

# FORCED, CHILD AND TRAFFICKED LABOUR IN THE PALM OIL INDUSTRY

You may not realise it, but it is likely you have palm oil in your home right now.

Palm oil is derived from the palm tree<sup>1</sup>. It can be found in a wide range of products including food, cosmetics, confectionary, cleaning and bathroom products. Usually

grown in tropical regions, the harvesting of palm oil has been widely criticised for its devastation of native rainforests. What you may not know is many of the palm oil products you use may also be tainted by forced and child labour.



## Key facts:

- Palm oil and palm kernel oil are found in approximately half of all packaged foods in our supermarkets<sup>2</sup>.
- Malaysia and Indonesia account for approximately 85 percent of global palm oil production<sup>3</sup>.
- Palm oil is produced in 17 countries. The top five palm oil producing nations are Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Nigeria and Colombia<sup>4</sup>.
- It is often referred to as “vegetable oil” on product packaging. There are over 200 alternative names for palm oil<sup>5</sup> including Palmitate, Stearic Acid, Glycerol Stearate-Coco palm, Sodium Stearate, Sodium Laurel Sulphate and Retinyl Palmitate<sup>6</sup>.
- Cosmetics containing palm oil often list the plant’s botanical name, *elaeis guineensis* under their ingredients<sup>7</sup>.

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# THE ISSUE

Indonesia and Malaysia produce the majority of the world's palm oil. The use of forced, child and trafficked labour is reportedly common in these countries<sup>8</sup>. The work involves collecting the palm fruit and tending to the plantations. Palm fruit bunches are made up of thousands of small fruits and can weigh between 15 and 25 kilograms<sup>9</sup>. Most labourers do not have gloves and suffer cuts, scratches and abrasions<sup>10</sup>.

## What is human trafficking?

Human trafficking is putting or keeping someone in an exploitative situation for profit. Trafficked persons are not free and they are exploited for profit over and over again. Exploitation can involve forced or debt bonded labour, child labour, sexual exploitation, armed conflict and many more situations<sup>14</sup>.

## Labour exploitation

Workers tend to either be migrants from nearby countries, in search of better opportunities, or from poor rural villages surrounding palm plantations. Limited opportunities in their villages mean men, women and children must work seasons in palm plantations<sup>11</sup>.

Foreign migrants transported by labour brokers are placed in remote plantations in isolated rural areas with virtually no available transportation, preventing them from leaving<sup>12</sup>. They must live in poor conditions without access to clean water, lighting and other basic facilities<sup>13</sup>. They are further isolated by a lack of social support, cultural barriers and discrimination.



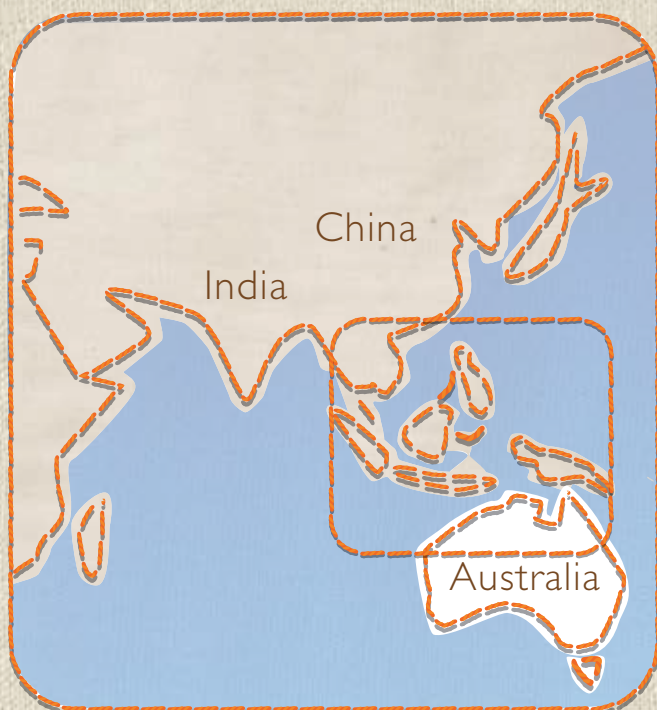
## Labour trafficking

Trafficking cases have been identified in Malaysian<sup>15</sup> and Indonesian<sup>16</sup> palm plantations. Men, women and children can be targeted by labour brokers who make false promises of good wages and working conditions<sup>17</sup>. Traffickers often confiscate passports and other official documents and charge workers high brokerage fees for finding them the jobs, which workers must then pay off as a debt<sup>18</sup>. Once at the plantations, workers can face abusive conditions and are threatened with deportation or confiscation of wages<sup>19</sup>. They may also be bonded to their employers through unrealistic debts from loans or

to cover their accommodation, food or other amenities. This can involve entire families, including children, being forced to work long hours in poor conditions to pay off extortionate debts.

