

Hearing the unheard: theorising the moral fabric against labour precarity

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Abstract

Purpose – Labour precarity is pervasive across global production systems, yet workers' lived realities remain largely marginalised in supply chain narratives. This study challenges dominant framings of labour issues by advancing an alternative account attentive to human relations and connections.

Design/methodology/approach – This research enters the factory shop floors of a key production hub for a global fashion giant in southern China. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted alongside garment workers, we combined a feminist approach with an interpretivist-constructivist positioning and engaged in theorising through reflexive reasoning while continually revisiting the researchers' positionality and ethical commitment.

Findings – Supply chains governed by patriarchal logics generate precarious working conditions through predatory purchasing practices. The pursuit of efficiency, flexibility and responsiveness obscures the human cost of labour, trapping workers in multiple dimensions of structural precarity. Grounded in workers' everyday experiences and interactions as they navigate these conditions, this research reveals how ethical agency manifests through care practices that sustain collective resilience. We theorise these findings into a moral fabric for addressing supply chain labour precarity, attentive to contextualised epistemological and methodological approaches.

Originality/value – This study introduces the ethics of care from the feminist literature as a framework for addressing supply chain labour precarity, emphasising human relations over universalised standards. Contextualised approaches that acknowledge indigenous and local knowledge are essential, and this study links these approaches to the Confucian virtues evident in the research context.

Keywords Precarious work, Fashion supply chain, Patriarchal logics, Focused ethnography, Ethics of care, Ethical agency

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Supply chains operate within a capitalist system driven by patriarchy (Kothari *et al.*, 2019) and rooted in labour exploitation (Quijano, 2000). Despite comprising millions of workers across fragmented production networks, they remain largely invisible to those who govern and profit from their labour (Marques *et al.*, 2025; Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025). For decades, supply chain management has prioritised operational and cost performance at the expense of social and environmental objectives (Hohn and Durach, 2023; Montabon *et al.*, 2016). Grounded in capitalist shareholder primacy, dominant efficiency-driven strategies focused on profit and compliance have failed to account for labour conditions, thereby perpetuating the systemic challenges workers face (Rogerson *et al.*, 2025). Market-based, instrumental governance mechanisms, such as audits and corporate social responsibility programmes, have been criticised for incentivising symbolic compliance while failing to bring about meaningful change (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021; Le *et al.*, 2025). Structural inequalities and power asymmetries sustain firms' relational distance from suppliers and workers, who bear the



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greatest risks (Gold and Schleper, 2017; LeBaron, 2021). Competing rhetorical framings of responsibility leave the question of who bears the cost of inaction conveniently unresolved (Gutierrez-Huerter *et al.*, 2023). Unless the foundational assumptions of operations and supply chain management (OSCM) are revisited (Luzzini *et al.*, 2024; Matthews *et al.*, 2016) and the structural mechanisms through which global supply chains produce harm are challenged (Marques *et al.*, 2025; Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025), precarious labour conditions will remain a foreseeable systemic outcome (Le *et al.*, 2025).

Operating within labour-intensive global supply chains, the garment industry exemplifies these dynamics with particular intensity (Huq *et al.*, 2014; Karaosman *et al.*, 2023). Cost pressures normalise subcontracting and informality, while dominant buyers leverage their purchasing power to demand lower prices, shorter lead times and greater flexibility in response to abrupt order changes (Anner, 2019). Risks are systematically transferred to the most vulnerable actors in the form of precarious contracts, excessive overtime and suppressed wages (Hickel *et al.*, 2024; Soundararajan and Brammer, 2018).

Recognising workers as individuals embedded within complex cultural and political contexts is a prerequisite for any meaningful interrogation of labour conditions (Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025; Stephens *et al.*, 2024). Universalised and decontextualised approaches impose external logics that silence situated realities and legitimise hypocritical practices (Glover and Touboullic, 2020). Without centring workers' lived realities and indigenous knowledge, social interventions risk reproducing the very problems they claim to address (Corbett, 2024; Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025). Yet, although numerous OSCM studies have examined labour conditions, workers are often treated as voiceless and obedient actors (Le *et al.*, 2025) while the terms of remediation are defined by those most physically and emotionally distant from these conditions (Huq *et al.*, 2014). The agentic power of labour remains unrecognised, and its behavioural, relational and situated dimensions are rendered systematically invisible (Glover, 2020). *Hearing the unheard* therefore requires critical engagement with both the foundational assumptions and the epistemic approaches that shape OSCM research (McCarthy *et al.*, 2018; Soundararajan *et al.*, 2021).

This study builds on focused ethnography conducted alongside garment workers. The research context is a site where structural precarity is made substantially evident within globalised garment supply chains, with the production stage mainly employing a migrant and temporary workforce. Moving beyond the documentation of precarious conditions, the study asks: *How does OSCM, ruled by patriarchal logics, perpetuate precarity on a garment factory shop floor? How do garment workers respond to structural precarity within the conditions in which they are embedded?*

2. Literature foundation

2.1 Supply chains, patriarchal logics and structural precarity

Capitalism is an economic system rooted in labour exploitation (Quijano, 2000), which can be understood as the latest stage of patriarchy (Kothari *et al.*, 2019). Patriarchy operates as a self-reinforcing logic that normalises hierarchical control through dominant power and rule-based governance (Demaria and Kothari, 2017; Narrain, 2017), privileging *wealth accumulation* over social reproduction (LeBaron, 2015; Quijano, 2000), often at the expense of those who sustain the system, and generating power asymmetries that simultaneously produce great wealth and great poverty (Tsing, 2009). In OSCM, this logic is deeply embedded in the objectives of *profit maximisation, efficiency, flexibility and responsiveness* (Montabon *et al.*, 2016; Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025; Wiengarten *et al.*, 2021). Buying firms pursue cost reduction through cost-extractive standards, predatory purchasing practices and penalty-based supplier management, systematically disregarding suppliers' and workers' needs (Anner, 2019; Karaosman and Marshall, 2023). Flexibility is enforced through informal and temporary labour practices and through

irregular, unstable orders imposed on upstream actors (Huq *et al.*, 2014; Marques *et al.*, 2025), while extreme responsiveness concentrates risk on the most vulnerable actors in the chain (Sodhi and Tang, 2021).

Where supply chains are governed by patriarchal logics, relationships are characterised by power hierarchies that increase the dependency of, and pressure on, weaker parties to absorb adverse conditions, since exit from key relationships carries prohibitive costs (Fletcher and Trautrim, 2024; Karaosman *et al.*, 2023). Underpinning economic efficiency measures guide operations to suppress labour costs (Tsing, 2009; Wiengarten *et al.*, 2021), prioritising capital extraction over the conditions of those who labour within them (Kothari *et al.*, 2019). This dynamic exacerbates *precarious working conditions* and exposes workers to *structural precarity* (Lewis *et al.*, 2015), an entangled condition of powerlessness, economic dependence and social marginalisation (Wang, 2025; Williams *et al.*, 2025). It manifests in forms of *employment precarity*, *labour intensification* and *social and communal exclusion* embedded within the organisation of work (Campbell and Price, 2016; Peticca-Harris *et al.*, 2025). Workers' well-being requires conditions in which their labour is recognised and their dignity affirmed (Vieno, 2023), yet access to such conditions is contingent on their position within hierarchies shaped by power (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2021). The complex expressions of capitalism result in *vulnerability* (Omid *et al.*, 2023), produced and reproduced through the structures that govern production (Tsing, 2009).

Labour-intensive sectors such as food and fashion have been criticised for treating labour as a commodity (Marques *et al.*, 2025; Thompson and Vincent, 2010), thereby disassociating workers from the networks of recognition and relation that render labour humanly significant (Vieno, 2023). Social ties and relations constitute a vital resource in building supply chain partnerships (Celestini *et al.*, 2022), yet the extent to which actors under structural precarity can sustain, manage or disrupt these relations remains poorly understood (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2021). Patriarchal logics reinforce the invisibility of these actors, who are the core constituents of supply chains (Marques *et al.*, 2025), leaving the fundamental assumptions, mechanisms and conditions that generate structural precarity largely unchallenged (McCarthy *et al.*, 2022; Soundararajan *et al.*, 2021).

