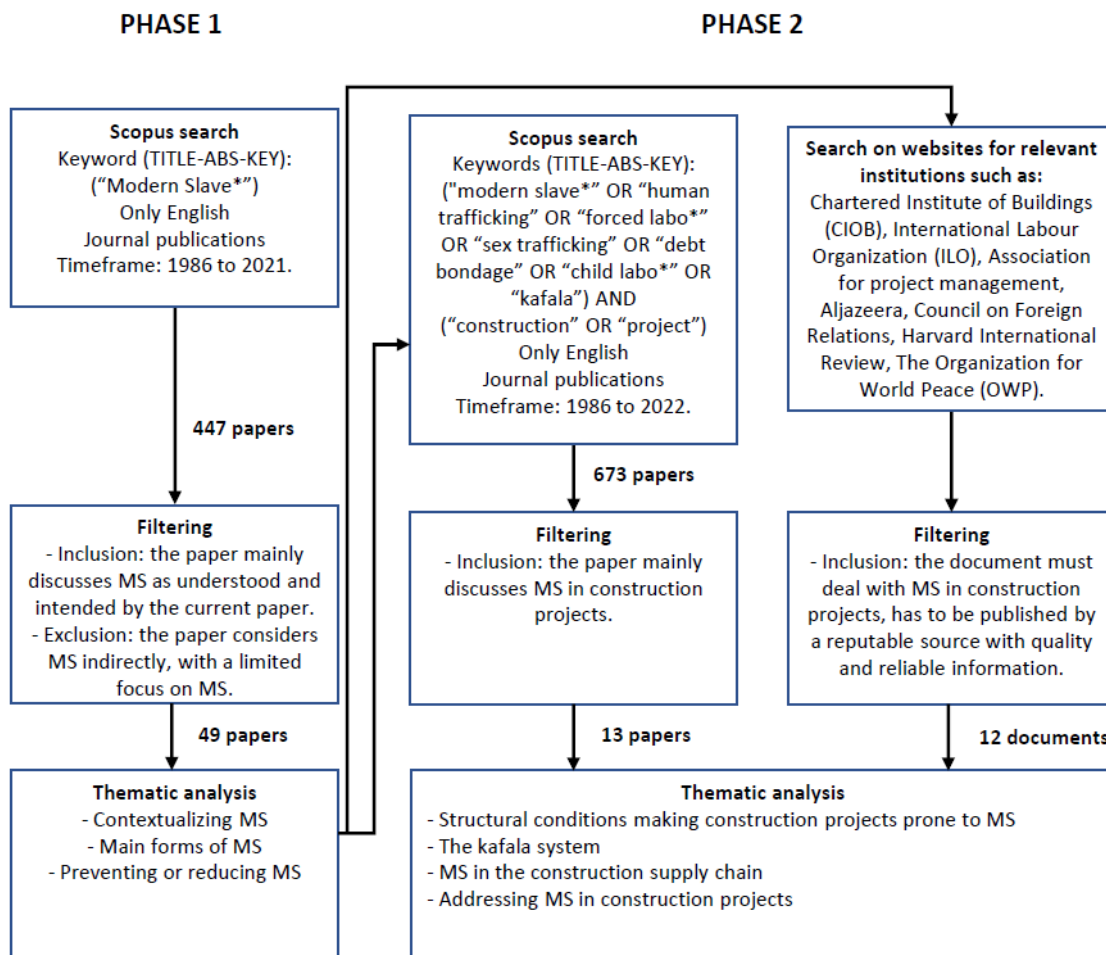


Figure 1. Main phases of the research method.

Phase 1: Data Collection—Modern Slavery

Scopus Search

The authors started the SLR using Scopus and searched for the term “modern slave*” in the title abstract, and keywords. This initial search focused exclusively on journal publications in English from between 1983 and 2021, which returned 447 articles .

Filtering

The following inclusion/exclusion criteria have been applied to the title and abstract of the articles identified in the previous stage:

- Inclusion criteria: the article mainly discusses modern slavery as understood and intended by the current article.
- Exclusion criteria: the article considers modern slavery indirectly, for example, multiple crimes, but the focus on modern slavery is limited.

As a result, the authors identified 121 relevant articles that were downloaded and further scrutinized using the above inclusion/exclusion criteria on the whole text, resulting in 49 relevant articles . These 49 articles were reviewed using thematic analysis to derive the main forms of modern slavery discussed in the literature.

Phase 2: Data Collection—Modern Slavery in Construction Projects

Scopus Search

The authors retrieved 673 Scopus-indexed articles applying the following search string on the title, abstract, and keywords of journal publications in English from between 1986 and 2022: (“modern slave*” OR “human trafficking” OR “forced labo*” OR “sex trafficking” OR “debt bondage” OR “child labo*” OR “kafala”) AND (“project” OR “construction”).

Filtering

The authors applied the following inclusion criteria to the title and abstract of the 673 articles previously identified:

- Inclusion criteria: the article mainly discusses modern slavery in construction projects.

This initial filtering stage resulted in 673 potentially relevant articles . Next, articles unrelated to modern slavery in construction projects were excluded, leading to 64 articles that were read in full and further filtered down based on the previously mentioned criteria. After the filtering process, only 13 articles fully satisfied the inclusion criteria.

Search on Websites for Relevant Institutions

After the two phases of SLR, considerable gaps in the academic literature about modern slavery, particularly concerning construction projects (e.g., the kafala system), emerged. Gray literature, however, deals with this topic; therefore, following Adams et al. (2017), the authors decided to include gray literature. This process focused on specific and relevant topics that had not been adequately covered by Phase 2 of the SLR. Following Phase 1, the authors identified the key institutions that discuss modern slavery in construction projects, including the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB), International Labour Organization (ILO), Association for Project Management (APM), Aljazeera, Council on Foreign Relations, Harvard International Review, and The Organization for World Peace (OWP). The authors visited their websites and collected the key documents on modern slavery in construction projects. The inclusion criteria for including the gray literature are:

- Relevance of the topic. The document must deal with modern slavery in construction projects.
- Relevance and reliability of the source. The document has to be published by a reputable source such as a university (e.g., Harvard), an established think-tank (e.g., Council on Foreign Relations), or a news channel (e.g., Aljazeera).
- Reliability of the data and information. As discussed by Adams et al. (2017), assessing the quality of gray literature is notoriously difficult and “it is often necessary to use fit-for-purpose quality criteria when selecting and evaluating grey literature” (p. 442). Our approach to establishing quality was a triangulation of the data/information across different and unrelated sources.