There have been reports of workers being forced into camps near plantations in Malaysia<sup>20</sup>, which are locked at night and guarded by security<sup>21</sup>. Workers are not free to leave and are forced to work long, tiring hours for little money. Security guards have also been reported to extort money from labourers<sup>22</sup>.

## WHERE DOES IT OCCUR?





## What is child labour?

Child labour is work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity; work that exceeds a minimum number of hours; work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and work that interferes with their schooling<sup>23</sup>.

## Child labour

Poverty is common in rural areas and often leads to parents making the decision to send their children to work in the plantations<sup>24</sup>. Families will work together to harvest up to two tonnes<sup>25</sup> daily and children often drop out of school<sup>26</sup> to help. Reports also exist of children from poor villages being deliberately recruited by palm oil companies to work in Malaysian plantations for little pay<sup>27</sup>.

Children carry and load heavy bunches of palm fruit, weed fields and spend many hours bending over to collect loose fruit off the plantation floor<sup>28</sup>. Heat exhaustion is common<sup>29</sup>. They must sometimes climb palm trees with thorny leaf fronds to harvest fruit or use

a heavy pole with a large knife on the end to cut down fruit bunches<sup>30</sup>. Often children end up receiving little or no pay and may be forced to endure terrible conditions including long hours and exposure to toxic chemicals which are sprayed on palm trees without any protective masks or clothing<sup>31</sup>.

Poor quality education, lack of school facilities and a general low regard for education in rural areas<sup>32</sup> can all help to push children into working in palm oil plantations<sup>33</sup>. This can keep children and their families locked in a cycle of poverty.

# THE PALM OIL SUPPLY CHAIN

## Plantation:

Palm fruit is harvested on remote tropical plantations. Forced, child and trafficked labour and other unsustainable and environmentally damaging practices are common at this stage.



## Processing:

Palm fruit is transported to processing plants, where palm oil is produced from the flesh and palm kernel oil is produced from the kernel of the fruit. Palm oil may be further refined to create a range of different palm oil derivatives in order to be used for different purposes. These are vital ingredients in many everyday products.



## Product manufacturers:

Palm oil is purchased by a variety of different companies that use the ingredient in their products.



## Retailers:

Palm oil is sold in an enormous range of consumer products.



# WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) aims to promote an environmentally and socially responsible palm oil industry through its Certified Sustainable Palm Oil trademark. It is made up of companies from all levels of the palm oil supply chain and various NGOs in order to ensure palm oil is harvested and produced more ethically. However, RSPO membership does not necessarily mean companies use Certified Sustainable Palm Oil<sup>34</sup>. Many companies, including some RSPO members, continue to profit from exploitative labour practices in their supply chains<sup>35</sup>. Other companies however, have responded more positively and made commitments to using only ethically certified palm oil in the near future<sup>36</sup>.

Much more needs to be done. Companies operating at all levels of the palm oil supply chain must commit to sourcing palm oil that is not only environmentally sustainable but also provides fair conditions for farmers and provides assurances against forced, child and trafficked labour.

## What can you do?

Your voice and purchasing power can put a lot of pressure on companies to improve their business practices.

- Educate yourself about the products you buy. Do they contain palm oil? Look in the ingredients lists for Palmitate, Stearic Acid, Glyceryl Stearate-Coco palm, Sodium Stearate, Sodium Laurel Sulphate and Retinyl Palmitate. It could even be listed as vegetable oil.
- Learn about the companies you buy from, their policies on forced, child and trafficked labour and supply chain transparency:
- Has the company made a statement or policy outlining its commitment to eradicating forced, child and trafficked labour from its supply chain? Does it use Certified Sustainable Palm Oil in its products?

For more information visit [dontradelives.com.au](http://dontradelives.com.au)

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