

Guest editorial: Labour conditions in supply chains: a continuum from extreme exploitation to decent work

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Introduction

The issue of labour exploitation in supply chains has firmly moved up the political and scholarly agenda over the last decade. International policy frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), as well as national and supranational legislation such as the UK Modern Slavery Act, the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act and the European Union (EU) Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (e.g. Brandenburg *et al.*, 2024; Buttke *et al.*, 2024; Islam and Van Staden, 2022), have brought renewed attention to labour exploitation and the responsibilities of firms for their global supply chains. In parallel, operations and supply chain management (OSCM) research has developed a growing body of work on labour exploitation, contributing both conceptual advances and practical tools for identifying and addressing various forms of worker exploitation in supply chains (e.g. Gold *et al.*, 2015; New, 2015; Benstead *et al.*, 2018; Kougkoulos *et al.*, 2021).

Yet despite this progress, the OSCM domain still lacks an integrative conceptual language for describing how different forms of labour exploitation relate to one another. Research and policy debates often focus on discrete categories, most notably “modern slavery” (e.g. Gold *et al.*, 2015), “forced labour” (e.g. Vanpoucke and Klassen, 2024), “child labour” (e.g. Cho *et al.*, 2019) and “human trafficking” (e.g. Bhimani *et al.*, 2025). While these categories are important, such a categorical approach risks obscuring the fact that labour exploitation is rarely experienced or governed in neatly separated forms (Caruana *et al.*, 2025). LeBaron (2021) has emphasized the dynamism and fuzziness of concepts of labour exploitation as workers may move in and out of different degrees of exploitation over relatively short periods of time. In addition, exploitative arrangements frequently combine legal and illegal elements in ways that are difficult to disentangle (Bhimani *et al.*, 2025). As a result, the language of discrete, categorical labels can illuminate some parts of the problem while concealing others.

We think that this is problematic as current debates stress the need to increasingly extend beyond extreme forms of exploitation alone (LeBaron, 2021; Joyce and Ryan, 2024). There is growing recognition that an exclusive focus on modern slavery, forced labour and human trafficking may be too narrow if the broader aim is to understand and improve labour conditions in supply chains (Marques *et al.*, 2025; Skrivankova, 2010). More moderate but even more widespread forms of exploitation, such as precarious work, insecure employment, weak worker representation, below-living-wage employment and structural vulnerability, may not always meet the narrow definition (Caruana *et al.*, 2021) of modern slavery and human trafficking, yet they remain central to the issue of labour exploitation in many supply chains (Wiengarten *et al.*, 2021; Hopfgartner *et al.*, 2022). To support this argument, critics have argued that focusing too narrowly on extreme categories can distract attention from the wider economic and institutional conditions through which exploitation is produced and normalized, including inequalities of power, migration regimes and supply chain structures that depend on cheap and disposable labour (e.g. Hodkinson *et al.*, 2020; Gutierrez-Huerter *et al.*, 2023; de Lima *et al.*, 2025; Durach *et al.*, 2025).

We therefore believe that there is a need for a framework that can systematically capture the different shades of labour exploitation: not because existing concepts such as modern slavery or human trafficking are unhelpful but because they are insufficient on their own for understanding the broader spectrum of labour conditions in supply chains. If extreme forms of exploitation are examined in isolation, their interconnectedness with less severe forms of



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substandard working conditions remains unaddressed and decent work at the opposite end of the spectrum disappears from view.

We conceptualize the continuum of labour exploitation in supply chains as a spectrum ranging from extreme forms of exploitation, such as forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking, through more “moderate” forms of exploitation, such as precarious and insecure work, to the aspirational ideal of decent work. With this, we seek to offer a starting point for scholars to dig deeper into the questions of how different labour conditions are connected, how boundaries between them are drawn and how those boundaries shift across institutional and socio-economic contexts.

We thereby respond to the empirical reality that exploitation is often gradual, layered, context-dependent and dynamic. Second, we aim to overcome conceptual fragmentation in the literature by offering a common frame within which existing research can be joined to advance the state of knowledge and practical implications. Third, we respond to the normative and political challenge of specifying what kinds of labour conditions are regarded as non-acceptable, tolerated, or desirable within specific supply chain and societal contexts. This latter point is especially important, because the boundary between “acceptable” and “non-acceptable” labour conditions is shaped through socio-political debate, institutional arrangements and changing norms and values and is therefore historically contingent and open to contestation (Rametsteiner *et al.*, 2011; Di Marco, 2023; Matthews and Silva, 2024).