This process leads to an additional 12 documents.

Thematic Analysis

The authors analyzed the 61 articles retrieved in Phase 1 (49 articles) and Phase 2 (13 articles , one of which was already included in Phase 1) using thematic analysis following Pittaway et al. (2004). All the articles were imported into NVivo software to help derive themes to answer the research questions. Later, as suggested by Davis (2014), all the articles from both phases were textually analyzed separately to determine the relevant themes. This transforms the filtered articles from both phases into relevant knowledge using open coding thematic analysis, and the results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of Filtered Articles From Phase 1 and Phase 2
(Adapted from Pittaway et al., 2004)

Coding	Theme	Brief Description	No. of Articles	% of Themes
Phase 1				
1	Background on modern slavery	Articles that discuss the meaning and conditions of modern slavery, the differences between historical slavery and modern slavery, consequences of using modern slavery in communities and countries, elements fostering modern slavery, and statistics on the number of modern slaves	21	34.4
2	Forms of modern slavery	These articles discuss different forms of modern slavery	20	32.8
3	Health problems of modern slaves and healthcare role	These articles focus on the health implications of modern slaves and the role of the healthcare sector in detecting and preventing modern slavery	12	19.7
4	Detecting modern slavery	Articles that discuss different ways and signs to detect modern slavery	6	9.8
5	Fighting modern slavery	Articles that discuss fighting and abolishing modern slavery	2	3.3
Phase 2				
6	Modern slavery in construction projects	Articles that discuss, in general, the existence of modern slavery in the construction sector and why it is prevalent in construction	6	33.3
7	Detecting modern slavery in construction projects	Studies that explore the detection, challenges, and conditions fostering modern slavery in the construction sector	2	11.1
8	The kafala system	A form of modern slavery specifically taking place in the construction sector	2	11.1
9	Modern slavery in the construction supply chain	Studies that discuss modern slavery in construction projects in the area of supply chain	6	33.3
10	Addressing modern slavery in construction projects	Articles discussing how to detect and reduce modern slavery in construction projects	2	11.1

Bibliometric Findings

Being aware of Caruana et al.'s (2021) concerns about modern slavery being a non-field, the authors provide the key bibliometric highlights concerning the 61 articles identified in our SLR. As shown in Table 2, most journals had a frequency of “one” paper. The *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal* is the journal that published more articles (four). Clearly, knowledge about modern slavery is scattered among these journals in disciplines such as sociology, public health, social sciences, and law. Furthermore, none of these articles comes from a project-based journal. As illustrated in Figure 2, the generic academic interest in modern slavery (Phase 1) has risen in the last decade, especially in the period from 2018 to 2021; however, the number of articles about modern slavery in construction projects (Phase 2) is still minimal. There are no articles related to modern slavery in projects except construction projects. Table 3 shows the forms of modern slavery and how often they are covered. A few articles deal with the kafala system, which is very relevant for construction projects. Conversely, human trafficking, forced labor, debt bondage, and sex trafficking have greater literature coverage.

Table 2. Distribution of Selected Publications for Phase 1 and Phase 2

	Journal Title	Frequency
Phase 1	<i>Supply Chain Management: An International Journal</i>	4
	<i>Journal of Public Health</i>	3
	<i>Australian Journal of Human Rights; The BMJ</i>	2
	<i>Academy of Management Review; Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal; American Journal of Nursing; Business & Society; British Journal of General Practice; European Journal of Political Economy; Federal Law Review; Frontiers in Psychiatry; Health & Social Care in the Community; Human Rights Quarterly; Human Rights Review; Indian Pediatrics; Journal of Business Ethics; Journal of Human Trafficking; Journal of Law and Society; Journal of Risk Research; Marine Policy; Multinational Business Review; Nature Human Behaviour; Pediatric Emergency Care; Politics and Governance; PLOS One; Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society; Progress in Human Geography; Regulation & Governance; Review of International Political Economy; Significance Magazine; Socio-Economic Review; The Journal of Adult Protection; The Journal of Humanistic Counseling; Arab Law Quarterly; Criminology & Criminal Justice; Alternative Law Journal; Social & Legal Studies; Development and Change; BMJ Open; Work, Employment and Society; Business Strategy and Development.</i>	1
	Total: 49	
Phase 2	<i>Child Abuse & Neglect; Policing (Oxford); Journal of International Development; Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies; Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development; Business Strategy and Development; Tanzania Journal of Health Research; Current Sociology; MDPI (Sustainability); Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies; Journal of Business Ethics; Sustainable Production and Consumption; Property Management.</i>	1
	Total: 13	

