

# Make ethical shopping your gift at Christmas

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Forced labour. Illustration: Mike Rigoll

We all know someone who has received a charity card for Christmas, or signed up mum to make a contribution to a water sanitation scheme in a far-off land.

I do this every year, with my family always receiving the, “You’re hard to buy for! Have a chicken”, Oxfam gift card. This in itself can be a great thing, but the reach for an ethical Christmas (or life) can and should spread a lot further than a thoughtful present.

Think how much better it would be if our ethical Christmas efforts also meant we were buying and consuming goods that weren’t contributing to the continuation of modern slavery.

Through technology and globalisation, we are the most connected we have ever been as a global community.

Yet those who need us the most are likely to be the furthest from our minds. It’s a hard reality to comprehend, and it’s easy to understand why many Australians aren’t aware of the existence of modern slavery.

We feel geographically and socially disconnected from the less economically fortunate countries where slavery is at its worst, and we often have narrow or unenlightened views about what slavery actually is or how we may contribute to it.

Modern slavery is the systematic removal of a person’s basic freedom and includes forced labour, the sale of children, forced marriage and human trafficking. And it exists in every country in the world.

Many of the 45.8 million people enslaved today are often unintentionally a part of our Christmases, for example, making the reindeer T-shirt we wear on Christmas morning.

The problem is so big that it can be hard for people to understand what they can do about it. And it's easy to get overwhelmed.

So let's focus on what each and every one of us can do — and simply being aware and asking the question is a good starting point.

Don't assume you can outsource the responsibility of buying ethically to retailers, or that their supply chains are clean just because they sell well-known brands.

You have every right to ask who made the clothes, toys or phones you are buying, and if they were made under ethical conditions.

Shop assistants should be able to help you, but if they can't (and this is often a hint) then hit up the company's social media presence and ask questions.

Every time we ask these questions, we are sending a message; that we care about how our goods are produced.

Just one example: recent investigations into India's illegal mica mines uncovered children as young as five working daily in horrific conditions, often risking their lives, sorting through rubble with their bare hands just to find the rare mineral known as mica.

Mica is commonly used to add some light-catching sparkle to cosmetics. But that layered glamour on eyelids and cheekbones could be coming at an incredible human cost — and one that is unnecessary.

It is beyond comprehension as to why some major cosmetic companies still use unethical mica when there is an easily available substitute that doesn't take small children to dig out of the ground.

The second thing you can do is look for a product with a Fairtrade logo. It is guaranteed that these products are made responsibly by people who come to work freely and receive a fair wage.

If your barista isn't able to confirm where the beans for your morning latte come from, then you have a great opportunity — and I would argue responsibility as a consumer — to help determine which companies will make profit and which won't. Give your hard-earned cash to the cafe that can guarantee fair trade or ethically sourced coffee.

In the spirit of Christmas and generosity, let's ensure that this year, ethical and slavery-free presents are the only ones under our trees and on our Christmas tables.

Otherwise we risk being reduced to a Hunger Games-style reality of the Capitol being served by the struggling Districts. And let's be honest, in that story we all want to be a part of the rebellion, not a well-dressed Capitol dweller whose lifestyle has been constructed off the back of the suffering labourers.

Don't underestimate the impact of your awareness and the right we have to ask questions.

This festive season, treat that right as a privilege and use it for the benefit of someone you may never meet.

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