

Guest editorial: Modern slavery and supply chain management

“Of all the shameful and infamous expedients whereby man has preyed upon man [...] this vile thing dares to call itself commerce”, – Sir Roger Casement

Introduction

Modern slavery is a continuing danger to vulnerable people around the world. Pressures on suppliers to comply with sustainability demands and control costs are squeezing margins upstream, leading to increasing likelihood of labour exploitation. Conflict and climate change are adding to risks that are experienced by people exposed to the sharp end of globalised capitalism. Despite increasing regulation around the world aimed at addressing modern slavery (Rogerson *et al.*, 2024; Pesterfield, 2026; Skerritt *et al.*, 2026), the issue continues to grow. An estimated 27 million people worldwide work in conditions of modern slavery (Walk Free Foundation, 2023) – a number which should give pause for thought to supply chain managers. The supply chains of products and services upon which we rely – both in distant upstream geographies and locations closer to home – imperil human wellbeing.

This guest editorial to the special issue Modern Slavery and Supply Chain Management brings together theoretical and practical perspectives from scholars around the world. From 36 original submissions, the peer review process ultimately led to a special issue consisting of eight high-quality papers on topics as diverse as construction, food delivery and social care, using a variety of methods and theories. Recognising both the urgency of the subject and the diversity of the contexts in which extreme labour exploitation occurs, the studies that comprise this issue advance research on private (Pesterfield, 2026) and public (Buttke, 2026; Skerritt *et al.*, 2026; Wang *et al.*, 2026) governance, collaboration (Strand *et al.*, 2026) and partnership (Macaveiu, 2026), digitisation (Kang, 2026) and modern slavery risks in public services (Emberson, 2026). The work advances knowledge on modern slavery and supply chain management (SCM) and provides a grounding for further research within and beyond our field. We thank the authors for their work and consistent engagement with the peer review process and are extremely grateful to the 52 reviewers for their detailed and constructive feedback.

Modern slavery in supply chain management

Modern slavery presents as a contemporary global problem that captures exploitative practices in supply chains, which

include but are not limited to forced labour, human trafficking, servitude and debt bondage (Stevenson and Cole, 2018; Yagci Sokat and Altay, 2023).

Companies face institutional pressures to be transparent regarding supplier risks (Flynn, 2020). This includes legislation such as the UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 and the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act, as well as media scrutiny and consumer advocacy (Buttke *et al.*, 2024; Skerritt *et al.*, 2026). These governance mechanisms seek to force firms to recognise that their legitimacy is tied to the ethical conduct of their entire upstream network (Flynn, 2020; Buttke *et al.*, 2024).

In practice, mandatory disclosure may not be driving the desired changes and that knowledge, not disclosure, is key to change (Rogerson *et al.*, 2024), which suggests that moral and ethical perspectives may be more impactful than legislative approaches. However, early moral and ethical framing of modern slavery failed to assign businesses clear responsibility, with subsequent attempts at reframing failing to gain broad enough support (Gutierrez-Huerter O *et al.*, 2023).

The risks of modern slavery are appropriately studied in SCM as focal firms often do not gather information sufficient to give visibility to their operations or materials sourcing (Gualandris *et al.*, 2014; Meehan and Pinnington, 2021). Multi-tier supply chains, geographic distance and a lack of transparency obscure accountability (Emberson *et al.*, 2022; Stevenson and Cole, 2018).

The definitions of modern slavery in SCM cover a number of different perspectives: institutional, managerial/operational and supply chain specific. An institutional or legal definition is cited by Flynn (2020, p. 1), drawing from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, who defines “status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised”. From a management perspective, Crane (2013) described the practice of under-pricing the key resource of labour through illegitimate and coercive means. Crane’s (2013) work moves towards an operations definition, where practice characteristics are phenomenologically described, as with one party forcing another to work, controlling them through threats, restricting their movement and treating them as a commodity (Emberson *et al.*, 2022; Flynn, 2020; Yagci Sokat and Altay, 2023). Gold *et al.* (2015, p. 487) focused the definition of modern slavery to the supply chain unit of analysis, defining it as “the exploitation of a person who is deprived of individual liberty anywhere along the supply chain from raw material extraction to the final customer”.

Contributions to modern slavery research

The editors of the SI aimed to elicit insights from research embedded in supply chain contexts, which can inform both practitioners and policymakers and drive theory development for researchers. Each paper is framed by a particular puzzle that the authors seek to address through their work. The challenge identified is examined through a theoretical lens. Methodologically, we specifically sought empirical studies focused on modern slavery along the supply chain. Each work then provides novel insights grounded in primary data from different contexts, making contributions to theory and practice.