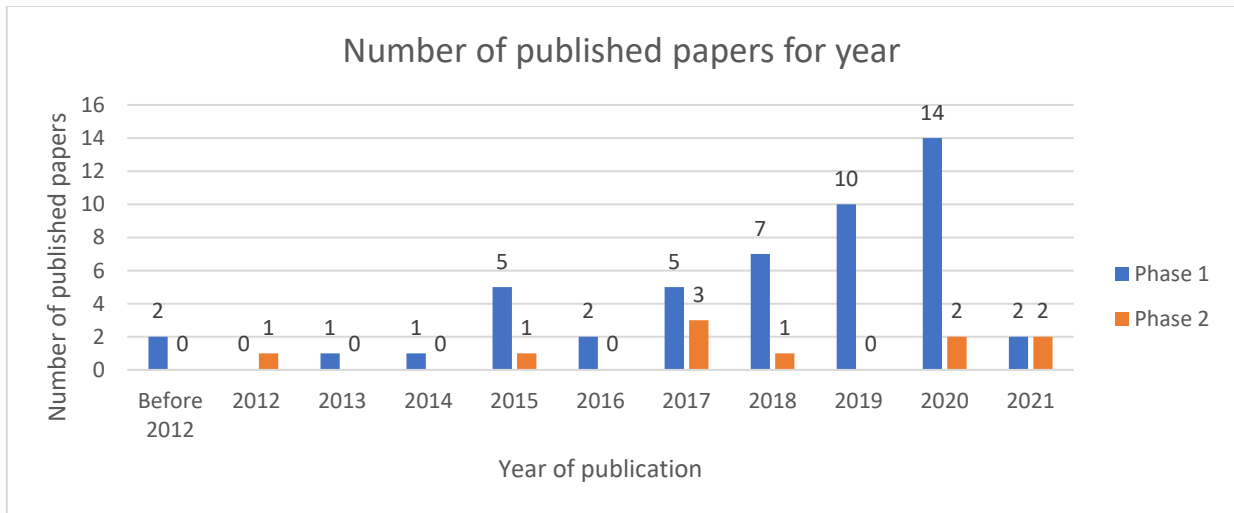


Figure 2. Number of filtered articles for Phase 1 and Phase 2.

Table 3. Number of Articles for Each Form of Modern Slavery for Phase 1 and Phase 2 (Some Articles Mentioned More Than One Form of Modern Slavery; therefore, the Paper was Counted More Than Once.)

Form of Modern Slavery	Number of Selected Articles (Phase 1)	Number of Selected Articles (Phase 2)
Modern Slavery (General)	30	6
Forced Labor	18	6
Human Trafficking	19	4
Debt Bondage	11	3
Sex Trafficking	12	2
Child Labor	8	6
Kafala System	1	2

About two-thirds of the 61 articles were conceptual, whereas one-third were empirical. This is hardly surprising given the struggle to collect primary data in this field, yet this is a call for more empirical research. An unexpected result is about the theoretical lens, or the lack of clear theoretical lenses, since 54 of our 61 articles did not declare any. This is particularly a concern, considering the need for a theoretical lens to explain the “why” of a particular phenomenon, as pointed out by Müller and Klein (2018). Of the remaining seven articles, the theoretical lenses are: “institutional theory” (Christ et al., 2019; Flynn, 2019; Crane, 2013), “neutralization theory” (Carrington et al., 2021), “Marxist theory” (Rioux et al., 2020), “relational development theory” (Natarajan et al., 2021), and “framing

theory” (Gutierrez-Huerter O et al., 2021); two additional articles are based on “grounded theory” (Russell et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2020).

Regarding the method used in the 61 articles, approximately 28 articles did not state an explicit methodology. This is explainable considering that several epistemological communities are interested in modern slavery and publish in many different journals (see Table 2) with different styles. Of the 33 articles with an explicit or implicit method, most articles were case studies and interviews, whereas fewer articles were SLRs or surveys. The most common types of data analysis were the thematic analysis and content analysis used in five articles each, followed by the statistical analysis used in three articles. Several types of data analysis were used, including comparative analysis, frame analysis, situational analysis, documentary analysis, cross-sectional analysis, and others. Remarkably, in many of the articles, the data analysis was not explicit.

Findings from Phase 1: Modern Slavery

Contextualizing Modern Slavery

There is no universally single accepted definition of modern slavery (Christ et al., 2019; Cockbain & Brayley-Morris, 2018; Crane, 2013; Landau & Marshall, 2018; Smith & Johns, 2019; Stringer & Michailova, 2018; Trautrimms et al., 2020). This article employs the Bellagio–Harvard Guidelines definition: “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised” (Slavery Convention, 1926, p. 16). To this end, the authors agree with Kevin Bales (the leading academic in developing the modern slavery narrative): “For me, this is the ‘single’ and best definition. And it’s basically a definition of slavery that applies to historical AND modern slavery” (Bales, 2022). The Appendix at the end of the article summarizes the definitions of slavery and modern slavery from the 61 articles in Phase 1 and Phase 2.

Modern slavery consists of keeping individuals as modern slaves or in servitude, forcing them to work, or inducing them to travel for the purpose of exploitation (Wen, 2016). People working in low-paid jobs during unsocial hours are not considered modern slaves as long as the job is “officially recognized”, and they are free to resign. The literature indicates that modern slavery exists when individuals are exploited in one or more of the following ways: (1) forced to work by being mentally or physically threatened; (2) owning or controlling the individual by an employer, generally by mentally or physically abusing them or intimidating them with such abuse; (3) brutalizing individuals by treating them as commodities; and (4) physically controlling individuals or restricting their movement (Wen, 2016; Emberson, 2019; Flynn, 2019; Crane, 2013).

It is estimated that 40.3 million individuals are in modern slavery worldwide (Landman & Silverman, 2019; Banerjee, 2020; Fellows & Chong, 2020) in different sectors, including construction projects (Liu et al., 2022; Russell et al., 2018; Trautrimms et al., 2020). Still, similar to other dark side phenomena, it is difficult to provide an accurate statistic of the number of modern slaves due to the hidden nature of this crime and the social stigma. Moreover, Landman (2020) and Gutierrez-Huerter

O et al. (2021) criticized that the methodological aspects used in measuring the prevalence and statistics of modern slavery are seen as low-quality and use limited data. Nevertheless, modern slavery is present worldwide (Christ et al., 2019; Wen, 2016) and it is estimated that there are 3.59 million in Europe and Central Asia, 520,000 in the Arab States, 1.95 million in the Americas, 24.99 million in Asia and the Pacific, and 9.24 million in Africa (Landman, 2020). The countries with the highest prevalence of modern slavery are: “North Korea, Eritrea, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Afghanistan, Mauritania, South Sudan, Pakistan, Cambodia and Iran” (Global Slavery Index [GSI], 2018). Notable examples where modern slavery is taking place include “the construction of FIFA World Cup stadiums in Qatar to the cotton farms of Uzbekistan, from cattle ranches in Paraguay to fisheries in Thailand and the Philippines to agriculture in Italy, from sweatshops in Brazil and Argentina to berry pickers in Sweden” (Christ et al., 2019, p. 837), or rug production in India (GoodWeave, 2017; Nolan & Bott, 2018). Migrants in poorly paid jobs who do not have job security are the most likely to be victims of modern slavery, particularly in sectors that are more prone to this hidden, unethical, and criminal activity and in which wages are insufficient for workers to be able to escape poverty (Lewis et al., 2015).