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we define the key anchors of the continuum of labour exploitation in supply chains. We then explain the continuum itself, including the criteria for positioning different forms of labour along it, before outlining how this framework can guide future research and help situate the contributions of the Special Issue.

Definitional anchors of the labour exploitation continuum

To operationalize the idea of a labour exploitation continuum, we first seek to define reference points along which different forms of work can be positioned. We introduce three definitional anchors: (1) extreme exploitation, (2) moderate exploitation and (3) decent work (Table 1).

We define labour exploitation broadly as *a set of work arrangements perceived to be characterized by unfair constraints, vulnerability and unfavourably asymmetric relationships between workers and other supply chain actors*. These unfavourable asymmetries manifest across multiple dimensions, including worker freedom, employment conditions, income and livelihood security, voice and agency, learning and growth and legal or institutional protection. Worker *perception* is key in understanding these asymmetries across each dimension, given differences in what is deemed “acceptable” and the need to ensure that our understanding is people-centric across global social-political divides (Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025). The three anchors introduced below (Table 1) represent ideal-typical configurations along these dimensions.

Extreme exploitation

Extreme exploitation refers to *work arrangements in which workers experience severe constraints on their freedom, development and agency*. These situations are typically characterized by coercion, deception, or the inability to exit employment, and correspond to concepts such as forced labour, debt bondage and other forms of modern slavery, and human trafficking (Crane, 2013; Gold *et al.*, 2015; LeBaron, 2021).

In such arrangements, workers’ freedom is either absent or fundamentally compromised. Entry into employment may be based on deception or coercion, and exit is prevented through physical, financial, or psychological means. For example, debt bondage occurs when an employee pays a recruitment fee, which then takes a considerable length of time to repay, preventing the employee from leaving until the debt is paid (LeBaron, 2021). In addition,

Table 1. Definitional anchors along the labour exploitation continuum

Dimension	Extreme exploitation	Moderate exploitation	Decent work
<i>Core characteristics</i>	Perceived severe constraints and coercion	Formal voluntariness with structural vulnerability and inherent discrimination	Secure, dignified and meaningful employment
<i>Worker freedom</i>	Highly restricted or absent (e.g. coercion, deception, inability to leave)	Formally free but strongly constrained by economic and social pressures	Full freedom to enter, remain and exit employment
<i>Employment conditions</i>	Unsafe, unregulated, often hidden or illegal	Precarious, insecure, unstable	Safe, stable and regulated
<i>Income and livelihood</i>	Extremely low or withheld wages; extreme dependency	Low, unstable, or insufficient income for workers and their families	Fair and stable income enabling a decent standard of living for workers and families
<i>Worker voice and agency</i>	Absent; no representation or bargaining power	Limited or weak voice; constrained representation and negotiation power	Strong voice, participation, association and collective representation
<i>Learning and growth</i>	Severely restricted to the immediate needs of job demands	Limited skill development opportunities keeping workers “stuck” in their jobs	Strong learning and development opportunities; purpose and self-actualization
<i>Legal and institutional status</i>	Illegal or criminal practices (e.g. trafficking, forced labour)	Legally ambiguous, illegitimate or minimally compliant arrangements	Fully compliant with labour laws, local and global societal expectations and social protection
<i>Examples</i>	Forced labour, human trafficking, debt bondage	Gig work, informal labour, zero-hour contract jobs, temporary and precarious work	Unionized, empowered, protected and socially embedded employment
<i>Related references</i>	Crane (2013), Gold <i>et al.</i> (2015), LeBaron (2021), Bhimani <i>et al.</i> (2025)	Koumenta and Williams (2019), Wiengarten <i>et al.</i> (2021), Hopfgartner <i>et al.</i> (2022), Wu and Huang (2024)	Reinecke and Donaghey (2021), Soundararajan <i>et al.</i> (2021), Pagell and Wilhelm (2025)

Source(s): Authors’ own work

employment conditions are frequently unsafe, unregulated and hidden from formal oversight, often intersecting with criminal activities (Bhimani *et al.*, 2025). Wages, if paid at all, are extremely low, withheld, or structured in ways that reinforce dependency such as through fraudulent accounting (Crane, 2013).