2.2 Ethics of care as an alternative lens for labour research

Governance approaches embedded in patriarchal logics produce epistemic conditions in which voices different from dominant ones are routinely silenced (Gilligan, 1982, 1995). They normalise relational detachment at the expense of already vulnerable actors, whose voices, even when formally included, are interpreted and assimilated through dominant cultural and institutional framings (Chowdhury, 2023; Noddings, 1984).

The ethics of care responds to this condition by reorienting connection as a fundamental condition of human life, emphasising *collective well-being* through empathic, reciprocal and responsive relations (Held, 2005; Tronto, 1993). Reflecting *feminist morality*, Gilligan (1982, 1995) presents *care* as a socially constructed and ontologically diverse concept, closely related to empathy and attentiveness to relationships (Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012). The ethics of care *recognises vulnerability*, framing it as an embodied and relational openness towards others, a shared human condition that enables connection (Johansson and Wickström, 2023; Reed, 2026), while *attending to relations* and seeking to *avoid harm* (Gilligan, 1982, 1995; Held, 2005). Persons are understood as relational beings who are morally and epistemologically interdependent (Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012; Noddings, 1984). Owing to its potential for social good, the concept was later extended beyond individuals, with care situated as a social and political practice rooted in concrete, enduring and reciprocal relationships (Held, 2005), foregrounding moral democracy (Tronto, 1993).

Care manifests a form of ethical agency, crucial to interconnected relationships, through which people's needs are met and relations between them are sustained and repaired (Noddings, 1984). Care as a practice unfolds through several phases: *caring about*, the moral

capacity to recognise need; *caring for*, the assumption of responsibility to respond; *care-giving*, the actual work of meeting need; and *care-receiving*, the response to care received that completes the cycle (Tronto, 1993). Tronto (2013) later extended this framework to include *caring-with*, portraying it as a co-constitutive relational process among participants grounded in solidarity and trust (Johansson and Wickström, 2023; Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012). It entails an inherently *other-oriented* dimension (Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012; Tronto, 2013), through which individuals' struggles can only be adequately addressed when their roots in broader social and political contexts are made visible (Reed, 2025; Wang, 2025). Table 1 synthesises the core constructs discussed in this section.

Despite its long presence in feminist scholarship, the ethic of care remains relatively underdeveloped in OSCM (McCarthy *et al.*, 2018). Workers in labour-intensive supply chains are frequently marginalised, silenced and exposed to hazards and violence (Shivakumar and Jerrentrup, 2025), with deep power asymmetries concentrating precarious labour in industries where structural decisions are made exclusively at the top of global value chains (Guerra Scheiwiller *et al.*, 2023; Karaosman *et al.*, 2023). In this light, the ethics of care offer an alternative analytical and normative lens for humanising supply chain research in the service of societal wellbeing (Luzzini *et al.*, 2024; Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025), enabling a deeper understanding of what care means in practice in the critical context of global supply chains (Gümüşay and Reinecke, 2024).

3. Focused ethnography: an epistemic commitment to hear the unheard

People are inherently embedded in social contexts (Ehrenreich, 2002). An ethnographic approach to knowledge creation involves full immersion in a particular setting to interpret and understand phenomena from the inside out (Jerolmack and Khan, 2018), examining the social world from a naturalistic stance by living in the field rather than merely visiting, while attending carefully to context and background (Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Focused ethnography is a particular form well suited to examining clearly delineated social phenomena involving fragmented subpopulations or specialised fields of inquiry (Trundle and Phillips, 2023). The method employs intensive immersion that, although time-compressed, remains powerful in supporting analytically deep inquiry (Knoblauch, 2005; Wall, 2014).

Ethnography offers a strong methodological fit with labour studies through its emphasis on context and lived realities (Pun, 2005). This study is situated in a southern China urban village densely populated with garment factories supplying a global fashion giant, where migrant workers constitute most of the population (see Appendix 1). An interpretivist-constructivist positioning enables the unpacking of these realities from within, attending to how workers navigate and respond to the conditions that structure their lives (Geertz, 2001).

3.1 Research protocol and access to the field

Abductive reflexivity was essential throughout the ethnographic research process, shaping how field encounters were approached, interpreted and progressively reoriented over time (England, 1994; Jerolmack and Khan, 2018). The study initially intended to focus on how global supply chains shape workers' lived experience and, consequently, their well-being. The original protocol centred on livelihoods, physical and psychological well-being, as well as workers' responses (e.g. staying or exiting) and motivations. As the labour rhythm was intense and demanding, leaving little time or space for reflection, fieldwork was structured into two phases separated by a three-week interval (Table 2) to ensure reflexive accountability (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). This pause provided an opportunity to step back from the intensity of fieldwork and to discuss and recalibrate the research protocol (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Jerolmack and Khan, 2018) based on first-hand experience and a deeper

Table 1. Comparison between the patriarchal logics and ethics of care

	OSCM governed by patriarchal logics	Ethics of care
Root	Capitalism (Kothari <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Quijano, 2000)	Feminist morality (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984)
Purpose	Wealth accumulation (LeBaron, 2015)	Collective well-being (Held, 2005; Tronto, 2013)
Objectives	Maximise profit, efficiency, flexibility and responsiveness (Montabon <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025; Wiengarten <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	- Acknowledge vulnerability (Gilligan, 1982; Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012) - Attend to relations (Gilligan, 1995; Tronto, 1993) - Avoid hurt (Gilligan, 1982; Hamington and Flower, 2021)15/06/2026 14:32:00
Mechanisms*	Non-exhaustive list - Cost reduction tactics - Predatory purchasing practices - Flexible on-demand, small orders towards upstream - Informal/temporal labour practice - Penalty-based supplier management (Anner, 2019; Huq <i>et al.</i>, 2014; Karaosman <i>et al.</i>, 2023; Marques <i>et al.</i>, 2025; Montabon <i>et al.</i>, 2016; Vieno, 2023)	Contextual moral reasoning: Grounded in the particular circumstances, histories and needs of those involved, the Ethics of Care attends to the irreducible particularity of human relations over abstract universal principles through - <i>Caring about</i>: The moral capacity to recognise and attend to the needs and vulnerability of others, requiring <u>attentiveness</u> beyond one's own concerns (Tronto, 1993). Whose needs get noticed is shaped by power relations (Held, 2005; Tronto, 2013) - <i>Caring for</i>: The assumption of <u>responsibility</u> to respond to an identified need, marking the transition from passive attentiveness to active moral engagement (Tronto, 1993, 2013) - <i>Care-giving</i>: The direct, embodied and actual work of care in meeting needs requiring the moral quality of <u>competence</u> (Tronto, 1993). The <i>one-caring</i>. The <i>one-caring</i> receives and responds to the <i>cared-for</i>'s reality and acts not from obligation or principle. The motivation originates in the relation, not in the self (Noddings, 1984) - <i>Care-receiving</i>: The <i>cared-for</i>'s response to care received, serving as the only means to assess whether care has been adequate, which requires the moral quality of <u>responsiveness</u> (Noddings, 1984; Tronto, 1993) - <i>Caring with</i>: Care mutually constituted among participants, grounded in <u>plurality</u>, <u>communication</u>, <u>trust and respect</u> and <u>solidarity</u> (Tronto, 2013) <i>Other-oriented care</i> as a form of practice directed outward towards the well-being of others, describing a moral orientation in which the needs, vulnerabilities and experiences of others become the primary reference point for action and judgement (Johansson and Wickström, 2023)

Note(s): *Underlined are the ethical values for each phase of care Tronto (2013)

Source(s): Authors' own work

understanding of factory work. Consequently, the research became more attentive to workers' interactions, relationships and agentic capacities as contextualised responses to the system in which they are embedded.