Modern slavery negatively influences modern slaves’ economic, physical, and social well-being and damages the functioning of industries, communities, and even countries (Cockbain & Brayley-Morris, 2018). Countries, industries, and communities that engage in modern slavery are perceived as untrustworthy, valuing profitability above people’s welfare (Institute of Business Ethics [IBE], 2019). Elements fostering modern slavery are corruption, conflict or war, natural disasters, economic difficulties, low education levels, lack of employment, discrimination, and poverty (Such et al., 2019, 2020; Sabella, 2011). According to Bales et al. (2011), modern slaves are cheaper than historical slaves. For example, in the 1850s, a slave in Alabama was expected to make around 5% profit on their purchase price, whereas a modern slave can make a profit from two to eight times their purchase price. Modern slavery is a public health concern (Srivastava, 2019), with modern slaves often having little or no training for their jobs and forced to work excessive hours, making them more likely to be

injured, disabled, or killed (Bales et al., 2011; Turner-Moss et al., 2014) and developing several emotional, physical, and mental health problems (Bales et al., 2011). Lack of awareness is a key obstacle to abolishing modern slavery (Bales et al., 2011), with people unaware, ignoring, and refusing to believe in its existence (Bales et al., 2011). Researching modern slavery is challenging because of its hidden nature; this generates a situation where little information, resources, and data are available for scholars, law enforcement agencies, and policymakers. The consequence is the difficulty in developing legislation, guidelines, frameworks, and approaches to mitigate or abolish modern slavery (Kidd & Manthorpe, 2017).

The Main Forms of Modern Slavery

Modern slavery can take different forms. Following the rationale presented in the previous section, the authors derived a classification of the main forms of modern slavery: (1) human trafficking, (2) forced labor, (3.) debt bondage, and (4) sex trafficking. These forms are not mutually exclusive.

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is the “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or 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, 2000, p. 2).

There are two different views regarding the relationship between modern slavery and human trafficking. The first view considers human trafficking a form of modern slavery (Acharya & Suarez, 2016; Turner, 2015; Scarpa, 2008; Bales & Lize, 2005). The second view considers modern slavery the same as human trafficking (Sabella, 2011; Such et al., 2018, 2019). During trafficking, modern slaves are often not yet aware that they have been tricked into one of the forms of modern slavery as they had yet to experience any force, intimidation, or coercion. Once modern slaves arrive at their

desired destination, only then they realize they have fallen into the trap of modern slavery (Emberson, 2019); therefore, for the scope of this article, human trafficking is a form of modern slavery.

Human trafficking is the third-biggest income source for a criminal organization after drug smuggling and illegal weapons (Bales et al., 2011; Stotts & Ramey, 2009). Promising a good job, slaveholders often make their modern slaves pay in advance for traveling, frequently lending them money (Emberson, 2019). Having modern slaves in debt is an additional way of controlling them. Once modern slaves arrive at their destination, passports are confiscated and they are informed that they must work for the slaveholders until their debts are paid (debt bondage), something the slaveholders are careful not to let happen (Emberson, 2019; Dando et al., 2016). Slaveholders threaten modern slaves to be reported to authorities as illegal aliens, making them scared to speak with authorities about their enslavement (Stotts & Ramey, 2009; Wilhelm et al., 2020). In addition, slaveholders threaten to harm modern slaves' families, intimidate the modern slaves, inflict violence on them, and refuse to pay wages (Dando et al., 2016; Stotts & Ramey, 2009; Wilhelm et al., 2020).

Forced Labor

Forced labor is “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily” (International Labour Organization [ILO], 1930). This includes labor exploitation, criminal exploitation, domestic servitude, and sexual exploitation (GLAA, 2020). Modern slaves work against their will and have imposed psychological, financial, and physical barriers to prevent them from leaving (Rioux et al., 2020). Child labor is particularly critical since it robs children of their right to a childhood, undermines their dignity, has a negative impact on their long-term prospects, and is detrimental to their mental and physical growth. Moreover, it often involves physically, emotionally, socially, and mentally demanding work and is frequently enforced at the expense of their education (Srivastava, 2019).

Illegal and unethical profit from forced labor amounts to approximately US\$150 billion annually (Crane et al., 2019; LeBaron & Rühmkorf, 2019; Stringer & Michailova, 2018). Crane et al. (2019) state that, according to the ILO, the annual profit for each modern slave is approximately US\$3,900

in Africa, US\$5,000 in the Asia-Pacific region, and US\$34,800 in developed countries. Most of these modern slaves are found in construction, domestic service, agriculture, and mining or manufacturing industries (LeBaron & Rühmkorf, 2019), with over 1.1 million new modern slaves added to forced labor annually (Kidd & Manthorpe, 2017).

Debt Bondage

Debt bondage is “the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of those services is not respectively limited and defined” (United Nations, 1956), and possibly the most widespread form of modern slavery (Jones & Comfort, 2022; Natarajan et al., 2021).

The slaveholders force modern slaves to work until they have paid off a debt taken out by the modern slave or family member (Jones & Comfort, 2022). The debt frequently includes fees the slaveholder charges to get them to their desired destination (Sabella, 2011). Modern slaves are working for no or little pay and cannot challenge or change the terms of their debt (Sabella, 2011). Money earned is sequestered as a loan repayment (Sabella, 2011), and often entire families have to work off the debt from a loan taken by one family member (Wallis, 2017). Inevitably, the value of the work done will exceed the original loan sum, and any modern slave trying to leave will face threats, coercion, and physical and mental violence (Wallis, 2017).

Sex Trafficking

Sex trafficking is “the recruitment, harbouring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act”—and it’s considered ‘severe’ when such an act is ‘induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or . . . the person induces to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” (Sabella, 2011, p. 30). The internet represents a primary mechanism that facilitates the sexual exploitation of millions of modern slaves (Giacobe et al., 2016). Nearly 54% of the modern slaves who survived modern slavery worldwide had been initially trafficked for sexual exploitation (Worden, 2018). In addition to the frequent psychological and emotional issues, including fear,

anxiety, and depression, that plague those trafficked into sex work, modern slaves suffer from severe additional health issues and diseases such as HIV and infertility (Sabella, 2011). Criminal organizations earn billions of dollars every year through the illegal trafficking and exploitation of young women (Bakirci, 2007). This form of modern slavery has a limited link to construction projects and will not be further discussed.

