



COURTESY OF DAVINA DURGANA

Davina Durgana Is Fighting Human Trafficking With The Skill You'd Least Expect

By **Lilli Petersen** | 5 days ago |

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A lot of little girls grow up dreaming of changing the world. And some little girls grow into women who actually do it – with whatever tools they have available. Women like, say, Dr. **Davina Durgana**, a millennial statistician who's using her skills with numbers to tackle the enormous problem of human trafficking.



Durgana, 29, is the Senior Statistician with the [Walk Free Foundation](#), an initiative fighting to end modern slavery, forced labor, and human trafficking. While you may not think of number crunching as the best way to take on the problem of modern slavery, well, you may be wrong.

"For a long time we've been making policy decisions ... without baseline data. Like, without knowing for sure where the most victims were likely to be found or where we were going to have the most return on investment for our intervention work," Durgana says in an interview with *Elite Daily*. That meant that initiatives fighting trafficking and slavery could only make "best guesses" on what would be most effective — and run the risk that their limited resources might not be used well enough to save lives.

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Durgana's work can help change that. "With statistics, what we can really start doing is building replicable models. We can start showing progress," she says.



Durgana is one of the co-authors of the *Global Slavery Index*, a large-scale report produced by Walk Free that describes the scope of the problem of human trafficking and slavery worldwide, breaking it down by country, region, and even products that consumers around the world should be aware of before purchasing. The 2018 edition of the *Global Slavery Index*, launched on July 19, highlights the enormity of the task ahead.

According to the report, there are more than 40 million people in modern slavery worldwide — more than 70 percent of whom are women and girls. The United States is one of the biggest consumers of products that are at risk of being produced by modern slavery, to the tune of more than \$140 billion. If you've ever bought anything from a



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Durgana's tackling the problem from both ends; with Walk Free, her role is to create models to both figure who is most vulnerable to being exploited by modern slavery, as well as to help governments use the data they already have to assess the problem within their borders.

"I felt if we could start measuring modern slavery and stop making excuses about why it was unmeasurable, we could actually start holding people responsible for what was happening," she says. "If we don't take the time to estimate or to count these experiences, then it's almost like we're not acknowledging that they happened."

Durgana found her passion for the issue of human slavery during a mission trip to El Salvador when she was in college. While working to help with education and health efforts in a local community, she found out that one of the young girls from the community had been trafficked and killed. This was especially jarring since, as a young American abroad, it was "kind of easy to divorce yourself from reality."

"It's easy to ignore that your group's hotel required private security because local law enforcement wasn't secure enough," she says, citing the conflict and unrest caused by [El Salvador's decades of civil war](#). "Then you start to think about what happens in developing countries that are facing these types of long-term conflicts and then trying to recover, but then have criminal groups that grow out of this."

At first, she didn't see how to combine her calling with her skill set as a statistician. "When I first started this, I thought the only way I could work in trafficking was to work with victims directly every day," she says. Like many millennials, Durgana considered a number of career paths before signing on with Walk Free in 2012. At one point, she even thought she'd go to law school — but statistics was what ignited her own passion. "The bigger the problem is, the more nuance there is and the more you can learn and continue to evolve in that work," she says. "The truth is, I was kind of looking for what the field needed."

AT LEAST NOW WE KNOW WHAT QUESTIONS TO ASK.

It needs people like Durgana, because modern slavery isn't just a problem in other countries — it's right here at home as well. In the United States, there's an estimated [400,000 plus victims of modern slavery](#), per the *Global Slavery Index*.

"Labor exploitation is essentially on display for consumers to see," she says. She cites massage parlors, nail salons, and hair salons as places where labor exploitation may



So what can you as a consumer do? "It comes down to taking a little bit of extra interest," she says, such as noticing if, say, someone looks miserable or if workers seem to have unreasonably long shifts. If you see it, she recommends calling the [National Human Trafficking hotline](#) for help and next steps.

Modern slavery is a big problem, but by tackling it in small steps, with the tools you have available, it is possible to make progress.

"Global slavery is, every day, a huge undertaking," Durgana says. But with tools like hers, those pushing against it are learning how to fight it more efficiently in all its nuance, from forced marriage to regional migration to the risks faced by refugees.

"We haven't resolved how to perfectly measure all of this," she says. "But at least now we know what questions to ask."