Table 2. Fieldwork details

	Details
Research setting	An urban village in Guangdong, China, densely populated with garment factories, where residents are predominantly migrant workers from other regions of the country engaged, either directly or indirectly, with the adjacent factories. The factories in this area are known for their role as key contract suppliers to a fast fashion Brand operating a global supply chain ^a
Time ^b	Phase 1 Phase 2 - Late March to early April 2025 (over 80 h on shop floor) - Researcher A in field, two researchers in remote support - Late April to early May 2025 (over 150 h on shop floor) - Researcher B in field, two researchers in remote support
Fieldwork context ^c	Factory X Factory Y Factory Z^d - Scale: Small; <40 workers; <15 workers in finishing division - Points of interaction: all workers in finishing division, 2 supervisors, 1 factory owner - Scale: Medium to large; <80 workers; <30 in finishing division - Points of interaction: most workers in finishing division, 1 supervisor, 2 sewing workers, 1 factory manager - Scale: Large; >120 workers; <50 in finishing division; ~15 factory in trimming section - Points of interaction: most workers in finishing division, 1 supervisor, 2 internal logistics workers, 1 factory owner
Method	Engagement with the field - Researchers applied for a job from the village's public hiring board. After direct contact with division supervisors, researchers joined the trimming section (finishing division) as temporary workers. Throughout the fieldwork, researchers served as ordinary workers labouring under the same conditions (schedule and workload) as the others. Observation and interaction took place from within through informal and unstructured exchanges on the shop floor while labouring, during breaks and over meals, grounded in their shared identity as garment workers. Conversations with all actors were natural and unmediated. Contact with workers and supervisors was sustained after the fieldwork Nature of fieldwork - Fieldwork was conducted covertly in factory X and factory Y to familiarise the researchers with the research context and to develop practical skills in garment work. No data from these two factories are reported in the paper. In factory Z, fieldwork began covertly but shifted to overt participation (details explained in the paper). Verbal and adaptive forms of informal consent were obtained from participants Researcher's positionality - Researchers joined the trimming section as novices, contributing to and sharing the workload while observing from within the collective. As researchers received care from the collective expressed through reciprocity and benevolence, their positionality gradually shifted, marked by a growing sense of responsibility and kinship developing towards the collective
Data content	Fieldnote - observation of the village; observation of factories, planning, work arrangement, and day-to-day operations on the shop floor - observation of workers, their relationship and interaction, interaction between workers and the management, both during- and off-work - conversations with workers, both during- and off-work, concerning themselves, their livelihood, their family and life - tension and conflict on the shop floor, resolution, and workers' response to the system - experience with the hiring and payment system Researchers' diary - reflections and personal feelings in becoming a trimmer; feelings and emotional processes of being accepted and becoming part of the collective - self-reflexivity and positionality throughout the fieldwork

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Details	
Data corpus ^e	<i>During fieldwork</i> - <i>Fieldnote (self-recording)</i>: 423 min (phase 1) + 1,074 min (phase 2) - <i>Fieldnote (written)</i>: 208 pages in Chinese; 40,718 words (phase 1) + 142,361 words (phase 2) - <i>Photo</i>: 260 photos (urban village, factory, work) - <i>Video and audio recording</i>: 3 videos (urban village, factory); 3 recording (factory ambient, operation noise) - <i>Screenshots</i>: 26 items (screenshots of work registration/tracking App) <i>Post fieldwork</i> - <i>Multimedia data shared by workers/supervisors^f</i>: 64 photos, video clip and screenshots (work, factory, chats, workers' social media) - <i>Researchers' sketches</i>: 6 sketches (plant layout, character profiles)
Secondary data	- <i>Brand's public data</i>: company website, 2 textual documents - <i>Commentary/news/report of the Brand</i>: 4 videos (transcribed); 49 textual documents (report, news)

Note(s): ^aThe names of the village and the brand have been intentionally omitted to prevent the factories and workers from being identified, ^bPrecise fieldwork dates have been intentionally omitted to protect the researchers; Daily working hours have been intentionally omitted to prevent any unintended and adverse consequence to the field, ^cDue to the temporary and informal nature of factory work, labour turnover and variation are extremely high; all figures are estimations of the average, ^dFieldwork in Factory X was led by Researcher A in phase 1 and fieldwork in Factory Y was led by Researcher B in phase 2; while Factory Z served as the shared research site across both phases, with each researcher having worked there at different points in time. Given the high labour turnover characteristic of the sector, moving between factories are free from raising suspicion among managers or co-workers, ^eThe self-recorded fieldnote served as basis of written fieldnote. Coding and analysis were performed on the original fieldnotes (written, Chinese). Only the excerpts included in the paper have been translated into English with carefully language check, ^fFor privacy and ethical considerations, these data are only checked for triangulation purpose and excluded from publication

Source(s): Authors' own work

Our approach to accessing the field differed fundamentally from engaging workers through brands or formal channels, which risk mediation or may be perceived by workers as reflecting dominant power. The team began by collecting video footage of garment factory work, and scenes from a particular urban village – a key production hub for a global fashion giant – drew our attention. Further evidence was gathered through formal and informal channels to understand the work regime, operations and hiring practices in the region, confirming that this would be an appropriate setting due to its central role in a global supply chain and the feasibility of gaining access. At this stage, one researcher entered the field by seeking temporary employment as a trimmer, a garment role characterised by extremely high labour turnover in the region while requiring minimal prior experience.

Researchers' self-reflexivity regarding positionality and the field is central to the feminist research approach adopted in this study (Deutsch, 2004). The field was never treated merely as a source of data; instead, reciprocal relationships were grounded in empathy and respect through the process of *becoming garment workers* (England, 1994). In the first fieldwork phase, the researcher presented herself as a college student seeking temporary income during a school break. While this was genuine and credible, this positioning created a sense of *difference*, as the researcher did not share the same livelihood urgency as workers. In the second phase, this was adjusted by having another researcher join as an ordinary worker, accessing temporary employment through village job-posting boards and working under the same conditions and schedules as factory workers (Strudwick, 2019).

This study seeks to avoid reproducing hierarchical dynamics that position the field and labour as subjects of externally imposed procedures (Chowdhury, 2023). Recognising the

prevalence of informal workers operating outside institutional frameworks, formal procedures and written consent are culturally unfamiliar instruments that would immediately dissolve the relational trust through which the study was made possible. They risk enacting forms of intrusion that the research encounter itself is unable to repair (Shivakumar and Jerrentrup, 2025). To avoid invoking the logic of *investigation*, often familiar to workers as an instrument of institutional power that may foreclose authentic encounter, the fieldwork began in a covert manner. Disclosure of the researchers' identity and intent was planned for an appropriate and considered moment (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019) to ensure ethical sensitivity. The transition from covert to overt status took place at a later stage of the fieldwork, when sufficient privacy on the shop floor allowed for disclosure through one-to-one conversations rather than a collective announcement, and trust had been established throughout the process. This was met with a warm reception, resulting in verbal consent for participants' stories to be represented. Verbal and flexible forms of agreement were prioritised over formal protocols to ensure that consent aligned with workers' customary practices (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Jerolmack and Khan, 2018). Where any worker withheld agreement, the related observations would have been removed without question. Protecting workers and factories from identification remained a core commitment, and all identifiable information has been intentionally omitted.

3.2 Documentation and analysis

Immersed in the same physical and emotional environment as workers, the researchers engaged in embodied and dialogical encounters rooted in epistemic proximity (Jerolmack and Khan, 2018). Primary data were gathered through informal and unstructured conversations, attentive observations and interactions on the shop floor during work and breaks, complemented by other forms of data (Table 2). Fieldnote documentation followed an anthropological approach, open and neutral in stance, capturing work processes, relations and interactions, fragments of conversations, tensions and conflicts, as well as the researchers' own feelings and reflections, without prematurely selecting what to record (Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Geertz, 2001). Given the demanding working hours *as workers*, jottings and self-recorded audio diaries served as the primary documentation tools, recorded privately during breaks and after night shifts and transcribed and reviewed whenever conditions allowed (Emerson *et al.*, 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). This enabled immediate reflection, tracing emotional trajectories and reflexivity and laying the foundation for later analytic memos (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993). Triangulation was achieved through cross-phase comparison, sustained contact with workers and supervisors after fieldwork and supplementary public materials (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Together with the fieldnotes, the team kept research diaries reflecting researchers' positionality, attentive to how it may have shaped the production and interpretation of knowledge (Jerolmack and Khan, 2018). The fieldwork is understood as a process of *co-becoming* (Tsing, 2015), marked by epistemic proximity, kinship and mutual influence.