Worker voice and agency are effectively non-existent (Stephens *et al.*, 2025). Workers lack access to representation through work councils or trade unions, are excluded from collective bargaining to improve pay and/or working conditions and are unable to assert their rights, for example due to remoteness of location or status as illegal immigrants (Stephens *et al.*, 2025). From a legal and institutional perspective, these arrangements are typically illegal and constitute serious violations of human and labour rights (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021). Extreme exploitation therefore marks the point on the continuum at which work becomes fundamentally incompatible with basic human dignity and freedom (Gold *et al.*, 2015).

Moderate exploitation

Moderate exploitation encompasses work arrangements that are formally voluntary but characterized by structural worker vulnerability, constrained choice and inherent discrimination. This category includes precarious employment, understood as arrangements combining insecure contracts, low earnings and weak or absent worker representation, as well

as certain forms of temporary agency, gig and informal work (Wiengarten *et al.*, 2021; Hopfgartner *et al.*, 2022; Wu and Huang, 2024). For example, last minute delivery drivers often experience inherently uncertain levels of demand and are therefore vulnerable to exploitation, which can lead to high stress levels (Longoni *et al.*, 2025).

In contrast to extreme exploitation, workers in these arrangements are, in principle, free to enter and exit employment. However, this formal freedom is often limited in practice by economic necessity, lack of alternatives, limited skills, disabilities, migration status, or social and cultural marginalization (e.g. Wiengarten *et al.*, 2021; Hopfgartner *et al.*, 2022; Cole and Narayanan, 2026). In specific biographic and familiar contexts, workers thus may accept unfavourable conditions that they would otherwise reject (Kubacki *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, local social contexts may lead workers to resist top-down governance mechanisms to address labour exploitation, when these mechanisms are perceived to be culturally irrelevant (Le *et al.*, 2025; Razak *et al.*, 2026).

Employment conditions in this category are typically insecure, unstable and only partially regulated. Income tends to be low, volatile, or insufficient to ensure a stable livelihood such as in zero-hour contract jobs (Koumenta and Williams, 2019). While not necessarily illegal, such arrangements often operate at the margins of regulatory frameworks, may be conceived as illegitimate by broader parts of society, or rely on minimal compliance. Worker voice exists in theory but is weak or fragmented, with limited access to effective representation, association, or collective bargaining. A useful illustration of this dynamic is Durach *et al.* (2023), who show that temporary workers can initially contribute to process innovation but that their influence can become negative at higher levels within the organisation. Work councils' attempts to improve worker integration only buffer the adverse effects of temporary work (Durach *et al.*, 2023) and could be described as "icing on a non-existent cake!". That is, they may be perceived as attempts to sweeten the experience of exploitative work arrangements without changing dimensions that have more significant adverse impacts on the well-being of the workers.

Moderate exploitation thus captures the "grey zone" of labour conditions that fall short of decent work but do not meet the threshold of forced labour or trafficking. It is within this zone that many contemporary supply chains are organized, displaying a reluctant or purely instrumental view of the management of social issues (Hohn and Durach, 2023) by, amongst others, prioritizing comparative cost advantages using low-cost labour. Competitive pressures in interconnected supply chains, weak worker agency and insufficient stakeholder control contribute to the reproduction of exploitation in everyday business practices (Marques *et al.*, 2025).

Decent work

Decent work represents the aspirational benchmark against which labour conditions can be evaluated. Building on existing literature, we define decent work as *employment that is productive, secure, and meaningful; provides fair and stable income and social protection; and enables workers' dignity, voice, and participation* (Lysova *et al.*, 2019; Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021).

In this work arrangement, workers enjoy full freedom to enter, remain and exit employment, while having the opportunity to continuously advance their skillset, grow professionally and personally and to pursue self-actualization in their jobs. Employment conditions are safe, stable and regulated, supported by effective legal and institutional frameworks. Income is sufficient to ensure a decent standard of living for workers and their dependents and is complemented by social protection as stipulated by the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(1948\)](#).