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Buttke (this issue) address the challenge faced by firms supply chain due diligence (SCDD). This form of legislation forces focal firms to take responsibility for the actions of companies in their supply chains. SCDD requires firms gain visibility of their supply chains and gather appropriate reporting data where risks are identified. Organisational information processing theory (OIPT) is a useful lens as the theory explains how organisations deal with uncertainty by acquiring, interpreting and using information. The study contributes to theory by taking a stakeholder perspective of OIPT, conceptualising SCDD in terms of information uncertainty from a multi-stakeholder supply chain perspective. The work is contextualised through an empirical qualitative study of 36 practitioners engaged in organisations involved with the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act. Literature supports expert interviews to categorise uncertainties and identify the conditions and constraints of context that create specific organisational information processing requirements.

Kang (this issue) explores the governance tensions faced by organisations with operations in other countries. The work draws upon theory of supply chain labour governance. The context of the study is the due diligence demanded of German firms operating within the politically constrained labour governance systems of China. A single empirical in-depth case study methodology is used, drawing data from 21 interviews with the focal firm and external experts in foreign multinational corporation operations in China. Labour outcomes are shaped by the interactions of local and overseas governance practices. Research identifies a dual strategy used: local non-union and management-centric employment relations are adopted to ensure feasibility of operations. Additional, more progressive, measures are introduced that support labour and human rights in local operations and the supply chain. Strong overseas governance may act to improve local practices, though local practice may constrain worker voice and limit visibility.

Macavieuv (this issue) analyses partnerships in events supply chains as a means of addressing modern slavery. This empirical study is based on narrative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 18 event professionals and associated organisations. Three narratives are identified. When partnerships are classed as relationships, they are transactional and compliance-driven, and actors present limited knowledge of modern slavery issues. Where partnerships are presented as solutions, collaborative responses are promoted by NGOs and consultants, proposing that partnerships help address modern slavery. Finally, when partnerships are seen as opportunities, actors adopt government and enforcement perspectives that stress measurable impact. Partnerships as a strategic tool to address modern slavery are limited by fragmented understanding. This further constrains effective partnership formation and limit organisations' ability to embed modern slavery considerations into supply chain governance.

Pesterfield (this issue) uses social exchange theory (SET) as a lens to examine supply chain verticals. Focal firms and their managers have garnered much research attention, but it is often within multi-tiered supply chains that modern slavery manifests. Larger UK construction firms and their supply

chain provide the context, with research drawing on data from 50 interviews. Legislative governance is found to be a driver of reporting obligation but fails to garner action as it comes without support or responsibility attribution. Thus, research focus shifts to examination of relational governance. Supplier relations are found to be antagonistic, such that conflictual relationships and mutual mistrust inhibit relational governance. In contrast, collaborative practices give rise to reciprocal benefits, reducing the risk of hidden labour exploitation within complex operations. The mix of positive and negative dimensions limits the effectiveness of relational governance in addressing modern slavery risks.

Skeritt *et al.* (this issue) examine the coupling between policy and practice. Work focusses on how design of the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) regulatory instrument shapes firms' human rights due diligence disclosures for modern slavery risks in global supply chains. Neo-institutional theory frames regulatory implementation as shaped by coercive, mimetic and normative pressures that influence how firms interpret, prioritise and operationalise due diligence. Data are drawn from firm sustainability reports with findings triangulated against 32 practitioner interviews in Ireland, an EU member state. The work finds significant improvement in firms reporting detail of policies on modern slavery. Substantive worker engagement is rare, and remediation mechanisms are weak. CSRD acts as a driver of sustainability consideration, with auditors and consultants found to be gatekeepers shaping norms.

Strand *et al.* (this issue) examine how and why NGOs and businesses work together to address modern slavery. It may appear unambiguous that NGOs should work with commercial organisations, but they face risks in doing so through lack of alignment in agendas and goals. Firms may enter into relationships for the appearance of collaboration rather than the outcome. NGOs may be co-opted by firms or lose focus on their mission. Strand *et al.* (this issue) grounded the study in literature from institutional theory (firm structure and practice), stakeholder theory (effect of internal and external constituencies) and legitimacy theory (firms complying with institutional and stakeholder pressures). A qualitative empirical study drawing on interview data with 16 firms and 6 NGOs from the Global North operating in international supply chains. The lenses of institutional and stakeholder theory are found to explain the NGO–business collaborative relationship in the context of addressing modern slavery in supply chains. The study presents a typology (four-box model) characterising NGO–business engagement, with high or low levels of social and business impact.

