



Thriving whilst surviving: Exploring the prevailing discourse of decent work in global supply chains

Work in Progress

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Introduction

Supply chain management (SCM) research has increasingly recognized the importance of improving the experiences of workers who labour in and for global supply chains. At its most extreme, the conditions of work for millions of workers can equate to modern slavery: around 16 million people are currently working under modern slavery risks in global supply chains (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021). Such issues have been conceptualized under the banner of ‘social sustainability’ research which has traditionally received less attention than ‘environmental sustainability’ and has yet to receive the collective attention needed to provide solutions for workers globally (LeBaron, 2021). In line with calls for sustainable supply chain management research to move away from an instrumental logic (Montabon et al., 2016), Soundararajan, Wilhelm and Crane (2021) have specifically called for the *humanization* of social sustainability research in SCM, to combat a tendency for SCM researchers and practitioners to construct human rights to decent work as merely social sustainability *issues* to be *managed*. Of particular importance within a more humanized research agenda in SCM are women workers, for whom contemporary SCM has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the

increased industrialization of the Global South has provided women with the opportunity of working, generating increased income and new forms of consciousness. However, on the other hand, women continue to be exploited in global supply chains, as they tend to do unskilled labor (Prieto-Carrón, 2008).

In this paper, we seek to contribute to emerging efforts to understand and improve working conditions for women workers in global supply chains. In line with recent scholarship (e.g. Touboulic McCarthy and Matthews, 2020; Soundararajan, Wilhelm and Crane, 2021; Wieland, Tate and Yan, 2024), we believe that progress in this area requires deeper engagement with alternative epistemological perspectives and related methodologies. In this paper, we therefore specifically seek to investigate the notion of decent work for women workers from a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective. Discourse analysis assumes that language plays an important role in constructing and sustaining reality (Hardy, Bhakoo and Maguire, 2020; Wieland, Tate and Yan, 2024). From this perspective, we view the international decent work agenda as a dominant discourse which constructs and sustains as legitimate certain meanings, power relations and practices in SCM. We therefore seek to understand the implications of this discourse for women workers and explore if and how discursive hegemony in the decent work agenda neglects the hidden realities of women at factory level.

Design/methodology/approach

To provide such an understanding of SCM, this paper's approach is divided into two components, both of which are analysed through CDA: 1) the dominant discourse of the International Labor Organization (ILO) and 2) the (potentially hidden) realities of women workers. First, to understand the dominant discourse of decent work, we investigate how ILO constructs the discourse around decent work. Second, we explore the daily working realities of women, as we draw on a comprehensive dataset consisting of more than 40 semi-structured interviews with female workers in garment factories in Myanmar, alongside photos and videos from on-site visits. Using CDA, we interrogate the meanings of decent work from the perspective of women workers as compared with dominant discourse of the ILO.

Findings

Through CDA, we highlight how ILO's dominant discourse to some extent fails at recognizing the needs of women at factory level. We show through the analysis, how women's personal needs are neglected in SCM, as the goal of SCM continues to be centred on profit maximization and risk minimization. As such, decent work discourses remain instrumental and fail at recognizing the issues that women are faced with in garment factories.

Discussion & Conclusion

Through CDA, we uncover the hidden discourse of women at work in the garment industry and shed light on how powerful discursive actors shape the prevailing discourse around decent work in a way that creates gaps for addressing the needs of female workers and appears to fall short at understanding and reflecting the many issues that female workers are facing in garment supply chains. We highlight how workers in women-dominated industries remain neglected in SCM due to the dominant instrumental logic. In doing so, we join the ongoing discussions in SCM on reimagining the discipline, as we follow up on calls for more critical research as highlighted by, for instance, Touboulic et al. (2020). By adopting a perspective rarely used in the field, we offer additional insights into the complex phenomenon of working conditions in global supply chains in an attempt at reimagining SCM to better encompass the needs of women.

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