Crucially, decent work is also characterized by strong worker voice and agency (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2021). Workers have access to representation, for instance, through work councils, can effectively participate in collective bargaining and are recognized as

legitimate stakeholders within supply chains and broader socio-political systems (Stephens *et al.*, 2025). This includes the ability to decisively influence working conditions and to participate in decisions that affect their livelihoods (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021). Importantly, governance mechanisms must be culturally relevant to meet local societal expectations, as Western-oriented mechanisms are not universally effective (Silva *et al.*, 2025; Schilling and Seuring, 2022). For example, recent research has identified the need to involve informal institutions (e.g. chieftaincy systems) in an African context to effect meaningful sustainability-related change (Razak *et al.*, 2026).

Decent work therefore marks the point on the continuum at which labour is not merely free from coercion but embedded in a system that supports human development, social inclusion and democratic and socio-cultural participation. Workers get re-humanized as an *end* in itself and not just a *means* in the sense of a production factor (Gold and Schleper, 2017); and thus, OSCM is addressed from a people-centric perspective (Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025). Decent work thus functions as an aspirational counterpoint to forms of extreme and moderate exploitation acknowledging the embeddedness of labour in the dynamics of work and employment (LeBaron, 2021) and the embeddedness of supply chains in socio-political and ecological systems (Gold and Wieland, 2024).

Taken together, these three anchors define the conceptual landmarks of the labour exploitation continuum. In practice, many labour conditions will fall between the polar types of extreme exploitation and decent work within the extensive “grey zone” of moderate exploitation. Moreover, empirically observed working arrangements often combine elements of different anchors (i.e. extreme exploitation, moderate exploitation, decent work) across the dimensions explained in Table 1 above. Nonetheless, we see the value of these definitional anchors in their ability to integrate formerly separate streams of research in OSCM and provide a common vocabulary to structure analysis and advance both academic knowledge development (Gold, 2014) and managerial and policy recommendations (Carter, 2008). In the next section, we build on these anchors to outline the continuum of labour exploitation in supply chains.

The continuum of labour exploitation in supply chains

Positioning along the continuum

The continuum conceptualizes labour conditions as ranging on a spectrum defined by the degree of constraint (e.g. level of worker freedom to enter and exit employment), vulnerability (e.g. exposure to exploitation due to socioeconomic, work-related or biographical conditions) and unfavourably asymmetric relationships between workers and other actors (e.g. related to worker voice and agency). As further explained above and summarised in Table 1, positions along this spectrum are determined by the configuration of multiple dimensions, including worker freedom, employment conditions, income and livelihood security, worker voice and agency, learning and growth and legal and institutional protection.

We have defined three anchors on the poles and in the centre of the continuum (namely extreme exploitation, moderate exploitation and decent work). Empirical observations of work arrangements will, however, rarely align perfectly with one of the three anchors. Instead, they exhibit hybrid characteristics, combining elements of constraint and freedom, security and insecurity, growth, voice and marginalization. The multi-dimensional continuum allows such configurations to be located relative to one another, making visible both incremental differences and more pronounced discontinuities. It thereby enables a more fine-grained analysis than categorical distinctions alone. Importantly, in line with LeBaron (2021), positions on the continuum are unlikely to be static. Throughout their biographies and development pathways, workers, firms and entire supply chains may move – in both directions – along the continuum over time. Economic shocks, regulatory changes, or shifts in sourcing strategies can push labour conditions towards greater precarity or, conversely, towards improved protection and stability (Trautrimis *et al.*, 2020;

Bednarski *et al.*, 2025), while biographic events such as migration, family status changes, health status and training and education may enhance or reduce the individual vulnerabilities of workers (Kubacki *et al.*, 2024).

Positioning along the continuum may also depend on stakeholder perspective (Khan *et al.*, 2025; Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025; Razak *et al.*, 2026). Downstream supply chain actor perspectives may be very different from those of upstream workers, and it is therefore argued that the same supply chain may include stakeholders who would have different interpretations of the level of labour exploitation. By positioning alternative perspectives at different points along the continuum, alternative interpretations can be readily explored, as the contested dimensions become explicit.

