

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE VULNERABLE TO MODERN SLAVERY IN SUPPLY CHAINS?

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ABSTRACT

It is estimated that over 40 million people are trapped in some form of modern slavery (ILO and Walk Free, 2017). However, there is no internationally agreed definition of modern slavery, except that it is understood to cover grievous forms of exploitation of vulnerable individuals and communities, ranging from human trafficking, forced labour, debt bondage/bonded labour, the worst forms of child labour to forced marriage. The notion of vulnerability therefore appears central for understanding where modern slavery is most likely to occur.

Vulnerability has been often used in academic literature in a generalising fashion to describe various demographic groups of consumers in a society (e.g., children, older adults, ethnic minorities; Baker et al., 2005) and the potential impact of their presumed inherent vulnerabilities on their consumer decision-making and wider engagement with markets. Yet there is a growing recognition that vulnerability is a complex social condition that requires nuanced understanding (Kubacki, et al., 2020; Pavia and Mason, 2014). Adding to its complexity as a theoretical concept, in practice vulnerability is also context-dependent (e.g., situational vulnerability; Baker et al., 2005). Accordingly, we all may become vulnerable to various hazards and risks, and therefore attempts to unpack vulnerability need to be located in a specific milieu, bringing together inherent (micro) and situational (meso) vulnerabilities within a social system (macro). This research therefore focuses on vulnerability to modern slavery in supply chains.

Supply chain management has long been a popular focus of research in the management field. According to Ellram et al. (2004) "Supply chain management is the management of information, processes, goods and funds from the earliest supplier to the ultimate customer, including disposal" (p.17). A common pattern of the structure of the supply chain is the arrangement of suppliers from developing countries and business buyers from highly developed countries, which are often powerful MNCs that are orchestrators of the supply chains (Gong et al., 2018). In supply chain management, the business side, as a response to the factors affecting supply chain management, implements various strategies and practices to build resilience against these factors, thereby seeking to mitigate risks and improve financial performance.

Differences in power asymmetries between large buying organizations and suppliers from developing countries allow the former to exert pressure on the latter as a remedy to the need to adapt to dynamic changes in the environment or even to the turbulence of the business environment. An increasing tendency of supply chain management is to non-disclose the supplier lists by buyers (e.g., to financial institutions granting working capital loans), because many suppliers prefer to be invisible (Sodhi and Tang, 2019). However, the research of Cho et al. (2019) shows that the lack of supply chain transparency increases labour violations by suppliers, including child labour. Many suppliers also engage in mock compliance (Huq and Stevenson, 2020).

In this research we aim to explore the notion of vulnerability and its representations at micro, meso and macro levels and we what makes people vulnerable to modern slavery in supply chains. Following systematic review procedures, we identified 51 studies reporting empirical and conceptual business research on modern slavery in supply chains. We found that, at the micro level, vulnerability is predominantly represented as an outcome of one behaviour—migration—simplifying the myriad of external push and pull factors, other behaviours and social relationships. At the meso level, situational risks are clustered around various conditions of employment representing and contributing to experiences of vulnerability. At the macro level, a broad set of systemic issues, from immigration laws to business models, were identified to contribute to the environment in which a heightened risk of vulnerability to modern slavery is experienced.

Keywords: supply chains, modern slavery, vulnerability.

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