Wang (this issue) investigates how digital platforms maintain authority over workers by controlling internal governance mechanisms. The study builds on digital corporate social responsibility and the role of algorithmic management in reconfiguring labour relations. The work is set in China's time-critical express delivery market, using a qualitative study drawing on 29 worker interviews alongside government documents, media articles and industry and academic reports. Significant differences between protective policies and practical enforcement identify a failure in digital platform self-regulation. Algorithms driving efficiency

facilitate worker exploitation. A change of logic, from extraction to stewardship, coupled with system redesign, would create digitally supported fair working conditions.

Finally, Emberson (this issue) provides an impact article that examines the challenge of domestic servitude for live-in domestic care workers. The underpinning literature draws from supply chain risk management and public procurement theory as domestic care work may be state-funded. Mixed-methods brought breadth and depth to insight. Comparative analysis identified different government actions to mitigate exploitation of domestic care workers. Participatory methods included care workers as peer researchers, generating insights from lived experience. Semi-structured interviews from 62 expert informants drawn from six countries and a Web-based survey of 97 respondents provide additional insights and allowed further qualitative and quantitative estimators of exploitation. The impact article demonstrates the value and ethical complexity of participatory, worker-centred approaches to reducing modern slavery risk. Researchers developed modern slavery risk assessment and due diligence guidelines for adult social care commissioning. The work influenced UK national policy, raising awareness of migrant care-worker vulnerability, and shaped local government practice.

Common trends and patterns in the special issue

The papers in this special issue exhibit several linked themes that collectively advance our understanding of how SCM is addressing modern slavery risks. First among these, developing a subject that recurs in the SCM literature on corporate responses to labour exploitation, is the theme of distant management. Absent strong legislation to compel the undertaking of the necessary due diligence, firms maintain a distance from sites of modern slavery. In their examination of regulatory trends around modern slavery, Skerriett *et al.* (this issue) find that companies continue to use “proxies instead of direct worker engagement”. Where firms have the opportunity for more direct inputs into managing risks to vulnerable people in supply chains, distance holds. In their investigation of labour governance in multinational operations, Kang (this issue) concludes that a German firm in their case operates a minimalist approach where their products are manufactured. In contrast, in the firm’s home country, where labour risks are lower, the focal firm abides by legislation mandating worker involvement, eschewing such approaches where risks are higher in their supply chains. Even where geographical distance may not be the primary space between management and workers, the dissociation holds. In China, where Wang *et al.* (this issue) studied labour exploitation among delivery riders, distance, albeit algorithmic, persists. Responsibilities are evaded as risk is displaced from focal firms to workers. As a result of firms putting distance between them and vulnerable workers, an information and knowledge gap is created, disabling effective due diligence. In their article on the resulting uncertainties, Buttke (this issue) find that organisational and structural issues exacerbate the gap between the necessary information processing needs and firm capabilities.

The second theme is relational. There is a growing awareness in industry and in the academy that modern slavery

cannot be solved by firms acting individually. Novel forms of organisation and inter-organisational configurations are therefore being created to add leverage, trust and information. And yet, as Pesterfield (this issue) finds, firms are failing to build the necessarily relational structures to effectively address modern slavery in supply chains. Responses to competitive pressures and mistrust obstruct inter-firm efforts, isolating firms in their anti-slavery efforts. While some firms fail to create the relational conditions in their supply chains to collectively address modern slavery risk, others have looked beyond their immediate dyadic relationships for knowledge and expertise. To this end, two of the papers in this special issue focus on business–NGO partnerships. Strand *et al.* (this issue) find that cross-sectoral NGOs can take advantage of stakeholder pressure on firms to influence corporate practices and shorten distances. In the events industry specifically, Macaveiu (this issue) highlights that inter-organisational efforts rely heavily on basic understanding of modern slavery and its attendant risks, where appreciation of modern slavery issue is linked to higher engagement with NGOs.

Finally, for where research reflects distance and relational issues, Emberson (this issue) provides insight into how researchers may deepen understanding of modern slavery and generate impact. Taking labour supply chains in adult social care in the UK as her context, Emberson uses of mixed-methods highlights the benefit of capturing worker input through participatory engagement, whilst understanding that the risks to adjacent communities are respected.

Future research direction on modern slavery and supply chain management

While the research in this special issue has theorised from very different sectors and perspectives, the uncomfortable fact remains that millions of people are subject to extreme forms of labour exploitation around the world. The complexity of modern supply chains is often cited as a reason for the continuation of these practices. Widespread outsourcing, large supplier bases, broad geographical diversity, product intricacy, information asymmetries, power imbalances, lack of focal firm expertise and/or willingness to undertake the necessary due diligence – these factors and more contribute to this complexity.

