

Submission by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation

Strengthening Australia's Legislative Response to Modern Slavery in Supply Chains

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Nursing &
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Introduction

1. The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) is Australia's largest national union and professional nursing and midwifery organisation. In collaboration with the ANMF's eight state and territory branches, we represent the professional, industrial and political interests of more than 356,000 nurses, midwives and care-workers across the country.
2. Our members work in the public and private health, aged care and disability sectors across a wide variety of urban, rural and remote locations. We work with them to improve their ability to deliver safe and best practice care in each and every one of these settings, fulfil their professional goals and achieve a healthy work/life balance.
3. Our strong and growing membership and integrated role as both a trade union and professional organisation provides us with a complete understanding of all aspects of the nursing and midwifery professions and see us uniquely placed to defend and advance our professions.
4. Through our work with members, we aim to strengthen the contribution of nursing and midwifery to improving Australia's health and aged care systems, and the health of our national and global communities.
5. The ANMF thanks the Attorney-General's Department for the opportunity to provide feedback on the consultation paper for Strengthening Australia's Legislative Response to Modern Slavery in Supply Chains.
6. The ANMF wishes to provide this submission in support of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) position. This submission will aim not to repeat what has been presented in their response. The ANMF seeks to illustrate how strengthening Australia's response to modern slavery in supply chains is relevant in healthcare and how the abhorrent acts that underpin modern slavery directly affect our members.



7. Modern slavery exists at an extreme end of labour rights abuses and it is essential that broader reform is undertaken to strengthen regulation that is aimed at addressing all forms of labour and human rights violations.
8. Strengthening Australia's modern slavery response should address other forms of extreme labour exploitation. Such exploitation can occur across a spectrum, from wage theft and unsafe working conditions, to forced labour and severe forms of coercion. A broader approach can facilitate the identification of risks earlier, before harmful practices escalate into situations of modern slavery. It also promotes a more comprehensive and preventative response that protects workers and addresses the underlying conditions that enable exploitation.
9. Trade Unions and workers are vital in identifying modern slavery as they are often the first to identify and experience exploitation such as underpayment, unsafe conditions and excessive working hours. Unions provide workers a safe pathway to report abuse and help ensure employers and labour-hire companies follow workplace laws. Strong worker representation therefore helps prevent modern slavery by making workplaces more transparent and protecting vulnerable workers.

Procurement Supply Chains

10. The health system procures products for clinical use from around the world. There are many decisions that are made in selecting the appropriate product for use, including cost, safety and quality of the product. The ANMF submits it should also be necessary to consider the conditions in which a product is manufactured as part of the selection process.
11. Our members' commitment to patient and community wellbeing extends to advocating for procurement practices that provide visibility across supply chains and ensure medical products are produced under fair and safe working conditions. To aid in preventing acts of modern slavery, the ANMF expects full transparency in the procurement of medical supplies through supply chains, recognising that ethical sourcing can help identify and address exploitation before it occurs.



12. To mitigate modern slavery incidents and to effectively identify risk, it is imperative that entities are required to be transparent in all their processes. This transparency, although is not sufficient as a standalone prevention strategy, is crucial in ensuring that entities are accountable for the role in preventing modern slavery.
13. Australia's public and private health systems rely heavily on imported goods. Healthcare procurement is among the nation's three largest government spending categories, with an annual procurement volume of \$3.8 billion¹. This is significant and is often overlooked when considering risks in supply chains for instances of modern slavery.
14. An example of exploitation that was discovered in supply chains was the case of medical gloves from Malaysia which were imported by Australian company Ansell². The company supplying Ansell allegedly exploited 200 workers in Malaysia through debt bondage, wage theft, forced labour and the deportation of workers who spoke up about their treatment². Supply chains in medical product procurement became more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the precarious nature of global supply chains.
15. At present large business, including health services, must provide annual reports outlining how they identify and address the risks of modern slavery within their operations and supply chains. However, to strengthen Australia's response to modern slavery, the next step must be to impose mandatory obligations to take action to prevent acts of modern slavery in supply chains and robust consequences are essential to incentivise business to take meaningful action.