Preventing or Reducing Modern Slavery

Modern slaves have experienced high levels of physical, mental, and verbal abuse; treated as commodities; and expected to be subservient, leading to severe health problems (Cockbain & Brayley-Morris, 2018; Rose et al., 2021), including physical and mental health issues (Gibson, 2018; Williamson et al., 2020; Ottisova et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2021). One way slaveholders increase the health risks of modern slaves is by not allowing enough sleep or rest, withholding medical treatment, and limiting their food supplies (Bales et al., 2011; Dando et al., 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2009). This thus leaves modern slaves with no physical capability to fight back against their slaveholders or try leaving their workplace (Bales et al., 2011).

Healthcare professionals can play a crucial role in identifying cases of modern slavery (Grace et al., 2014; Helle & Steele, 2021). For example, suppose a worker is injured or exploited physically or mentally; in that case, healthcare professionals (if appropriately trained) can detect modern slavery through the “behavior” (GLAA, 2020) or the “appearance” of the modern slave, as outlined in Table 4. However, surveys undertaken with healthcare professionals in several environments indicate a lack of knowledge and training to identify an appropriate response to patients if they suspect modern slavery (Williamson et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2020). For example, between 28% and 50% of modern slaves in the United States met with healthcare professionals during their enslavement (Grace et al., 2014); yet, in most cases, no identification took place (Grace et al., 2014).

Another example is in the United Kingdom, where only nine of 33 of the UK’s medical schools offer any kind of training to detect and respond to suspected cases of modern slavery (Saunders & Harris,

2019). In addition, UK National Health Service (NHS) staff often did not know how to question patients if modern slavery was suspected, and 78% stated that they felt they were poorly trained to help detect modern slavery (Wright et al., 2020). This is troubling, as healthcare professionals are the most likely to encounter cases of modern slavery during their treatment of physical, emotional, or mental abuse (Grace et al., 2014; Helle & Steele, 2021).

Although there is no specific indicator that unequivocally demonstrates that an individual is a victim of modern slavery, there are several signs that indicate modern slavery, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. General Signs of Modern Slaves (Adapted from GLAA, 2020; Cockbain & Brayley-Morris, 2018; Jones & Comfort, 2022)

Indicators	Explanation
Restricted Freedom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not holding their passports, travel permits, or identity documents • Confined to one work environment • Prevented from communicating with others and accessing medical care
Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not being able to speak local languages • Appear ignorant about where they are • Not responding when spoken to directly, allowing others (usually slaveholders) to respond on their behalf • Showing signs of anxiety, fears or depression • Appearing malnourished • Forced into criminal activity to obtain food or money • Subjected to threats of violence that render them scared and unwilling to speak up • Prevented from organizing, forming, or joining unions
Working Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have no choice about the time or place of their work • Working very long hours for many consecutive days • Lacking training or professional qualifications • Inadequately dressed for the type of work required
Accommodations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living in crowded, cramped, unhygienic accommodations • Living in the workplace • Not being able to choose where or with whom they live
Finances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being unpaid or very underpaid • Not being allowed access to their earnings and not having a bank account • Paying off debts to their slaveholders with no wages being paid until all debts are settled
Appearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having injuries that appear to be caused by physical abuse • Appear to never change clothes

Fighting modern slavery is included in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, Target 8.7 (United Nations, 2020). To this end, some countries have created legislation making organizations legally and ethically responsible for what goes on in their businesses and imposing a responsibility to minimize the chances of those employed by them being victim of modern slavery (Wilhelm et al., 2020). Such legislation includes the California Transparency in Supply Chains Act of 2010, the UK Modern Slavery Act of 2015 (Caruana et al., 2021), France's Corporate Duty of Vigilance Law of 2017, and Australia's Modern Slavery Act of 2018 (Wilhelm et al., 2020).

Fighting modern slavery requires political motivation and resources, two elements that are often missing in government policies (Bales et al., 2011). Ultimately, it is the responsibility of businesses to guarantee that workers do not suffer exploitation, that they are kept safe, and that all applicable employment laws (including wages and working hours), health and safety regulations, human rights laws, and international standards are ethical and abided by (GOV.UK, 2017).

Findings From Phase 2: Modern Slavery in Construction Projects

All the references identified in the second phase of the SLR and the gray literature about modern slavery deal with construction projects, which is, therefore, the focus of this section. Within the European Union (EU), only the sex industry outranks construction as the sector where modern slavery is likely to occur (CHAS, 2021), particularly in cases of labor shortages. Construction is an intrinsically dangerous sector requiring modern slaves to lift heavy materials, experience extreme temperatures, and work at height (Kamazima et al., 2012). Modern slaves can sustain injuries by carrying heavy materials and using dangerous machinery without sufficient training or access to appropriate protective equipment (DeGraff et al., 2016).

Structural Conditions Making Construction Projects Prone to Modern Slavery

There are structural conditions that make construction projects prone to modern slavery:

- The high percentage of low-skilled and migrant workers working on construction projects with socioeconomic difficulties, which increases the risk of modern slavery due to the reliance on self-employment agencies (Gutierrez-Huerter O et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Trautrimis et al., 2020);
- Construction projects often face delays (Arditi et al., 2017; Assaf & Al-Hejji, 2006; Qazi et al., 2016). This could increase modern slavery, as workers could be pushed to work for extensive hours (Liu et al., 2022) with limited breaks to recover time and cost. Trautrimis (2020, p. 2) states that “Production aspects such as seasonality increase the risk of modern slavery as workers are needed temporarily, often hired through agents or gangmasters, and operational pressures like [...] a construction project running late, may override ethical compliance considerations in operational practice”;
- Despite much of the construction workforce being at or close to minimum wage, the sector has a low-profit margin (Greco, 2021), pushing to cost-saving in ethical and unethical ways, including poor working conditions (Khan et al., 2020; Trautrimis et al., 2020; Gutierrez-Huerter O et al., 2021);
- The sector is not fully rigorous about enforcing labor standards (CIOB, 2018);
- Limited visibility and transparency in lower tiers of the supply chains (Gutierrez-Huerter O et al., 2021). Construction projects are characterized by complex supply chains comprising many subcontractors, suppliers, and labor agencies (Russell et al., 2018; Trautrimis et al., 2020). Therefore, it is challenging to oversee and govern all these transactions since the main contractors generally have systems to audit the first two tiers of that supply chain; below that level, organizations might not be visible (KPMG, 2020); and
- The high dependence on continuous moving labor forces from one site to another (Russell et al., 2018; Trautrimis et al., 2020).