Data analysis unfolded as an iterative, interpretive engagement with the material, anchored in *perspectival theorising* that foregrounds alternative conceptualisations and contextually grounded interpretations (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2024; Darby *et al.*, 2019). Analysis began in the field. Participating *as workers*, the team accumulated first-hand experience and developed reflexive analytic memos in which emergent themes, patterns and tensions were sketched for further theoretical articulation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Initial coding followed an open coding approach to construct an interpretive narrative of the data (Emerson *et al.*, 2011). Through iterative cycles between empirical material, conceptual development and manuscript revision, the analysis converged on the ethics of care, with the coding structure (see Appendix 2) continuously refined to sharpen interpretation (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993).

Narrated in the first person, the following three vignettes foreground workers' voices, honouring their lived realities and agentic capacities through three distinct moments in which

care becomes an act of ethical agency directed towards one another: *when a novice joins, when “everyone is the same” and when orders never end.*

4. Becoming a trimmer: a narrative from within

4.1 Vignette 1: when a novice joins

With a flick of her wrist, a long-haired auntie pointed to a large bundle of black T-shirts on the table. “Just trim these”, she said. Noticing me standing still, she fixed her eyes on me and asked, “Don’t you have scissors?” I was embarrassed to admit I didn’t. She laughed out loud, half-teasing, half-complaining: “How do you not even have scissors?” I was even more embarrassed. She poked around in a makeshift box of folded cardboard behind her and handed me a metal-handled thread trimmer. They were evidently different from ordinary scissors. [Fieldnote p. 84]

This was the first scene after I started at the second plant (Factory Z), where I was employed. I thanked the woman and did not dare say another word. I returned to my stool and began working through the bundle, when I soon realised that the trimmer was too blunt. I had hundreds of hours ahead: with each thread requiring several attempts to trim, it would not suffice. I needed to get a pair of my own. As I then understood, a “proper trimmer” always had her own.

The trimming section is the first stage of the garment finishing division, which flows into ironing, piece-by-piece quality checks, packaging and warehousing (shipping). Trimmers were expected to bring finished bundles of garments to the ironing station once completed. Slightly over an hour later, I managed to deliver my first bundle of 20 units to the mountain-high pile behind the ironing workers by the window. While returning to my spot, I gathered the courage to ask Chen, seated beside me, where she had bought her scissors. Workers in this village are predominantly rural migrants from other regions of the country, which is reflected in their strong regional accents. Chen was one of those whom I found particularly difficult to understand.

I thought I heard her say a “hardware store”, so I repeated it back to confirm. She shook her head: “A distribution shop”, she said. I had ABSOLUTELY no idea what that would mean.

Jade, an elderly woman with a full head of white hair sitting across the table, must have heard my struggle. For a while, she searched through her personal pouch, eventually pulling out a pair of red-handled scissors and handing it to me. I was too embarrassed to ask if I could borrow them for a day or two, so I would have time to buy my own. Jade smiled warmly. “*Xiao meimei* (little one)”, she said, “don’t worry, keep them.” [Fieldnote p. 87]

In the following days, I also came to notice that whenever I hesitated over an unfamiliar garment, pausing for too long to figure things out, someone would appear to offer guidance before I had a chance to ask. Workers would spontaneously step in the moment a novice’s confusion became apparent. No one was instructed or monitored to do so. It felt like a consistent, unspoken pact, an attentiveness and support extended quietly to the “little ones”.

Chen was among the most attentive to me. While her hands kept moving, her eyes would drift across the piles of garments between us towards the work in my hands. She had joined the factory only two months earlier. Having shown up for 20 consecutive days, she was already classified as a “steady” worker, qualifying for a small monthly housing subsidy. Yet this distinction offered little protection, as the piece-rate payment system bore equally on both temporary and “steady” workers. It did not take long for me to understand why Chen kept her attention on me, as she eventually expressed her concern.

Chen pulled her chair closer to me as we were trimming. “Are you able to make a hundred yuan a day?” Chen asked, her words cutting her heavy accent. In those first few days, the honest answer was clearly no. She then asked about how much my daily rent was (I had to tell a white lie, stating only a third of the actual amount to avoid marking myself as “different”). As she learnt, she

instantly stopped her hands, shaking her head, as if calculating what that would mean for sustaining a living. [Fieldnote p. 88]

Her conclusion was clear: at my pace, trimming work would not sustain my livelihood. Day after day, she encouraged me to find other work, suggesting waitressing, retail or hotel reception – anything but garment work. In her words, “*Only older women like us do this kind of work*”, adding that I was too young and decent to be trapped in work of this kind.

She was so concerned about the life of a novice that her care soon extended beyond words. I felt guilty each time I fell short of the hundred-yuan daily threshold she had set for me, as I could not refuse her insistence on quietly shifting simpler bundles from her own allocation to mine, so as not to disturb the section’s equilibrium. I was fully aware that exchanging easier tasks for mine meant she would take on the more burdensome ones herself. To my surprise, she eventually began sharing what might be called survival knowledge: certain thread ends could be left untrimmed, as no one would ever notice.

It would be strange to admit that what I felt in response was not gratitude alone but also a sense of obligation. It was a pull towards mastering the trimming work that had little to do with research and more with not wanting her care to be wasted on someone undeserving. Amid the help and generosity I received from fellow workers, I felt a persistent guilt in accepting their support in “making a living”. Out of a sense of reciprocity, I became fully transparent with the workers within a few days. I did not expect that they would continue to care for me even after learning that I was not there to earn a living. This fostered a sense of collectivity, to the point that I came to see myself as an actual trimmer, and I sensed a shift in the section as I began to be accepted as one of them. I worked hard to improve my trimming skills so as not to benefit unfairly from their support. Chen recognised my effort. A few days later, when the supervisor passed by and teased that I would soon become a “professional trimmer”, Chen corrected him without hesitation: “*She already is!*”

Though generosity was never unconditional. Care was something earned and sustained, not exploited. This became evident in the case of a novice who routinely selected easier bundles and avoided more complicated tasks by claiming inability. What followed were jokes about her “speed” and teasing remarks intended to keep certain tasks out of her reach.

In this space, care towards novices was never a single gesture. It was a collective practice built on attentiveness to the distinct needs of different individuals at different moments, resulting in plural expressions of caregiving in practice. Workers’ generosity rested on an implicit reciprocity, an unspoken expectation that novices were there to learn and grow, to integrate and contribute and to support one another.

4.2 Vignette 2: when “everyone the same”

Among all the garments that passed through the trimming section, one dress had earned its own nickname: *huahua* (flowery). It was the only piece with a name, and for good reason. From a trimmer’s perspective, *huahua* was a headache. Trimmers’ pay was based on piece rates, regardless of the labour involved, yet *huahua* – effectively a top and a skirt joined together – counted as a single “one-piece”. To make matters worse, its design details – an elasticated off-shoulder neckline, puffed sleeves, a gathered waistband and a multi-panel skirt – multiplied the number of thread ends that needed trimming. *huahua* took significantly longer and required more effort to process than anything else. Yet it was a bestseller, appearing on the trimming table almost every day.

Becoming a trimmer myself, I came to see the dark side of this renowned small-batch, on-demand production model and how its costs were borne by the factory and its workers. The setting in which I was embedded was one where absolute fairness was structurally impossible: the agile production model was sustained by a purchasing tactic of ultra-low minimum order quantities produced on demand, which translated into persistent chaos on the factory shop floor. Every day, the number of bundles per garment model was unpredictable and rarely matched the available workers; the number of units per bundle also varied significantly, from

single digits to over eighty pieces. Urgent orders frequently arrived at short notice, disrupting the existing workflow and prioritised prototypes meant constant interruptions and extremely tight lead times. Any delay in delivery would incur economic penalties from “the company”, in the workers’ own terms. Combined with high labour turnover resulting from precarious working conditions, these garment factories were simply not a context conducive to effective production planning.