¹ Tan VY, Ahsan K, Yadlapalli A. Investigation of supply chain transparency practices of healthcare firms from modern slavery reporting. *Int J Logist Manag.* 2026;37(3):620-643. doi:10.1108/IJLM-02-2025-0132

² Butler B. Australian glove-maker Ansell accused of exploiting workers at Malaysian factory of supplier, MediCeram. ABC News [Internet]. 2025 Sep 11. Available from: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-09-11/ansell-gloves-factory-workers-alleged-exploitation-malaysia/105730848>



Workforce

16. The care sector in Australia has a high proportion of migrant workers, reflecting the country's long-standing reliance on care workers and internationally qualified nurses and midwives (IQN/M) to meet workforce demand and address shortages across the healthcare sector. Migrant nurses make a significant contribution to Australia's nursing workforce, bringing diverse skills and experiences while helping to maintain the availability of healthcare services.
17. Migrant workers are particularly susceptible to workplace exploitation due to limited knowledge of their entitlements, insecure work arrangements, low union membership and limited leverage to negotiate working conditions. There are many workers, particularly in aged care, who are on temporary visas. It is common for these workers to feel powerless in a system which allows exploitation by unscrupulous employers.
18. This exploitation occurs in a wide range of ways, which includes but is not limited to wage theft, low pay, unpaid training, being forced to pay back wages and employers offering false promises to support pathways to permanency and threats to visas if workers do not comply with employer direction.
19. The ANMF encountered a specific example of exploitation through employment contracts for IQNs on visas. In this case, the employer included terms in five-year contracts that required visa holder employees to pay \$50 for each day they did not work for up to five years if they resigned before the contract was fulfilled. While such a contractual term would clearly be unenforceable, the threat of becoming liable for a debt of up to \$90,000 caused the IQNs created high levels of fear amongst that workforce. The employer in this instance had recognised the inherent vulnerability of those workers, which they subsequently sought to exploit.



20. A further example where there is a risk of worker exploitation is within the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme. Highlighted in the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary forms of Slavery report on Australia, those that participate in the PALM scheme ‘face the most significant risks of exploitation and contemporary forms of slavery’³. The bonding of the worker to the approved employer creates a significant power imbalance that allows for employers to exploit workers. The lack of portability under this scheme for the worker is inherently a high risk for exploitation of the worker as the workers Visa is tied to their employment with an Approved Employer (AE) meaning the worker cannot independently move employers if experiencing poor conditions. Further exploitive practices can include underpayment, excessive deductions from wages, racial discrimination, sexual and gender-based violence.

21. Threats to visas and lack of security in their status leaves workers feeling powerless.

Workers with little knowledge of the Australian industrial relations system face barriers in accessing and navigating information about their rights, even where that information is publicly available. Moreover, even when such workers are aware of their lawful rights, they lack the necessary power to enforce those rights. It follows that union representation and involvement must be central to any reform.

³ Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner. UN Special Rapporteur report spotlights gaps in Australia’s anti-slavery response [Internet]. Canberra: Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner; 2025 Aug 15. Available from: <https://www.antislaverycommissioner.gov.au/news/un-special-rapporteur-report-spotlights-gaps-australias-anti-slavery-response>



Conclusion

22. The ANMF welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Attorney-General's Department's consultation paper for Strengthening Australia's Legislative Response to Modern Slavery in Supply Chains. We recognise the work that has been undertaken to strengthen Australia's response to acts of modern slavery within global supply chains and the ANMF supports the ACTU's response to this consultation. It is essential a robust framework that protects fundamental rights at work, recognises the risks within supply chains and takes action against the abhorrent acts that not only encompass modern slavery but contributes to broader labour and human rights violations is developed.

References

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