The role of physical and labour supply chains

The continuum is shaped by the interaction of two interrelated systems: physical supply chains and labour supply chains. While the former concerns the flow of products and services, the latter refers to “the sequence of employment relationships that a worker goes through in order to be deployed in a productive capacity” (Allain *et al.*, 2013, p. 42, cited in LeBaron, 2021, p. 30). This duality is important because it shifts attention from a material and product-centred supply chain view to one that also considers the processes through which labour is mobilised and deployed throughout supply chains.

Physical supply chains influence positions on the continuum through their structure and governance (Crane *et al.*, 2019; Wilhelm *et al.*, 2025). Fragmentation, outsourcing, and geographical dispersion may generate governance voids and opacity across supply chain tiers, creating conditions under which exploitative labour practices are more likely to persist and remain hidden (Gualandris *et al.*, 2021; Sodhi *et al.*, 2025). These risks are reinforced by operational pressures that shape the behaviour of upstream suppliers. Cost pressures, short lead times and demand volatility can constrain supplier margins, reduce room for responsible employment practices and shift risks unfairly upstream in the supply chain (Lund-Thomsen and Lindgreen, 2014). Conversely, greater visibility and accountability among supply chain actors may help rearrange supply network configurations and break up patterns of dominance thus facilitating decent working conditions (O’Brien and Dhanarajan, 2016; Busse *et al.*, 2017; Hohn and Durach, 2023).

Labour supply chains, in turn, determine how workers are recruited, contracted and managed (New, 2015; Fayezi *et al.*, 2025; Papier *et al.*, 2025). Focussing on these processes allows a distinct view of the vulnerabilities of human resources, which depend on both systemic (e.g. socio-economic, political, human rights) and individual (e.g. education, health, family) factors. Labour supply chains span a range from illegal trafficking networks (Bhimani *et al.*, 2025) to formalized employment relationships mediated by agencies, to stable and protected employment embedded in institutionalized systems of worker representation (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021). Even arrangements that appear fully legal and legitimate may involve (severely) exploitative practices, particularly when recruitment and employment are distributed across multiple (potentially hidden) actors (Marques *et al.*, 2025). Vulnerabilities may be exploited by recruitment deception and subsequent economic exploitation and/or continuous coercive control (Fletcher and Trautrim, 2024), underscoring the perspective of labour exploitation not as a static condition but as a processual and dynamic phenomenon (Marques *et al.*, 2025).

Understanding labour exploitation therefore requires analysing both supply chain types in tandem. One specific physical supply chain can host very different labour conditions depending on how labour is sourced and governed, and conversely, similar labour supply chain arrangements may lead to different outcomes depending on the configurations, pressures and power structures of the physical supply chain. Thus, the duality of physical and labour supply chains, and hence the interaction between systems of value creation and labour mobilisation influences positioning on the continuum of labour exploitation.

Shifting boundaries of legitimate exploitation

A central feature of the continuum is that the specific positioning of labour conditions is not purely descriptive but also normative. The extent to which a given work arrangement is considered “acceptable”, or “non-acceptable” in a certain societal context is shaped by the prevailing institutional arrangements, cultural norms, stakeholder expectations and public policies. These boundaries are neither fixed nor universal, and may vary according to stakeholder group and/or supply chain actor. They are continuously negotiated, reproduced and altered through socio-political processes and vary across countries, industries and time periods (Rametsteiner *et al.*, 2011; Di Marco, 2023). For example, forms of precarious work that are tolerated or even normalized in one context may be contested or regulated in another. Similarly, new forms of work organization, such as gig and platform work, challenge existing classifications and require ongoing reassessment of where the boundaries of “acceptable” work arrangements should be drawn (Wu and Huang, 2024).

Through the continuum, we seek to make this socio-political debate and struggle about legitimate labour exploitation in supply chains explicit. The continuum highlights that transitions between moderate and extreme exploitation, or between moderate exploitation and decent work, are often gradual and contested. This is particularly evident in cases where legal compliance coexists with substantive worker vulnerability, or where improvements in one dimension (e.g. income) are offset by deterioration in another (e.g. security or voice).