These structural conditions make it difficult to estimate the number of modern slaves in the construction sector. For example, construction companies insist they have worker protection

procedures and policies in place, but complex procurement processes enable companies to ignore what happens in low-tier subcontractors (CIOB, 2016). Moreover, practices within construction drive the motivation for lowering labor standards, for example, demands for project discounts, awarding tenders to the lowest bidder, fee retention, and late/non-payment (CIOB, 2018). A remarkable example of a practice promoting modern slavery in construction is the so-called “kafala system,” as presented in the following section.

The Kafala System

The kafala system is a form of modern slavery endemic in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, along with Jordan and Lebanon (Robinson, 2021); even though some GCC countries, such as Qatar, have claimed that they have abolished it (el-Mumin, 2020). In those countries, the recruitment of migrant workers in the construction sector is common (Hall, 2018; Rak, 2020), and the kafala system consists of several legal elements, including the constituent’s specific residency rules and suitable employment and immigration laws (Malit & Tsourapas, 2021). The kafala system has three key elements:

- A migrant worker cannot enter the country or take up employment without having a sponsor, and the migrant worker must only work for their sponsor (ILO, 2012).
- The right of residency for a migrant worker depends on the sponsor providing employment; the sponsor is responsible for every legal and financial aspect of the migrant worker (el-Mumin, 2020; Rak, 2020).
- Because a specific sponsor provides the right to work in the country, the sponsor must give explicit permission if a migrant worker wants to change jobs, end the job, or depart the country (Robinson, 2021).

The kafala system is considered a form of modern slavery for several reasons:

- Low wage: The sponsor has complete control over any expatriate and pays the lowest wage (Hall, 2018; el-Mumin, 2020).

- **Withheld wages:** Sponsors often withhold wages; for instance, a company building infrastructure for Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup did not pay its workers any wages for months (el-Mumin, 2020; Zayadin, 2021).
- **Restrictions of movement and communication:** Migrant workers are restricted in their freedom of movement because of their poor wages (el-Mumin, 2020). Moreover, sponsors can curtail the right of free movement through, for example, the use of Non-Objection Certificates (Ghani, 2021) or by taking away their passports and phones when they arrive (Hall, 2018; Robinson, 2021; ILO, 2012).

Millward (2017) describes the kafala system concerning the development of the infrastructure associated with the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar. In such a context, several migrant workers have lost their lives or were injured while working on construction sites (Millward, 2017). Furthermore, migrant construction workers have complained about their poor living conditions and their sponsor's control by taking their passports away and/or delaying their wages (Millward, 2017; Hall, 2018). These exploitive and controlled practices have garnered a great deal of criticism from many NGOs (Amnesty International, 2016). Similarly, Sönmez et al. (2011) investigated the conditions of migrant workers in the construction sector in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), highlighting issues such as inadequate accommodations, overcrowded labor camps, and a contaminated water supply.

Modern Slavery in the Construction Supply Chain

The construction supply chains for materials and on-site labor were highlighted as two areas vulnerable to modern slavery (Jones & Comfort, 2022; Trautrimis et al., 2020). The level of vulnerability varies depending on the firm's size and position within the supply chain (Trautrimis et al., 2020). Liu et al. (2022) noted that even if a construction project occurs in developed countries with effective standards for against modern slavery, contractors could unknowingly employ suppliers associated with modern slavery.

The construction work supply chain is a dangerous environment for child labor (Larmar et al., 2017). A remarkable example is the production of construction bricks in countries such as India, Bangladesh,

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nepal (Tahir et al., 2021). Brick production is a labor-intensive process, from molding to transferring heavy bricks from one place to another, with health and safety issues for children (Larmar et al., 2017). Moreover, brick production relies on the continuous operation of dangerous equipment and exposes child laborers to risks such as working at height and falling objects (Ahmed & Ray, 2014). It is estimated that between 28,000 and 30,000 children are employed in dangerous labor in brick kilns (Daly et al., 2020). Children employed within the construction sector have more training than those employed in other dangerous sectors yet they are often injured (DeGraff et al., 2016). Moreover, they work for long hours and live in overcrowded accommodations with poor sanitation, leading to health issues and suffering from mental health problems (Larmar et al., 2017). Construction project managers should be concerned about modern slavery in the construction supply chain for at least three reasons: legal, ethical, and economical. First, from a legal perspective, countries have developed and enforced legislation against modern slavery (Wilhelm et al., 2020). For instance, the UK Modern Slavery Act of 2015 includes penalties for offenders up to life imprisonment (Jones & Comfort, 2022). Other countries, such as the United States, France, and Australia have introduced similar legislation (Wilhelm et al., 2020). Second, from an ethical point of view, construction project managers need to appreciate the importance of this phenomenon, not only for their companies but also for the organizations (such as subcontractors) working on their projects. Accepting bids or contracts that are far cheaper than the industry average can imply the presence of modern slaves, making the main contractor ethical (and, often, legally) guilty. Finally, the reputational risk associated with modern slavery can destabilize the economic impact on reputable stakeholders in construction (Brookes et al., 2020). By involving subcontractors or suppliers, employing modern slaves should be seen as a major risk to reputation and legal sanctions.

Addressing Modern Slavery in Construction Projects

Modern slavery in construction projects can be addressed at three main levels:

- 1. Countries/jurisdictions** would require stronger criminal and civil sanctions to discourage modern slavery in the construction sector. Furthermore, effective awareness campaigns are

essential to informing and updating project professionals in the construction sector (Gutierrez-Huerter O et al., 2021).

