



# Contemporary forms of slavery in the informal economy: preventing labour exploitation in the garment industry in England

This submission was prepared by the outlined project team in the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham, and De Montfort University.

The authors welcome queries and requests for information on the content of this submission. Any enquiries may be directed to [Michelle.Stirk@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Michelle.Stirk@nottingham.ac.uk)

## Project team

- Dr Alison Gardner, [Rights Lab Associate Director, Communities and Society](#)
- Krista Blair, [Rights Lab Research Fellow in Communities and Society](#)
- Dr Oana Burcu, [Rights Lab Senior Research Fellow in Global Regulations and Labour Exploitation](#)
- Charlotte Gray, [Rights Lab Research Fellow in Modern Slavery and Labour Exploitation](#)
- Dr Laura Pajon, [Senior Lecturer](#), De Montfort University
- Dr Kieran Phelan, [Rights Lab Research Fellow in Geographies of Modern Slavery and Labour Precarity](#)
- Dr Michelle Stirk, [Rights Lab Associate Professor in Accounting](#)
- Helen Taylor, [Rights Lab Senior Administrator](#)
- Professor Dave Walsh, – [Professor in Criminal Investigation](#), De Montfort University

## Overview

This submission draws on findings from a project examining labour exploitation in the garment industry in England. The project sought to generate an empirically informed understanding of community resilience and vulnerability to exploitation in the city of Leicester (UK). The project examined the garment and textile industry through stakeholder and worker experiences and priorities, to analyse the local problem of labour exploitation and interventions that might minimise or prevent its occurrence. The research took a multi-method approach, comprising a literature review, workshops, and interviews with stakeholders (including manufacturers), as well as focus groups and interviews with garment workers.

Although this project did not find examples of contemporary forms of slavery, it did provide extensive evidence for a range of labour abuses consistent with the concept of a continuum of exploitation (Skrivankova, 2010), including wages being paid below the UK's national minimum wage, wages being withheld, health and safety breaches, and a minority of accounts that suggested potential cases of forced labour and child labour.

## Contemporary slavery in informal work in England's garment industry

*5. Who is employed in the informal sector in your country? Please provide details with regard to gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, nationality, as well as social and/or economic status. Are some categories of workers affected by contemporary forms of slavery more than others? If so, please explain.*

Undocumented migrants are a feature of the demographic composition of the labour market within Leicester and its garment industry. Denial of the right to drive, work, or access social or welfare provisions can compound vulnerabilities to labour exploitation and creates a potential



barrier for participant engagement with enforcement and reporting agencies. However, our research also found that many garment workers in the informal economy within Leicester are longstanding residents, and fully documented, though not always fully integrated with wider UK communities, particularly in terms of ability to use English.

*6. What are the main factors in the informal economy which push workers into these practices (e.g. a lack of employment contract, access to employment benefits and protection, complaints mechanisms, and wider regulation/protection by States)?*

Participants in our study cited a range of factors that restricted their employment options, with a number of these factors contributing towards a situation of financial precarity and a degree of isolation from or non-integration with the wider community. According to workers, the fear of losing their job and the lack of alternative employment were the two main factors that prevent workers from reporting problems experienced in the workplace. At a personal level, a lack of ability to speak English was frequently identified as a limiting factor, alongside caring responsibilities for children or partners and/or low employability (e.g. skills and qualifications). In addition, immigration status and legal rights to access work affected participants' abilities to access employment in the mainstream economy and restricted their options.

Situational factors included the need for employment that was close to home due to either a lack of ability to drive or access public transport. Structurally, these issues were more frequently a problem for women than men, and in our study there was some evidence that certain minority groups experienced more labour abuses than others. Lack of opportunities within some minority communities may make these groups more likely to accept exploitative work practices in garment factories. A number of workers also mentioned how some employers deliberately exploited workers' vulnerability—in particular, their limited alternative employment options. Persuasive or sometimes threatening strategies (which sometimes included bullying and physical violence) were deployed using the ultimatum that workers could accept the conditions or leave.

*9. What kind of complaint/grievance mechanisms exist for informal workers to address violations of their human rights, including contemporary forms of slavery?*

Regulatory regimes rely on worker/victim reporting, and there is a risk that more isolated individuals and minority groups may be left more vulnerable to exploitation, because their limited options and access to community support present significant barriers to them taking action to report labour abuse.

Our research suggested that workers were unlikely to report labour abuses due to repercussions they feared facing (such as losing their jobs), language barriers, a lack of alternative options, previous negative experiences of reporting, and a lack of knowledge and confidence in approaching the intermediaries or agencies who could assist and enforce the law. This finding is particularly important because it shows that even if people recognise their precarious and exploitative working conditions, such recognition will not automatically translate into willingness to report or to act upon it in the absence of alternative employment, skills, or language training. Solutions suggested by our study included the provision of free confidential community advice services in a range of languages appropriate to local workers, and the development of improved community links by enforcement agencies.



*12. What role, if any, do civil society organisations and trade unions play in preventing informal workers from being subjected to contemporary forms of slavery in your country? Please provide examples.*

The garment and textile industry in Leicester remains highly fragmented with few workers being members of unions. Despite many participants experiencing egregious examples of workplace exploitation (including poverty pay and wage theft, workplace intimidation, and dangerous working conditions), workers lacked some knowledge of their basic working rights, and evidence of workplace organising was limited. In our study, we undertook a survey of Leicester garment workers, using a convenience sample involving 115 respondents, and found that most respondents (87%) knew that they are entitled to minimum wage, which also came strongly through in the open-ended questions where workers complained about being paid below minimum wage. However, other rights are much less known to the workers. Rights related to free health and safety training and protective equipment were some of the least known, with only 57% and 64% of our survey respondents reporting their being aware of them. At the same time, more of our survey respondents said they knew they were entitled to receive regular payslips (79%) and paid annual holiday days (77%).

This is not to say there lacked evidence of appetite for unionisation; just that there are systemic issues of non-engagement amongst participants with formalised structures of worker organisation. Many were open to the idea of organising to resolve workplace issues, but they needed more information and to identify organisations or individuals they could trust.

Civil society organisations played a key role in local intervention strategies. Minority participants described the importance of learning skills and participating in courses which empowered them and aided their resilience. For example, a local women's centre cultivated strong links to many marginalised groups and minority communities within Leicester, and served as a trusted intermediary for support and targeted intervention (employability courses, sewing instruction, English courses etc). These served as important assets of community resilience which raised awareness of participants' statutory rights and empowered them with labour market knowledge.