Figure 1 visualizes the labour exploitation continuum as the integration of these elements. The definitional anchors provide orientation, the dimensions determine positioning and the interaction of physical and labour supply chains determine how different forms of exploitation emerge and persist. The zone of “acceptable” work can shift further towards extreme labour exploitation or further away from it; in addition, the extent of this zone can either shrink or increase over time depending on the catalyst. Whilst we argue that extreme labour exploitation should never be included within the “acceptable” range, we acknowledge that much moderate exploitation may be “acceptable” to groups of stakeholders depending on many complex and inter-connected factors such as pragmatism, expectations, values and social context.

Implications for research

Conceptualizing labour exploitation as a continuum opens several avenues for future research in OSCM and adjacent domains. First, it enables comparative positioning of different labour

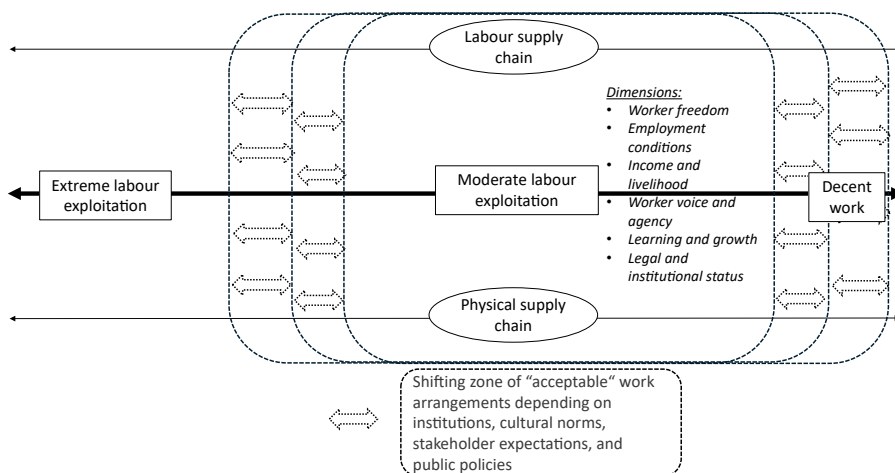


Figure 1. Shades of exploitation: a continuum from extreme exploitation to decent work. Authors’ own work

arrangements within and across supply chains. Researchers can examine how specific practices, sectors, or governance mechanisms relate to different points on the continuum, and how these positions vary across institutional contexts. This raises the question of whether drivers and mitigators identified for one level of labour exploitation are also effective at more or less extreme levels, or whether their effects are threshold-dependent and confined to a narrow zone of the continuum. Researchers may ask, for example, whether a supplier development programme that reduces extreme exploitation also has a significant positive impact on labour conditions when applied to a context within the grey zone of moderate exploitation? Answering such questions might align well with comparative and configurational research designs; and can be further investigated using action research. Comparative case studies across sectors and countries can trace how the same practice occupies different positions in different institutional contexts. Configurational methods such as fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis are suited to capturing how combinations of the dimensions in [Table 1](#) jointly produce a given position on the continuum. Institutional theory might offer a fruitful lens for explaining cross-context variation and a contingency perspective can help specify the boundary conditions under which drivers and mitigators travel along the continuum or lose their effect.

Second, it draws attention to dynamics along the continuum. Future research can investigate the processes through which labour conditions deteriorate or improve over time, from both a biographical worker perspective and a job or workstation perspective. One could ask, through what mechanisms do workers move into and out of moderate and extreme exploitation, and how do biographical events such as migration, changes in family status, health, or training interact with changes at job level to shift positions? A related question could concern agency: what roles do firms, intermediaries, suppliers, customers, civil society organisations, or public policies play in shaping these trajectories; and when and how do workers respond to deteriorating conditions? Such questions might rather call for longitudinal and qualitative designs, including ethnographic studies, in-depth interviews with workers, and panel data that can follow arrangements over time. Rich data infrastructures regarding panel data already exist and we encourage their use: in Germany, for example, the Research Data Centre (FDZ) of the German Federal Employment Agency at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) provides longitudinal individual employment biographies (Sample of Integrated Labour Market Biographies, SIAB), linked employer–employee data connecting these biographies to establishments (Linked-Employer-Employee Data, LIAB), household data on labour market participation and social security, and data on migration and labour market integration (IAB-SOEP Migration Sample). Theories that may be relevant here include agency theory and socio-material perspectives.