2. **Professional associations** can have a crucial role in educating and developing professional standards against modern slavery (Gutierrez-Huerter O et al., 2021). For instance, in the United Kingdom, the APM sponsored a report by Brookes et al. (2020) discussing modern slavery in projects and how this criminal activity can be abolished. Furthermore, professional associations should provide mandatory training about detecting and fighting modern slavery in the construction sector.
3. **Organizations involved in construction** are also responsible for educating and supervising employees about business integrity, sustainable procurement and supply, and outsourcing for labor-intensive activities (Esoimeme, 2020; Trautrimis et al., 2020). These organizations should provide training on modern slavery for their personnel and subcontractors, as they already provide their workers with the mandatory and repeated training on health and safety . Construction experts should make ethical decisions about whether to disseminate and enforce the standards for sustainable employment. Informal arrangements, such as overlooking certain criteria when procuring labor and the “illegal actions” (Müller et al., 2014), are often a precondition of modern slavery. Ethical labor practices should orientate suppliers’ selection (Esoimeme, 2020). Furthermore, companies often rely on whistleblowers to draw their attention to modern slavery; therefore, it is essential to make avenues of communication available and create an inclusive, non-discriminatory company environment that gives personnel the confidence to speak up (Stevenson & Cole, 2018). Managers must be trained to take reports seriously and respond with timely actions when necessary (Stevenson & Cole, 2018).

A Research Agenda for Studying Modern Slavery

In the previous sections, the article presented the state of the literature about modern slavery, focusing on construction projects. As emerged, this literature is published outside project-based journals. Therefore, the authors agree with Hodgson and Cicmil (2008) when arguing that project studies should pay more attention to social and ethical concerns. Modern slavery, an ethical and moral issue relevant to construction projects, is a clear example of a topic not getting enough attention.

In the following sections, the article presents a series of propositions leading to a research agenda. The first two sections provide specific propositions for construction projects, whereas the remaining sections provide propositions that can be generalized to a broader realm of projects. Finally, the authors explain how CMS can inform scholars interested in addressing such an agenda.

Organization

Trautrimis et al. (2020) and Liu et al. (2022) mentioned the importance of auditing systems within the organization to address and detect modern slavery. Organizational mechanisms, such as whistleblowing procedures, are essential to enable workers to report unethical or illegal activities on-site, including suspects of modern slavery (Liu et al., 2022; Trautrimis et al., 2020). However, developing and enabling such mechanisms might be a challenge in projects because of the temporalities involved (Söderlund, 2004), and the fact that organizations in the project network evolve over time (Artto & Wikström, 2005; Gil & Fu, 2021). Therefore, future research ought to be devoted to studying how “project-based organizations” (Winch, 2014) can capture and share lessons learned across projects (Davies et al., 2018; Fuller et al., 2011; Invernizzi et al., 2018). Such lessons learned can be used to develop the necessary capabilities to detect and avoid modern slavery in their construction site. In addition, research should also be devoted to studying how construction projects can develop a routine for regular inspections and a rigorous and comprehensive auditing system for lower tiers of barely visible contractors (Dharmapalan et al., 2021) who are more likely to engage in

modern slavery. Therefore, although the literature suggests that organizations, such as clients and main contractors, can play a key role in preventing subcontractors from using modern slavery, there is still very limited understanding on the *why* and *how*. This leads to the following proposition for further research:

Proposition (P1): Clients and main contractors can play a key role in preventing subcontractors from using modern slavery in construction projects.

Project Network

Trautrim et al. (2020) discuss the need for further research to understand why modern slavery is an issue and a challenge in the supply chain. They mentioned the necessity to further learn about modern slavery to understand how it enters the supply chain and why the recently developed systems to fight modern slavery are inadequate. A key research area should investigate how government and professional associations can deal with modern slavery in construction projects from a project network perspective (CIOB, 2016, 2018; Brookes et al., 2020). Modern slaves can be employed at different levels, including the material supply chain (e.g., brick production). Supply chain visibility in projects is a recognized issue in the literature (Nolan & Bott, 2018). In addition, health, safety, and quality certifications should be investigated and, eventually, certification for training on modern slavery in construction projects can be developed. For instance, Trautrim et al. (2020) suggested that reducing modern slavery in the construction supply chain necessitated establishing robust training and educational programs targeted at all employees across the supply chain tiers. Moreover, Liu et al. (2022) recommend developing an online platform for collecting, filtering, and analyzing procurement data to conduct a modern slavery risk assessment, allowing for a rigorous modern slavery risk analysis and systematic supply chain monitoring. They also suggest increasing the traceability and transparency of firms' supply chains and making them accountable for modern slavery in their supply chains. In short, research should be developed to study how project network

changes when modern slaves are involved (e.g., investigating new links among stakeholders and, eventually, new stakeholders in the network). The collaborative effort done in the project network in the previous decade to improve health and safety in construction projects should be replicated for modern slavery.

Proposition (P2): The project network has a key role in preventing and fighting modern slavery in construction projects.

Individual Workers

The modern slavery literature stresses the importance of training and education to detect and fight modern slavery (Jones & Comfort, 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Trautrim et al., 2020). Landau and Marshall (2018) mentioned the need for workers to undertake training to detect and fight modern slavery; however, such training is still uncommon (David & Salter, 2021). Training is needed particularly for the people in the organization who are more likely to deal with modern slavery (Trautrim et al., 2020). Traditional project management training focuses on hard skills, including tools and techniques, while ethical aspects are often downplayed despite their increasing relevance to the profession (Helgadóttir, 2008; Ljungblom & Lennerfors, 2018). Therefore, research should be devoted to establishing how to train project managers and workers to detect, fight, and deal with cases of modern slavery. In particular, attention should be given to contexts where training is notoriously difficult, such as in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Tezel et al., 2018) or developing countries (Nguyen, 2007). Organizations truly committed to fighting modern slavery should train their workforces to identify modern slaves and be able to report this finding (or suspect) to the organization and legal authorities in a timely manner.

Proposition (P3): A trained and experienced workforce can reduce modern slavery in projects.