Owing to the significant differences in throughput time, any unbalanced work distribution meant varying hourly earnings under the piece-rate system, in addition to already suppressed incomes. It was not surprising to learn that workers who made a living from trimming preferred to avoid complicated tasks. Fair distribution among workers was never guaranteed and became a daily puzzle to solve. Whenever *huahua* appeared, it became a quiet spark beneath the surface, and a subtle tension developed across the section.

In the late morning, everyone was busy trimming *huahua* when Jing finished her bundle. Despite there were still *huahua* to be trimmed, she started picking through the pile, seemingly searching for something easier. Peng noticed immediately, and once she confirmed what Jing was doing, she intervened directly: “*Huahua* had to be cleared by four o’clock or we will receive a penalty”, she said. “Everyone trims only *huahua* until lunchtime. We need to make room for the remaining finishing stages.”

Jing has barely listened before attacking back. “I had already trimmed *huahua*”, she said – which was technically true, but she has been strategic about it. She has taken advantage of the varying bundle sizes, offering herself the smallest one with a single-digit count. She did show that she was working on *huahua* like everyone else but was quietly attempting to move on to easier pieces. The atmosphere grew increasingly tense as Jing did not seem to stop complaining. “We’re all doing it”, the other trimmers tried to calm her down. Peng stepped in, raising her voice to address the whole section: “We all have to keep it fair. EVERYONE THE SAME – the newcomers too.” [Fieldnote p. 185].

Peng had caught my attention from my first day in the section. Whenever a trimmer was about to take a new bundle to work on, she would watch and, at certain moments, intervene. I was so curious that I once tentatively asked Chen what I should be doing next. She redirected me without hesitation: ask Peng.

The factory’s sewing division occupies another floor in the same building, employing over 50 workers. Several times a day, once a batch of bundles is completed, a few male workers transport freshly sewn pieces down to the finishing division using large cargo carts. Orders are relentless, and there is never enough space in the trimming section to stack all the arriving bundles. When storage space runs out, transport workers lay woven sacks on the floor wherever they can find space and stuff garments into them, frequently blocking the aisles.

Peng paid close attention whenever the supervisor arrived to announce which bundles were part of urgent orders. She developed a habit of helping distribute upcoming work during lunch and dinner breaks, pulling garments out of the woven sacks and piling them in the narrow space beside each worker’s seat. It was her break too, yet she would stay behind to lay out the work before the others returned. Whenever the bundles allowed, her aim was to give every trimmer an identical bundle: same garment, same count. This would mean identical throughput and, as closely as the system permitted, identical pay.

In the afternoon, Cao, the only male trimmer in the section, drew a bundle of *huahua* to trim, but found out there were fifty-eight pieces inside. It was such bad luck: Despite being an experienced trimmer, it would likely take him close to three hours to finish. Cao did not complain, but everyone could see it. When Peng came around during the evening distribution, dividing up the complicated garments that still needed to be finished before the day ended, she intentionally avoided Cao and left two bundles of camisoles – possibly, the easiest pieces for trimming. [Fieldnote p. 105]

It was a quiet but visible form of compensation in Peng’s way of ensuring that no one took advantage of others while also ensuring that no one was left at a disadvantage. There were neither formal rules nor authority. Peng was, like everyone else, an ordinary trimmer with no

formal title, yet she recognised that the only way to protect every worker was to ensure the shop floor operated in equality. Over time, her role became impossible to ignore, even for the supervisor. When urgent orders arrived and a particular sequence needed to be maintained in the trimming section, he would seek her out directly. Care in this case extended beyond a one-directional act, developing through individual agentic actions and collective response. The trust that trimmers placed in Peng's sense of equality, attentiveness to fairness and willingness to intervene had quietly settled into an unspoken tradition: when in doubt about what to pick up next, ask Peng.

4.3 Vignette 3: when the orders never end

A national holiday fell in the middle of the fieldwork. The factory I was working in at the time was supposed to be closed, but the pressure of on-demand orders arriving from the brand with penalising lead times made closure effectively impossible. The workload was evident to everyone, and with no possibility of planning, there had been no confirmation of arrangements until the night before. While we were busy trimming, the supervisor arrived with a visibly apologetic expression and tentatively asked whether anyone would be willing to come in on the holiday. The workers, and I among them, quickly inferred two things: the next day was theoretically a day off; yet the factory would remain open for those who wished to come. A silence fell over the shop floor. It had been the first possible day off in over two months. As the news settled in, I overheard fellow workers beginning to talk about how they would spend the day off. In private, I volunteered myself to the supervisor. He, grateful, told me that I could come at any time, with no need to follow the ordinary work schedule.

The next day, I arrived an hour later than usual. Only a handful of workers had shown up on the shop floor. At the trimming station, there were only myself and another young novice who had come in to earn her tuition fees during her school holiday. The ironing and packaging sections were both unattended. When I spotted the supervisor, he appeared visibly concerned that the workers present that day could hardly form a production line capable of meeting delivery schedules. The factory offered daily lunch subsidies to present workers in the form of food vouchers, each linked to a specific "canteen" in the area. As I had come in on a holiday, he kindly offered me one from what he called "the best one". I gathered my courage and asked if I could join him for lunch. He did not refuse.

The village was not small, yet the workers – migrants from other regions of the country who stayed only to make a living – would spend time together even on their days off. It was an extraordinarily hot day. At the canteen, we bumped into fellow workers who were chatting beneath the barely perceptible breeze of a ceiling fan. Seeing the supervisor, they broke into dialect. It took me a moment to piece together what they were discussing: the night before, Peng had intervened in a dispute in the trimming section and, at one point, had slapped the table. Peng argued that without her intervention, things would have escalated. The supervisor made clear that he supported both her motivation and her capacity to act, only asking that she soften her approach. The conversation soon drifted towards the more pressing concern that there were not enough workers on the shop floor to meet the day's deadlines. I excused myself from the lunch table to find a space to record the field notes from the morning. It was only after returning to the factory that I understood what that conversation had implied: a few more workers had shown up, and a production line had assembled itself.

On ordinary days, the trimming section followed an unwritten rule: complicated garments were to be completed during the daytime so that by nightfall, the remaining work would be lighter for those still at the tables. However, relentless urgent orders often disrupted any possibility of planning, making this arrangement difficult to maintain. One might expect that under a piece-rate pay system, workers would focus solely on delivering their own units. Yet when operational pressure peaked, there was an impulse to share the burden – a collective response that cut across individual interest. On one such night, Han noticed at a glance that a

fellow trimmer had drawn a bundle of sixty *huahua* with no realistic prospect of finishing on time alone; she simply offered, “*Split it in half; I’ll help you trim thirty.*”

It was beyond my comprehension at that moment, but days later, I came to notice something had shifted in me. A feeling I had not expected: a sense of responsibility whispering that I too was part of this.

It was 22:45. Closing time had not yet arrived, but at my pace, starting a new bundle now meant there was little chance of finishing within an hour. Knowing fact that I would, once again, barely have time to sleep after putting down the field note, I carried the bundle I had just finished over to the ironing station. It was an unusually large and heavy bundle. I moved carefully in the narrow aisle, which was nearly impassable, crowded by garments waiting to be processed on both sides. As I passed Han, she looked up with a smile and asked whether I was ready to head “home”. There is no doubt I wanted nothing more than to stop. [Fieldnote p. 133]

The unforgiving fluorescent light had been unrelenting since morning. By this hour, my eyes were too tired to catch the tiny thread ends with any confidence. Looking around the factory floor, garments were piled everywhere, and the pressure in the air to meet the day’s delivery deadline was palpable. It was obvious that the division would be running well past midnight. Everyone was busy. The clothes waiting to be processed loomed like monsters to me; to the workers, this was probably just another ordinary day. It was only later that I started noticing unfamiliar faces appearing on the shop floor.