Third, the continuum highlights the importance of multi-dimensional analysis. It encourages researchers to boldly move beyond single indicators and to consider how different dimensions of labour conditions interact to jointly create specific forms of working arrangements. This is particularly relevant for understanding trade-offs and unintended consequences, for example when interventions improve compliance with specific aspects of work conditions (such as working hours) but fail to account for the actual needs of workers who might prefer flexibility to working longer hours. Or, when does a move to formal contracts raise income but leave worker voice and agency weak? Studying such interactions requires designs that treat labour conditions as a configuration or bundle of dimensions rather than a set of separate variables. Configurational methods might be useful here as well, and system dynamics modelling could reveal time-dependent feedback loops through which single-dimension interventions rebound across the other dimensions. To ensure that worker perception is captured, such methods may need to be complemented with ethnographic studies, worker interviews, or diary studies.

Finally, the framework invites greater engagement with the normative foundations of supply chain management. Through exploring the assumptions that underlie judgments about “acceptable” and “non-acceptable” labour conditions, future research building on the labour

exploitation continuum may contribute to ongoing debates on supply chain justice, responsibility and the role of business in society. How do downstream supply chain actors, upstream workers and other stakeholders differ in where they locate the boundary of acceptable labour conditions and through what socio-political processes is that boundary negotiated, reproduced and shifted over time? What assumptions and convictions are taken for granted and thus deeply institutionally ingrained in a specific cultural context? As these questions are normative and subject to individual and collective sense-making, they appear to be good candidates for critical and interpretive research of supply chains as embedded in political, socio-economic and ecological systems.

Table 2 offers a summary of illustrative research questions for each direction.

Implications for business practice and policymaking

The continuum should stimulate managers to rethink their role in addressing the shades of labour exploitation. Is their mandate from investors and society simply to identify the presence or absence of extreme exploitation, or do they also have responsibilities regarding labour conditions across the full continuum? Corporate due diligence and social auditing remain largely targeted towards forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking. Yet, labour conditions in global supply chains regularly sit within the grey zone of moderate exploitation, where precarious contracts, below-living-wage and weak worker representation coexist with formal legal compliance. This has three managerial implications.

First, it calls for assessments that go beyond single indicators such as wages or working hours and instead considers how worker freedom, employment conditions, income and livelihood security, worker voice and agency, learning and growth and legal and institutional protection combine in any given work arrangement. The reason is that an improvement along one dimension may be offset by deterioration along another; a move to formal, better-paid contracts, for instance, may leave worker voice and agency largely untouched. Second, it should remind managers to treat audit results as only valid at the time of assessment, since economic shocks, changes in sourcing strategies and a buying firm's

Table 2. A research agenda for the labour exploitation continuum

Research direction	Illustrative research questions
<i>Comparative impacts of supply chain practices within and across supply chains</i>	(i) How do specific practices, sectors and governance mechanisms map onto positions along the continuum and how does this vary across institutional contexts? (ii) Do drivers and mitigators identified for extreme exploitation also apply to moderate exploitation, or are their effects threshold-dependent?
<i>Dynamics along the continuum over time</i>	(i) Through what processes do labour conditions deteriorate or improve over time and how do biographical events and job or workstation changes interact to shift positions? (ii) What roles do firms, intermediaries, public policies and civil society actors play in these trajectories and when do workers respond through (internal) withdrawal or exit rather than voice?
<i>Multi-dimensional analysis of interactions across dimensions</i>	(i) How do the dimensions in Table 1 interact to jointly produce a given working arrangement? (ii) When does an intervention that improves one dimension deteriorate another, and what unintended consequences follow?
<i>Normative foundations of “acceptable” and “non-acceptable” labour conditions</i>	(i) Whose perspective counts in locating the boundary of acceptable labour conditions, and how do supply chain actors and stakeholders differ? (ii) Through what socio-political processes is this boundary negotiated, reproduced and shifted over time?
Source(s): Authors' own work	

own cost pressures, short lead times and demand volatility can quickly push suppliers' labour conditions towards greater precarity. Taken together, we suggest that firms which continue to treat labour conditions as a reputational risk to be screened out will capture only the extreme end of the continuum and miss the grey zone in which most of their workers are employed. This leads to the third managerial implication, as it suggests that progress towards decent work and "humanized" supply chains depends on strengthening worker voice and agency rather than relying on top-down control (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021; Soundararajan *et al.*, 2021) and on governance mechanisms attuned to local cultural and institutional contexts, given that Western-oriented mechanisms are not universally applicable (e.g. Razak *et al.*, 2026).

