

# Robot workers will lead to surge in slavery in south-east Asia, report finds

Monday 16 July 2018, by [KELLY Annie](#) (Date first published: 12 July 2018).

**Research shows risk of trafficking will rise, as automation pushes low-skilled workers into 'race to the bottom' for jobs**

[Robots](#) will slash millions of jobs and create an upswing in trafficking and slavery across south-east Asia, research claims.

In a [report launched](#) on Thursday, supply-chain analyst firm [Verisk Maplecroft](#) predicts that the rise in robot manufacturing will have a knock-on effect that results not only in lost livelihoods but in a spike in slavery and labour abuses in brand supply chains.

Earlier this year, the UN International Labour Organisation predicted that [56% of workers](#) in south Asia's key manufacturing hubs in Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam could lose their jobs over the next two decades due to automation.

"There has been a lot of discussion about the impact of robot automation on jobs but less on the resulting human rights abuses that are likely to follow," said Dr Alex Channer, analyst at Verisk Maplecroft.

"We know that in a couple of decades, robot manufacturing will replace many low-skill jobs. Displaced workers without the skills or capacity to adapt will have to compete for a rapidly diminishing supply of low-paid work in potentially exploitative conditions. This will lead to increased risks of slavery and trafficking across a region already vulnerable to these kind of abuses."

Automation is already revolutionising manufacturing and lowering labour costs for industries across the world. The [International Federation of Robotics](#) estimates that next year another 250,000 industrial robots will come on to the market, with the capability to help produce cars, electronics and new machinery.

Robots are already in production that will replace workers in [farming](#) while analysts at Citibank estimate that automation technology could help footwear brands reduce labour costs by 50% and cut material costs by 20%, as well as expand product ranges and speed up lead times.

This year the world's first "[sewbot](#)" factory in the US will begin production, with robots sewing garments without human operators. It is thought that each sewbot machine could potentially do the work of 10 people.

Yet, Channer said it would be a mistake for brands not to recognise the consequences of the changes.

"Businesses may argue that they are not responsible for the knock-on effects of the rise of automation, but robots will never completely replace workers. People will still have to find work just

further down supply chains, where abuses are more likely to occur and regulation and worker rights can be more easily ignored.”

Manufacturing hubs in south-east Asia are seen to be particularly at risk from potential labour abuses rising from the onset of automation manufacturing because of the high dependence on low-skilled jobs and existing high levels of labour violations.

Thailand’s fishing industry is heavily linked to slavery and labour abuses and the electronics sector in Malaysia, which accounts for [nearly 35% of the country’s export economy](#), has faced international scrutiny for its treatment of migrant workers.

In 2014 a [report](#) by supply chain watchdog Verité found that nearly one third of workers in Malaysia’s electronics sector were in forced labour, and called for reforms from foreign companies operating there.

“In an environment like south-east Asia where workers are already vulnerable to labour abuses, increased competition for remaining jobs will see workers having to accept jobs at lower wages, pay more in recruitment fees and be forced to work in more dangerous and exploitative workplaces.”

Sectors identified by Verisk Maplecroft as being particularly at risk included agriculture, fishing, manufacturing, retail and electronics.

Of the five countries deemed most likely to be affected by job losses, the report predicts that Vietnam will suffer worst, with 36 million people estimated to be replaced with robots.

Women will also be disproportionately affected in the garment, textile and footwear industry. In Vietnam and Cambodia, 85% of jobs in this sector are potentially at risk, with more than 75% of these held by women.

Verisk Maplecroft say that both businesses and governments need to work urgently to mitigate the potentially catastrophic consequences of automation on the 156 million people whose jobs are likely to be under threat in the coming decades.

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jul/12/robot-workers-will-lead-to-surge-in-slavery-in-south-east-asia-report-finds>