Listening to the workers chatting, I gathered that Han’s husband and daughter had arrived, along with a few acquaintances of fellow trimmers who also lived in the village. They had been called in to help shoulder the work. Money was not the issue, as we were all paid by the unit, but the workload was. It needed to be done before the day ended. [...] As more hands arrived, the exhausted late-night floor grew louder and more alive. [Fieldnote p. 193]

To me, these were all strangers, yet the ease with which they settled in suggested this was nothing out of the ordinary. At that precise moment, I felt an emotional bond and caring attachment between myself and the others. I was no longer a researcher, but simply one of the ordinary trimmers on the factory floor, shouldering the workload so that others would not be overburdened.

To be precise, it was never the workers but the factory that would receive penalties for missing delivery deadlines. Yet, as the factory offered them shelter and a predictable income, the workers responded with a sense of belonging and considered themselves part of a collective, protecting it from adverse consequences. Something that had been a vigil became, briefly, almost convivial. The warmth of a night on the shop floor was tangible and real.

I found myself unable to make sense of the boundary I was watching dissolve. I sensed myself becoming a different person alongside and for the people I had encountered, what anthropologists might call co-becoming. If I had the chance to ask any question: how different would it be if the work in front of us simply waited until the next day? And when, exactly, is the actual end of a day? [Diary – Researcher 1]

5. Towards a moral fabric through the ethics of care

5.1 Structural precarity: the consequence of patriarchal supply chain logics

The garment sector is known for its labour-intensive supply chains in which workers often experience long working hours, low pay and physically and psychologically demanding tasks (Anner, 2019; Shivakumar and Jerrentrup, 2025). Despite numerous efforts to address labour issues in this context, critical concerns persist, compounded by significant power asymmetry and relational distance between buying firms and those who labour within their supply chains (Huq *et al.*, 2014; Kothari *et al.*, 2019).

The global fashion giant is the largest client of the factories in this production hub, known for its fast-refreshing designs at affordable prices. This research reveals how its small-batch, on-demand production model generates recurrent conditions that structurally shape the production context and workers' livelihoods. In pursuit of efficiency, flexibility and responsiveness and enforced through penalty-based supplier management, brands' purchasing practices systematically prioritise profit over labour conditions. Factories are required to absorb *irregular and unstable orders* with urgent delivery dates, resulting in *extreme production pressure*, driving excessive labour turnover and progressively *eroding their capacity to plan workloads and manage their workforce*. These conditions cascade to workers, entrenching them in multifaceted dimensions of structural precarity (Lewis *et al.*, 2015). They confront *employment precarity* alongside chronic social and economic instability, often excluded from public welfare systems. To secure adequate earnings, workers resort to *labour intensification* and, at times, self-exploitation (Tsing, 2009), as a response to structurally imposed income insecurity. Their identities and needs are systematically neglected, reinforcing *social and communal exclusion* and compounding *adverse material exposure* (see Table 3).

Patriarchal logic positions the brand as the key power-holder, yet this further increases the physical and emotional distance between brands, suppliers and workers, who absorb the greatest risks (Gold and Schleper, 2017; LeBaron, 2021). This framing not only fails to address underlying injustices but actively perpetuates conditions of dependence (Gutierrez-Hueter *et al.*, 2023). Garment workers need jobs; those jobs depend on factories remaining operational, and factories remain operational only if brands issue orders. This economic dependency increases pressure on the weakest party to absorb adverse conditions (Fletcher and Trautims, 2024; Karaosman *et al.*, 2023), producing further social marginalisation (Williams *et al.*, 2025). Precarity thus becomes a structurally produced outcome (ILO, 2023), representing the unequal intensification of vulnerability through patriarchal logics in the form of exploitation and dependence (Hamington and Flower, 2021).

Although the OSCM discipline acknowledges the need for alternatives (Luzzini *et al.*, 2024), the dominant logic continues to frame values such as diversity and inclusion as instruments of operational performance (Matthews *et al.*, 2025), normalising an appropriation that forecloses genuinely alternative approaches. Supply chain practices will continue to perpetuate structural precarity at individual, organisational and supply chain levels unless the patriarchal logics and epistemological assumptions underpinning them are fundamentally challenged (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2021). Grounded in the ethical agency of garment workers manifested under conditions of system-induced precarity, the next section envisions an OSCM shaped by the ethics of care.

5.2 Theorising the moral fabric against labour precarity

The ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 2013) presents an alternative logic for reorienting OSCM practices in addressing labour precarity (Figure 1), treating workers as individuals with ethical agency while recognising their vulnerability (Johansson and Wickström, 2023). This care orientation not only captures how workers develop their own mechanisms of fairness, mutual support and collective care in addressing their conditions, grounded in their everyday interactions, but also elucidates how attentiveness to relations enables potent ethical agency – dimensions that remain largely invisible to instrumental, compliance-based governance models (Glover and Touboulic, 2020; Wilhelm *et al.*, 2025).

Workers carry diverse lived experiences and are embedded in different contexts (Glover, 2020), making the plurality of their needs ontologically grounded in their relational and interdependent nature (Held, 2005). As needs are not homogeneous and

Table 3. Analytical synthesis of vignettes

	Vignette 1: When a novice joins	Vignette 2: When “everyone the same”	Vignette 3: When the orders never end
<i>Outcome on factories</i> (Precariousness of context)	Driven by imperatives of <i>extreme efficiency, flexibility and responsiveness</i> , brands enforce cost-reduction through <i>penalty-based supplier management</i> that transfers the consequences (<i>extreme production pressure, irregular and unstable workloads</i>) onto suppliers, cascading further to workers as precarious working conditions. These conditions drive excessive labour turnover and heavy reliance on temporary workers (varied skill levels, many with limited job familiarity), <i>eroding factories’ capacity to plan workloads and manage their workforce</i>	Brands’ “agile” business model, predicated on <i>small-batch ordering</i> in pursuit of <i>extreme flexibility and responsiveness</i> , imposes structural instability on factories through <i>irregular and unpredictable order sizes</i> . Enforced through <i>penalty-based supplier management</i> , any deviation in order quantity, quality or delivery date would charge the factories economic penalty and a punitive rating	Brands’ “agile” business model, predicated on <i>on-demand production</i> in pursuit of <i>maximum efficiency and responsiveness</i> , imposes structural instability on factories through <i>extreme production pressure</i> . Orders placed at short notice with urgent delivery dates <i>erode factories’ capacity to plan workloads and manage their workforce</i> . Enforced through <i>penalty-based supplier management</i> , any deviation in volume or delivery date exposes factories to economic penalties and punitive supplier rating reductions
<i>Outcome on labour</i> (Structural precarity)	The temporary nature of the job is tied to system-induced <i>employment precarity</i> , driving workers towards survival-driven <i>labour intensification</i> as a response to structurally imposed income insecurity. Prolonged <i>adverse material exposure</i> to synthetic fibres and material dust further exacerbates the physical toll of the work environment. This precarity is further compounded by <i>social and communal exclusion</i> , reinforced by stigma attached to garment workers (especially trimmers) as uneducated, with limited access to alternative employment, predominantly older and female of rural origin. For many, survival-driven labour is oriented towards funding the next generation’s education as a channel to escape the sector		
<i>Care practices</i> (Ethical agency)	Practices of other-oriented care expressed through <i>care-giving and care-receiving</i> when a novice enters the collective: how care is extended or conditioned by shared values within a context marked by heavy reliance on temporary workers and excessive labour turnover	Practices of other-oriented care in the form of <i>care-giving and caring with</i> in everyday operation: how workers construct and maintain bottom-up mechanisms of “fairness” in distributing work amid structural precarity induced by brands’ supply chain practices	Practice of other-oriented care in the form of <i>caring with</i> , sustained under conditions of extreme production pressure: how workers collectively endure and respond to pressing lead times and excessive workloads induced by brands’ supply chain practices