For policymaking, the continuum helps to assess (and remind politicians of) both the reach and the limits of current labour and human rights regulation (Bodrožić and Gold, 2025). Simultaneously, it may expose the intentionality of government regulation (Leong and Howlett, 2022) that is only targeted to extreme forms of exploitation. Regulation aimed at extreme categories (e.g. Dutch Child Labour Due Diligence Act, UK Modern Slavery Act) only addresses the most visible human rights abuses while leaving the wider economic and institutional conditions that produce and normalize exploitation largely intact. These conditions include inequalities of power, migration regimes and cost pressures transmitted along supply chains. With the present paper we also explicate that the boundary between "acceptable" and "non-acceptable" labour conditions is not fixed but continuously negotiated through socio-political processes (Rametsteiner *et al.*, 2011; Di Marco, 2023) and that policymakers are themselves key participants in drawing and redrawing it; new forms of work organization such as gig and platform work accordingly require ongoing reassessment (Wu and Huang, 2024).

Introducing the contributions of the special issue

The following five research articles are contained in this Special Issue.

Based on a systematic review of 87 articles, Asadov *et al.* (2026) look at two forms of decoupling as the reasons for the persistence of "extreme" forms of labour exploitation in global supply chains: policy-practice decoupling (gap between corporate anti-slavery policies and actual practices) and means-ends decoupling (gap between practices and the realization of effective worker protection). NGOs as social intermediaries may facilitate durable progress through "synergistic recoupling" by simultaneously exerting high-intensity external pressure (which motivates firms to act) and providing internal support (which builds firms' capability to act).

Hossain *et al.* (2026) examine the prevention of modern slavery – an "extreme" form of labour exploitation – within the garment industry in Bangladesh, and ask why the mechanisms adopted in response to macro-economic pressures are often ineffective on the factory floors. This qualitative, abductive study, which is informed by institutional theory and the theory of planned behaviour, explains how, at a meso-level, weak management commitment, cost and lead-time pressures and fragmented supply chain control make workers perceive modern slavery prevention mechanisms (such as grievance systems) as merely symbolic. This undermines workers' trust, social support and sense of control, leading them to avoid disclosing exploitation at a micro-level.

Through a qualitative empirical study in Pakistan, Khan *et al.* (2026) look at a broader spectrum from "extreme" to "moderate" labour exploitation and show that labour governance in agrifood supply chains fails upstream because top-down corporate and market logics clash with the local "social logic". This creates a "messy paralysis" of governance where farming communities actively resist imposed standards, limiting their effectiveness. The study concludes that recognizing local values is essential for avoiding this clash and thus for both protecting corporate reputation and enhancing workers' well-being. This points to the challenge of aligning supply chain governance with local norms and perceptions, ensuring that

all dimensions of exploitation are addressed (Figure 1), and not only certain dimensions at the expense of others.

Based on an event study of 5,649 disclosures of upstream labour exploitation linked to US buying firms from 2007 to 2024, Wang *et al.* (2026) find that upstream labour exploitation in supply chains trigger negative stock-market reactions for downstream buying firms. This confirms that investors hold firms morally accountable for worker and human rights violations across their supply chains. Differentiating along the continuum of labour exploitation (Figure 1), the study reports stronger negative reactions for exploitation types that investors perceive as more severe (e.g. forced labour) and negative reputational spillovers to non-reported but linked buying firms.

Xu *et al.* (2026) scrutinize labour precarity – situated within the zone of “moderate” exploitation – in global fashion supply chains, arguing that predatory purchasing practices of brands shift risks onto supplier factories and keep workers trapped in multiple dimensions of structural precarity. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among garment workers in southern China, the study reveals how workers exert ethical agency through practices of care that establish fairness, reciprocity and collective resilience. The authors call for further adopting an ethics-of-care approach to supply chain management that facilitates worker agency and voice by leveraging the power of human relations and contextual sensitivity.

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Further reading

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