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Weekend Confidential: Alexandra Wolfe

Andrew Forrest's Mission to End Modern Slavery

The Australian billionaire's Walk Free Foundation is working to help the estimated 45.8 million enslaved people around the world



Andrew Forrest Photo: Ian Regnard for the Wall Street Journal

by Alexandra Wolfe

Seven years ago, [Andrew Forrest](#), founder and then-chief executive of [Fortescue Metals Group](#) in Australia, was talking to his daughter Grace about her work at an orphanage in Nepal. A government official suspected that the orphanage was connected to a sex-trafficking network that ran through the Middle East, so Mr. Forrest had his security team look into it. They discovered that the official was right—many children in the orphanage had disappeared into the sex-trafficking trade. That led him to begin researching child trafficking and then, more broadly, modern slavery around the world.

Mr. Forrest decided to audit the subcontractors his company, one of the biggest iron-ore exporters in the world, worked with by asking them a series of questions about their labor practices. He found nine companies that seemed to use forced labor, including one British company with manufacturing operations in the United Arab Emirates that had seized the passports of 4,000 of its Indian workers stationed there.

Mr. Forrest immediately stopped using those subcontractors until they could prove that they had changed their ways. Five years ago, he decided to make it his mission to eradicate slavery. After stepping down as CEO of Fortescue (he remains nonexecutive chairman), he started the nonprofit Walk Free Foundation with his wife, Nicola, in 2012.

As one of Australia's most prominent businessmen—he is estimated to be among the country's wealthiest people, according to Australian magazine BRW, with a net worth of about \$3 billion—he has brought more attention to the practice of forced labor. Mr. Forrest, 55, has traveled around the world to encourage other companies to look into the conditions of their workers. He recently went to the U.A.E., where he finds modern slavery particularly prevalent. “I found thousands of south Indian workers in these horrible working conditions in these massive sheds in the desert,” he says. “These men were in danger.”

An estimated 45.8 million people around the world—about the population of Spain—are enslaved, according to the Walk Free Foundation's third [Global Slavery Index](#), released last month. (Its definition of slavery is “situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, abuse of power or deception.”) The idea for the index came from a conversation with philanthropist [Bill Gates](#). The Microsoft co-founder told Mr. Forrest that without a way to quantify the problem, many people wouldn't take it seriously, so Mr. Forrest decided to rank countries based on the prevalence of slavery.

Working with Gallup, the organization did in-person interviews with 42,000 participants in 53 languages for its latest survey. The countries with the highest numbers of slaves overall were India, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Uzbekistan; many of the enslaved were in food production and the sex industry. The countries with the highest proportion of the population in slavery included North Korea, Cambodia, India and Qatar.

Governments seem to be paying more attention to the problem. India recently released a draft of its first-ever law against human trafficking.

The Walk Free Foundation is working on several fronts. In 2014, it facilitated a Joint Declaration of Religious Leaders Against Modern Slavery, an agreement among leaders of major world faiths, to publicly reject the practice.

Another part of Mr. Forrest's plan is to promote the idea of moral capital markets. He thinks that the governments of developing nations should advertise their efforts to eradicate slavery, to indicate to foreign investors that they're good bets. He hopes that more countries will enact rules like the U.K.'s 2015 [Modern Slavery Act](#), which requires large companies to report on how they are protecting their supply chains from forced-labor practices.

Mr. Forrest remembers defending his friends as a child against schoolyard bullies, even though he was so slight that one of his friends started calling him Twiggy, a nickname that has stuck to this day. "My friend said, 'You're too skinny to be a forest, and you're too skinny to be a tree, so you're a twig.' So that's why I'm Twiggy," he says.

He had originally intended to be a jackeroo, or a cattle-ranching apprentice, but in school at the University of Western Australia, he developed an interest in finance and the metal industry. He spent a few years after school as a mining analyst before starting his own mining company in 1994. Nearly a decade later, he founded Fortescue, now the world's fourth-largest producer of iron ore. Today, in addition to focusing on slavery, he owns three cattle ranches on about three million acres of land.

Mr. Forrest lives in Perth and has two children still in school. Grace, the daughter who worked in the orphanage in Nepal, is a communications strategist for the Global Slavery Index while she pursues a graduate degree. He tells his children not to fear failure but instead to consider it an opportunity. "You only ever improve and you only ever win in how you handle failure," he says. "In success you learn nothing." He and his wife plan to give away 95% of their wealth to charity.

In his down time, he enjoys horseback riding, cycling and paddling. "I don't keep fit nearly enough, as my wife will attest," he says with a laugh. "I do try and enjoy life and have plenty of energy."

He remains optimistic about the decline of slavery in the future. It isn't like a disease that "is kind of thrust upon the human race," he says. "This is a crime of opportunity." And by shining a light on the issue, he hopes, "we can actually end this travesty."

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