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

	Vignette 1: When a novice joins	Vignette 2: When “everyone the same”	Vignette 3: When the orders never end
Care practices – Example	- Attentiveness, spontaneous help and guidance towards the novice - Concern towards the novice’s livelihood in vocal and agentic forms - Taking care of the <i>little ones</i> in task protection - Generosity as conditional and reciprocal act - Inclusion of the novice as an individual respecting their own motive rather than productive resource	- Consciousness of and responsibility for fairness - Protecting the collective against self-interest-seeking behaviour - Attentiveness and actions in addressing inequity - Informal deliberation between workers and supervisors to sustain fair work distribution	- Solidarity in facing day-to-day production pressure; call in acquaintance to help so as to prevent penalty - Solidarity in voluntary shifts on holidays - Unspoken rule of work distribution between day and evenings - Sustaining joyful moments and emotional support

Source(s): Authors’ own work

require situated responses, it is fundamental to *recognise their plurality* through attentive interpretation (Bellingan *et al.*, 2020; Chowdhury, 2023), resisting universalised framings. The ethics of care are uniquely positioned to attend to this plurality, establishing epistemic proximity in the process (Reed, 2025). Senior workers offered diverse forms of care based on what they understood from the *cared-for*: helping novices when recognising their vulnerability due to limited tacit knowledge; intervening out of concern for others’ livelihoods; and seeking to include newcomers in the collective by building relational ties. Expressions of a relational care ethic respond to others’ particular needs, while remaining contingent on the receivers’ responses. It requires the *one-caring* and the *cared-for* to relate to one another as equals in a shared understanding, where reciprocity is a constitutive condition of the caring relation (Tronto, 2013). In the absence of reciprocity, care that flows only in one direction risks reproducing the very asymmetries it seeks to address (Johansson and Wickström, 2023).

Approaching labour precarity requires an epistemological perspective that remains attentive to the structures and conditions in which it is situated (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2021). It emphasises the value of *locally grounded knowledge and solutions* over universal prescriptions. Extensive global supply chains exacerbate this challenge, as engaging with diversity while attending to the particularities of the human condition demands contextual attentiveness that universal governance frameworks struggle to provide (Tsing, 2009). Labour theory must acknowledge contextual ambiguity and remain open to theoretical and epistemological plurality (Roehrich *et al.*, 2025). Care practices are deeply rooted in relational and contextual nuances (Gilligan, 1982), and the values observed in this study are no exception. Within the intricate tapestry of Chinese culture, values and care practices at the research site are intrinsically intertwined with Confucian thought, serving as indigenous moral principles. These principles encapsulate virtues such as *Ren* (humaneness), *Yi* (righteousness), *Li* (propriety) and *Xin* (trustworthiness). These virtues collectively form a moral framework

that emphasises relational attentiveness, harmony, contextual discernment of just action and commitment to those in vulnerable positions (Li, 1994), which consequently shapes appropriate conduct within the relational contexts of everyday work (Kang *et al.*, 2017; Li, 1994; Yuan *et al.*, 2023). Just as nuances of meaning may be lost or distorted in translation across cultures, remediation frameworks developed in one context may not be directly applicable to others with distinct epistemic foundations. The moral fabric against labour precarity can only be established through the cultivation of trust and respect via epistemic proximity, attentiveness and sensitivity in the process of knowing (Chowdhury, 2023; Noddings, 1984).

Contextualised approaches are a prerequisite for ethically sound engagement with labour precarity. Attentiveness to the conditions that limit observation and framing is constitutive of this process, a commitment that shapes how interaction with labour realities can be meaningfully conducted (Shivakumar and Jerrentrup, 2025). Approaches and methods must adapt to context while examining how labour realities are constructed and negotiated (Chowdhury, 2023; Soundararajan *et al.*, 2021). This prioritises workers' own narratives and sense-making, alongside researchers' grounded engagement in comparable conditions that enables interpretation from within (Ehrenreich, 2002; Pun, 2005). Solidarity is what makes this possible and sustains care. Without a commitment to *speaking with* those whose conditions are being studied, methodological approaches risk reproducing the asymmetrical power relations and epistemic distance on which precarity is built.

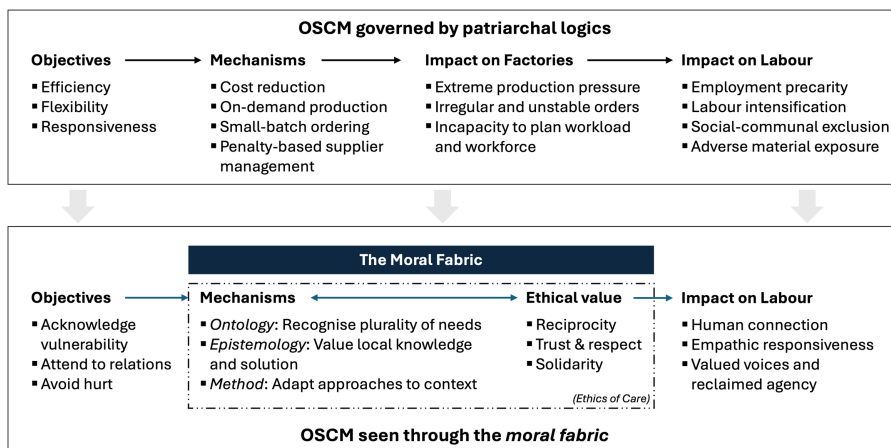


Figure 1. Reframing OSCM through the ethics of care. Source: Authors' own work

5.3 Theoretical implications

The instrumental logic governing supply chains is contingent on a disconnection from workers that takes the form of epistemic dissociation, a process of inner separation through which workers come not to know what they know and not to feel what they feel (Gilligan, 1995). When these dissociations become normalised, workers are expected to take care of relations and absorb the consequences induced by the structure, echoing colonial patterns of enforcement (Chowdhury, 2023; Spicer and Alvesson, 2025).

Theorising connection as central to human life directs attention to the relational dimensions of labour that dominant supply chain research and practice consistently overlook (Held, 2005; Tronto, 1993). These dimensions cannot be fully incorporated within existing paradigms characterised by rigid, instrumental structures (Kothari *et al.*, 2019). As

long as the patriarchal social order, understood as the structure that sustains imbalanced relationships and structural precarity, remains unchallenged, caring becomes an obligation rather than a shared responsibility (Tronto, 1993). Workers are left to navigate and respond to chronic precarity on their own terms (Glover and Touboullic, 2020; Karaosman *et al.*, 2025).

An ethic of care is a voice of resistance, attentive to relations in context (Gilligan, 1982). Grounded in the recognition of persons as relational, vulnerable and interdependent, feminist ethics of care speaks directly to the dissociations that lead people to systematically neglect different voices (Gilligan, 1995). It challenges the patriarchal logic that governs labour discourses through elite-led narratives, enforcing universalised standards and advancing remediation with epistemic distance (McCarthy *et al.*, 2018). Labour conditions are complex and frequently entangled with contextual and cultural nuances that universalised solutions cannot address. Framing labour issues as matters of human rights risks reducing remedy to uniform prescriptions, neglecting the social realities of those they intend to serve (Kuruville and Li, 2021; Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021). It is therefore vital to challenge the assumptions inherent in prevailing narratives and engage in epistemological and methodological reflection, viewing workers as individuals with agentic power (Glover, 2020; Gutierrez-Huerter *et al.*, 2023). Only when silenced voices surface and enter into connection do they begin to create difference and open an ontology of possibility (Gilligan, 1982; Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012). Equally important, the care orientation does not displace concerns with justice, rights and power (Karaosman *et al.*, 2023; Wilhelm *et al.*, 2025) but complements them with sensitivity to context (Gilligan, 1995; Tronto, 2013).

We envision avenues for future research to examine individual and contextual nuances to further develop the moral fabric across diverse settings. Moving beyond representations of supply chains as technical configurations of flows, we seek to revitalise the notion of an *anthropology of the supply chain* (Price, 1996), approaching supply chains ethnographically as lived fields where agentic actors form responses under contextualised and constrained conditions. This epistemological shift repositions workers as agentic subjects whose situated responses and voices cannot be fully interpreted without acknowledging their embeddedness (Gilligan, 1982), thereby shaping supply chains from the microscopic level. Similarly, supply chain systems cannot be fully captured and explained without remaining grounded in the everyday realities of those who sustain them.