How this complexity comes about with regard to modern slavery and how upstream voices should be included in labour governance are two issues that continue to be under-theorised in SCM research. Future research could meaningfully build both theoretically and practically on the diverse settings in this special issue to shed light on the trade-offs and practicalities involved in these questions.

Complexity as a choice

Supply chain complexity is clearly a driver of modern slavery risks, but as Pagell and Wilhelm (2025) asserted, this has become something of a clichéd excuse for the exploitation of vulnerable people. Of the factors making supply chains more complex, some are hard to avoid. Raw materials such as minerals and metals are in fixed geolocations, and many crops are difficult to grow outside of their natural habitat. Extraction of resource at scale is labour and cost intensive. Labour costs and labour availability in Global North

economies can make production extremely expensive if it is possible at all. Resources are sourced from areas where profits can be maximised through cheap labour and weak governance.

Many of the factors feeding complexity are the result of choices made by focal firms whose reputations are at risk from involvement in modern slavery scandals, however. These choices feature trade-offs that our literature has not adequately understood. Outsourcing reduces costs and transfers financial and ethical risks (LeBaron, 2021), whilst simultaneously reducing visibility and the ability to conduct due diligence on suppliers. The power imbalances between focal firms and the lower tier suppliers expected to comply with foreign (conceptually and geographically) governance regimes exacerbate the malpractice created by driving down prices. In short, much of the complexity in supply chains can be traced back to choices made by focal firms. That is, supply chain complexity is a choice, brought about intentionally or otherwise by managerial decisions, which have negative impacts upon vulnerable people.

Our discipline has yet to adequately recognise or theorise how the decisions and trade-offs made in SCM contribute to modern slavery. The opacity of the supply chain and disassociation between firm decisions and lower tier supplier action is poorly theorised (Rogerson *et al.*, 2025). Future research could investigate this from focal firm perspectives, studying how such decisions are made, the extent to which these trade-offs are acknowledged and where, why and how firms that identify these decisions as trade-offs make sense of, think through and make choices on these issues. Research could also investigate how suppliers experience these trade-offs and what the consequences are upstream by drawing direct lines between focal firm choices, supplier responses and working conditions. While work on some of these topics is ongoing in other disciplines, the implications for SCM are not the focus of those studies, leaving weaknesses in our understanding of modern slavery and related issues which few have addressed.

Upstream voices

Another view largely missing from the SCM literature is those of workers. The lived experience of workers is under-appreciated and under-theorised in the SCM literature, and the implications for our discipline remain poorly understood. Researchers should seek to better understand how different forms of supply chain governance impact on working conditions, workers' wellbeing, and more broadly on how decision mechanisms downstream affect workers. Whilst political economy and business ethics scholars have sought to understand what worker-driven governance looks like (e.g. Shivji, 2024), SCM perspectives on worker involvement in the design of anti-slavery mechanisms remain sparse. Benstead *et al.* (2021) and Stephens *et al.* (2025) have begun to raise the profile of "worker voice" to bring understanding to the lived experience. However, more needs to be done, and further examination is required to develop knowledge of how worker-driven governance affects SCM.

Conclusion

This special issue underscores that modern slavery remains prevalent, a "vile thing" that continues to imperil human wellbeing in a landscape of globalised extractive labour

practice. By synthesising diverse perspectives on governance, digitisation and cross-sector partnerships, the collected research reveals a recurring theme of distance, be it geographical, structural or algorithmic, which embeds and enhances critical information gaps that inhibit supply chain visibility and disable effective due diligence. Researchers can have impact by seeking to address the shortcomings and use theory to solve the complex problems of modern slavery in supply chains.

To advance the field, future research must move beyond viewing supply chain complexity as an unavoidable obstacle and instead theorise it as a managerial choice, investigating the ethical trade-offs and decisions that contribute to the opacity of multi-tier networks. Legislation thus far has raised awareness of the challenge of modern slavery, but above all appears to have created institutionalised professional regulators. This enhances due diligence and raises expectation, but policy–practice coupling appears insufficient to drive action necessarily affecting workers lived experience.

A frontier for researchers in SCM seeking to have impact on modern slavery lies in elevating "upstream voices". The labourer's perspective remains significantly under-developed in current literature. Integrating the lived experiences of the vulnerable – and bringing them into governance which claims to be for their benefit – will transition the field from studies of mere legislative compliance towards authentic insights. Anti-slavery mechanisms should be shaped by insights from the workers they are intended to protect help.

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