Human Capital

Human capital is a relevant contribution of a research agenda to project studies. Human capital is central in project studies for two main reasons: (1) projects are human-centric activities (Suhonen & Paasivaara, 2011), and (2) the project is a natural condition, as most human activities concern temporary endeavors (Jensen et al., 2016). While investing in innovation or training can lead to long-term benefits for the organization, employing modern slaves can be a short sight solution that reduces cost in the short term but does not make the organization complete in the long run.

Proposition (P4): Project-based organizations employing modern slaves have less human capital and are less competitive in the long run.

The Role of Critical Management Studies

CMS can offer a relevant perspective for project scholars in approaching such a research agenda. For example, Prasad and Mills (2010) emphasized how CMS offer scholars theoretical frameworks and analytical procedures that might effectively address and possibly mitigate ethical and social dilemmas that arise in businesses and organizations such as modern slavery. Fournier and Grey (2000) identified two principles relevant to researching modern slavery in projects. First, CMS has a “non-performative intent,” grounded on the idea that topics of ethics and equality are just as essential, or perhaps more essential, than the classical considerations about organizational performance and productivity (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Fournier & Grey, 2000). Second, CMS “aims to prevent oppression/exploitation,” whether it is the exploitation of workers, women, or ethnic minorities, the overall objective of such work is to fight discrimination, exploitation, and coercion in organizations and society (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Fournier & Grey, 2000). Therefore, CMS can provide the scientific background for scientists interested in studying modern slavery.

Conclusions

Slavery has existed for thousands of years and has developed into what is now known as modern slavery (Bales et al., 2011). After a general SLR, without losing generality, the authors focused on the construction sector because it is an exemplar project-based industry in which modern slavery is prevalent. Construction project managers should take modern slavery seriously for legal, ethical, and economic reasons. Due to the frequent movement of construction workers among different locations and the nature of this hidden crime, it is difficult to detect cases of modern slavery within this sector (Russell et al., 2018; CIOB, 2018). Children, in particular, working in the construction sector (often in brick production) are exposed to dangerous working conditions, and the construction sector accounts for the most threatening form of child labor (DeGraff et al., 2016; Larmar et al., 2017). Organizations should commit to fighting modern slavery, not only because of ethical and legal reasons but also because of the risk of reputational damage. As shown by the SLR presented in this article, the literature about modern slavery is rapidly growing; however, this is not the case for project studies. Modern slavery is what (Geraldi & Söderlund, 2018) call a “Type 3 paper,” an area that, along with the studies on the “dark side of projects” (Locatelli et al., 2022a, 2022b), needs further development. There are no articles published in mainstream project management journals discussing modern slavery despite the relevance and prevalence of MS, particularly in the construction sector. Project management scholars should consider modern slavery a relevant research topic, perhaps starting from the research agenda and propositions derived in this article.

As seen from the different definitions in the Appendix, modern slavery is an umbrella term (Carrington et al., 2021; Nolan & Bott, 2018; Rioux et al., 2020) that is debatable and contentious, and researchers argue that the term does not adequately describe the situation of severe labor exploitation with no clear consensus on which practices or kinds of people would be included under the term (Allain, 2012; Quirk, 2011; Gutierrez-Huerter O et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; LeBaron, 2018). More radical scholars even discussed if the term “modern slavery” should be abolished because it describes many forms of unethical practices that cannot be tackled or treated as one specific issue (O’Connell Davidson, 2015). Nevertheless, despite these arguments and criticisms, modern slavery remains the most often used term in the business and management studies (Caruana et al., 2021).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Rodrigo Juarez and Marco Terenzi for reviewing early versions of the article. The authors are extremely grateful to the editor, Dr. Joana Geraldi, and the three anonymous reviewers for their generous and constructive feedback, which immensely helped us improve the article.

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Appendix Definitions of Slavery and Modern Slavery from Phase 1 and Phase 2

As presented in the following table, the authors collected all the definitions of “slavery” and “modern slavery” defined in our sample of 61 articles from Phase 1 and Phase 2.

Reference	Definition of Slavery
(Crane, 2013; David & Salter, 2021; Gold et al., 2015; Landau & Marshall, 2018; Landman, 2020; Mende & Drubel, 2020; Smith & Johns, 2019; Stringer & Michailova, 2018; Turner, 2015; Wen, 2016)	“the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised” (Slavery Convention, 1926).
(el-Mumin, 2020)	“the significant deprivation of a person’s individual liberty with the intent of exploitation through the use, management, purchase, sale, profit, transfer or disposal of that person” (The Bellagio–Harvard Guidelines, 2012).
Reference	Definition of MS
(Liu et al., 2022)	“cases of serious human exploitation where the victim cannot refuse or leave. The Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth) further describes it as exercising ownership over another person, including through debt or contract” (Australian Government, 2020).
(Jones & Comfort, 2022)	“the severe exploitation of other people for personal or commercial gain” (Anti-Slavery International, 2021).
(Srivastava, 2019; Such et al., 2018, 2019)	“the recruitment, movement, harbouring or receiving of children, women, or men through the use of force, coercion, abuse of vulnerability, deception, or other means for the purpose of exploitation” (Such et al., 2018).
(Carrington et al., 2021)	“a relationship in which one person is controlled by another through violence, the threat of violence, or psychological coercion, has lost free will and free movement, is exploited economically, and is paid nothing beyond subsistence” (Bales et al., 2011, p. 31).
(Flynn, 2019)	“the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised” (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018). This is the same definition of slavery from the (Slavery Convention, 1926).
(Natarajan et al., 2021)	“the severe exploitation of other people for personal or commercial gain, where ‘people are being controlled — they can face violence or threats, be forced into inescapable debt, or have had their passport taken away and are being threatened with deportation” (Anti-Slavery International, 2020).
(Wallis, 2017)	“the illicit trade in human beings turned into mere commodities to be bought, sold and exploited for vast profits with little chance of the perpetrators being caught or convicted, and with horrendous human rights violations for the victims” (Wallis, 2017).
(Redmond, 2020)	“situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power” (ILO, 2017, p. 9).
(Such et al., 2020)	“a human rights violation that encompasses a range of exploitative crimes. It refers to activities involved when one person obtains or holds another person in compelled service through mental or physical threat, violence or abuse” (Such et al., 2020).
(Sabella, 2011)	“activities involved when one person obtains or holds another person in compelled service” (U.S. Department of State, 2010).