The anthropology of the supply chain foregrounds the challenges we face today as social rather than technical and invites dialogue with established domains of anthropology and sociology (Pun, 2005; Tsing, 2015), possibly through interpretive and constructivist methods and perspectival theorising (Darby *et al.*, 2019; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2024). As researchers, we must remain conscious and reflexive about our approaches when investigating groups that do not share the same epistemic ground as our own (Chowdhury, 2023; Deutsch, 2004). The ethics of care, and the feminist lens more broadly, are not only a theoretical orientation but also a guide to how we approach the field (Johansson and Wickström, 2023; McCarthy *et al.*, 2018), attend to contextual nuances and position ourselves in ethical relation to those we study (Shivakumar and Jerrentrup, 2025). The goal should not be to *represent* workers but to create conditions for them to *express* themselves, ensuring their voices shape rather than merely illustrate our understanding (Chowdhury, 2023; Glover, 2020). Plurality in research methods can cultivate insights that complement the language of our own (Gilligan, 1995; Soundararajan *et al.*, 2021).

5.4 Practical implications

This study provides several practical implications for companies and OSCM managers operating in labour-intensive global supply chains. First, brands and buying firms must

recognise the hidden consequences of their practices and understand how purchasing decisions shape the conditions of those who labour within their supply chains. The imposed structural instability does not stop at the factory gate but directly reproduces workers' everyday labouring conditions through irregular workloads, income insecurity and excessive labour turnover. Workers are relational actors whose well-being, dignity and agency are structurally determined by upstream decisions, and they carry significant leverage over product quality, supply chain stability and reputational exposure. The pursuit of efficiency, flexibility and responsiveness has delivered measurable gains for buying firms over recent decades, yet the human costs externalised onto suppliers and workers through practices such as small-batch on-demand production are rarely accounted for. Workload stability, employment security and workforce retention are currently overlooked dimensions in managing supplier relationships.

The findings demonstrate that workers operating under conditions of system-induced employment precarity develop their own mechanisms of fairness, mutual support and collective care. OSCM managers must recognise workers' ethical agency, which sustains productivity and collective resilience under structural pressure, rather than treating it as incidental workplace culture. Management practices that disrupt these relational networks (e.g. excessive reliance on temporary labour, irregular scheduling, punitive supervision) would actively erode the informal social infrastructure that keeps production running. Investment in stabilising employment conditions and acknowledging workers' relational practices yields returns in skill continuity and collective commitment that current performance framings fail to capture.

Finally, this study calls on buying firms and OSCM managers to move beyond philanthropic and compliance-based narratives of labour responsibility. Audits, codes of conduct and social certification schemes that impose universal standards without attending to the particular, local and contextual dimensions of workers' lives risk producing a facade of accountability while leaving the structural causes of precarity unaddressed. Effective labour governance requires a contextually grounded, relational and care-oriented approach, attending to plural needs, building locally grounded solutions and responding adaptively to the conditions workers actually face.

6. Conclusion

Reflecting on the blind spots of dominant narratives of labour conditions, this study presents a moral fabric grounded in local, contextualised and relational responses. It challenges the dominant portrayal of supply chain workers as passive and voiceless in labour interventions, illustrating how local and contextual values shape individual and collective care practices. Based on an interpretivist-constructivist ethnographic approach, the study examines how structural precarity is normalised in the day-to-day operations of a garment factory shop floor and how workers draw on ethical agency and care practices to navigate and respond to the conditions in which they are embedded.

This paper was not written to document workers' suffering but to evidence an alternative perspective on labour by foregrounding workers' agency in their own voices. Such agency should be recognised and acknowledged rather than systematically neglected. We intentionally obscured the site and omitted quantitative metrics to protect the field that embraced us. Such measures, when decontextualised, risk being weaponised against the context we aim to protect. The ethics of care served as both the theoretical lens and a guide to this endeavour, calling for attentive and conscious action to avoid harm when approaching labour in different contexts.

CRedit statement

Jinou (Valentina) Xu: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing–Original Draft, Writing–Review and Editing; Hakan

Acknowledgments

This paper – a story we wrote *about, for, with* and *as* garment workers – is dedicated to all garment workers we encountered in the field.

Appendix 1

Details of the research setting

As the world's largest apparel producer and exporter, China holds a central position in the global textile and garment supply chain, relying on its fully integrated production system that spans from raw materials to finished goods ([World Trade Organization, 2024](#)). Although recent debates have suggested the potential relocation of production to lower-cost countries, China retains a strategic role due to its scale, flexibility and capacity amid geopolitical uncertainty ([Financial Times, 2025](#)).

Garment production in China often gives rise to industrial clusters, where geographical concentrations of factories benefit from shared labour markets, infrastructural networks and institutional support. As workers migrate towards these areas in search of opportunities, such clusters are strongly associated with large-scale labour migration, resulting in distinctive settlement forms known as *urban villages*. These villages offer low-cost housing in proximity to manufacturing hubs, functioning as transitional neighbourhoods shaped by rapid urbanisation ([Liu et al., 2010](#)). By 2025, Guangdong Province alone had attracted more than 43 million migrant workers across various sectors, of whom over 24 million were from outside the province ([Qiu and Liu, 2025](#)), underscoring its pivotal role as a destination for migrant labour.

Migrant workers, having left their hometowns in pursuit of higher incomes, often endure longer working hours and more physically demanding conditions as a consequence of their social context ([Dou et al., 2026](#)). Limited educational attainment compounds this vulnerability, with many lacking formal contracts or adequate awareness of labour protection and social insurance provisions ([Marques et al., 2025](#)). Against this backdrop, the urban village selected for this study is significant as a core production hub of a global fashion giant, operating through contract suppliers where these workers constitute the majority of the labour force.

Appendix 2

Data structure

SECOND-ORDER CATEGORIES	DIMENSIONS	THEME
Pressing lead time	Extreme production pressure	PRECARIOUSNESS OF CONTEXT (OUTCOME ON FACTORIES)
Urgent orders		
Irregular bundle size		
Uneven task distribution	Irregular and unstable workloads	
Excessive labour turnover		
Temporary workforce	Incapacity in planning and management	
Economic penalty & punitive rating reductions		STRUCTURAL PRECARIETY (OUTCOME ON LABOUR)
Rework & operational distribution	Brand-imposed punitive consequences	
Economic vulnerability		
Employment insecurity	Employment precarity	
Public welfare exclusion		
Absence of coercive retention		
Invasive working hours	Survival-driven labour intensification	HUMAN RELATION (INTERACTION & RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WORKERS)
Onerous workload		
Social-communal exclusion	Social-communal exclusion	
Discomfort	Adverse material exposure	
Curiosity		
Subtle suspicion	Awareness of "difference"	
Family and kin ties	The relational network	ETHICAL AGENCY (CARE AS A PRACTICE)
Fellow-native ties (<i>laoxiang</i>)		
Chats on the shopfloor	Everyday connection	
Moments of joy		
Latent tension	Tensions and conflicts	
Open conflict		
Attentive to others' needs		INDIGENOUS VALUES (CARE AS A VALUE)
Attentive to inclusion	Caring about	
Attentive & empathetic to workers' reality		
Conscious of fairness		
Responsible for stewardship	Caring for	
Committed to fair distribution		
Emotional support & Vocal concern		INDIGENOUS VALUES (CARE AS A VALUE)
Responsive in assisting others	Care-giving	
Active in fair distribution		
Decisive in addressing inequity		
Considerate in daily interaction		
Recognition of care received	Care-receiving	
Reciprocal acts toward care givers		INDIGENOUS VALUES (CARE AS A VALUE)
Sensitivity to responsiveness		
Other-oriented care towards novice		
Collective act under structural precarity	Caring with	
Responsive to voiced concerns		
Informal deliberation on shared concerns		
Solidarity		INDIGENOUS VALUES (CARE AS A VALUE)
Trust and respect	Ethical values of care	
Plurality		
Communication		
Reciprocity and collectivism		
Hard-working as virtue	Shared value in the collective	

Figure A1. Data structure. Source: Authors' own work

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