

Labour exploitation: OSCM research to combat modern slavery, human trafficking and precarious work

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Introduction

The issue of labour exploitation – including its most extreme forms of modern slavery and human trafficking – has moved up the political agenda over the last decade. This is reflected by global normative targets such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) and national public policies aiming for sustainability and human rights in supply chains (Bodrožić & Gold, 2024). In particular, these policies take the form of legislation such as the UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 (Meehan & Pinnington, 2021), the German Due Diligence in Supply Chain Law 2023 (Brandenburg et al., 2024) or the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive which was endorsed by the EU Council in 2024. Operations and Supply Chain Management (OSCM) scholars have been focusing more on this challenge since 2015 (Gold et al., 2015; New, 2015) – advancing both theory (e.g., Benstead et al., 2018) and practical solutions through decision-support tools (e.g., Benstead et al., 2021; Kougkoulos et al., 2021).

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such as lack of freedom of association or inadequate living wages, and neglects its underlying causes, namely power imbalances in regional and global economies (Gutierrez-Huerter O et al., 2023). Furthermore, LeBaron (2021) points out that “forced labour is a porous category in the context of business and supply chains, meaning that it is challenging to isolate because workers can move in and out of forced labour and more minor forms of exploitation in relatively short periods of time” (p. 31). Against this background the objectives of this Call for Papers are to motivate research that goes beyond a static investigation of extreme forms of labour exploitation and explicitly explores the fringes that may be represented by various forms of precarious work (Hoepfgaertner et al., 2022; Wiengarten et al. 2021; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), and the broader dynamics of work and employment. In addition, we reach out for research on the labour supply chain which “consists of the sequence of employment relationships that a worker goes through in order to be deployed in a productive capacity” (Allain et al., 2013, p. 42 cited by LeBaron, 2021). Labour supply chains may embrace issues such as recruitment deception (Fletcher and Trautrim, 2024), and link to human trafficking and the field of criminology, a related discourse that is more prevalent in the US. Human trafficking can open up our view on how legal and illegal activities may be intertwined (Bhimani et al., 2024) in recruiting, exploiting and continuously trapping humans in exploitative working conditions (Fletcher and Trautrim, 2024).

Submissions may cover – but may also go beyond – the following topics of interest:

- Identification and prevention of labour exploitation and trafficking in supply chains
- Drivers of unethical, illicit and illegal labour practices in global supply chains
- Impact of culture on just cause and questionable labour practices
- The interrelation between legal and illegal activities in (labour) supply chains
- Modern slavery as a “porous concept”: Dynamics between precarious work and forced labour
- Issues of labour supply chains: vulnerability, recruitment, exploitation, 

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exploitation

- The role of procurement in human rights within global supply chains
- The role of brokers and other middlemen in bad labour practices
- The role of intermediaries in combating exploitation
- Labour justice, workers' rights, and their effect on global operations
- The relationship between labour conditions and sustainable supply chains
- Understanding drivers and choke points of human trafficking from a supply chain management perspective
- Development of effective mechanisms to impede or interdict human trafficking
- The role of logistics service providers in human trafficking
- Operational and economic indicators to help identify human trafficking activity

Through this Call for Papers we aim to spur and catalyse rigorous empirical research on labour exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery that offers innovative conceptual and theoretical perspectives and can make a real-world difference in our quest for more equitable, inclusive and sustainable operations and supply chains (Corbett, 2024; Van Wassenhove, 2019). Collectively, the special issue will aim to incorporate research from a variety of perspectives – specifically including the somewhat under-represented worker voice (Stephens et al, 2024) – as well as the voice of other supply chain actors and external stakeholders.

Submissions open: 1st June 2025

Submissions close: 30 September 2025

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