

**FOCUS ON  
LABOUR  
EXPLOITATION**

# **Worker Engagement in Human Rights Due Diligence: Learnings from a Pilot in Outsourced Cleaning**

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**Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX)** is a research and policy organisation working towards an end to labour exploitation. FLEX seeks to achieve this vision through the prevention of labour abuses, protection of the rights of those affected or at risk of exploitation and by promoting best practice responses to labour exploitation through research and evidence-based advocacy.

**The Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS)** is a feminist and human rights organisation run by and for Latin American migrant women living in the UK. We support women who are exposed to violations of their fundamental human rights, facing violence against women and girls, exploitation in low-paid sectors, trafficking, and enduring severe poverty and deprivation. We also actively advocate for women's rights, migrant's rights and the rights of ethnic minorities at local, national and EU levels, working with sister organisations in the women, migrant, anti-trafficking and racial justice sectors, as well as networks and campaigns, to tackle the vulnerabilities faced by Latin American women, who are affected by intersectional layers of discrimination.

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# Contents

<b>Acronyms / Abbreviations</b>	<b>04</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>05</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>09</b>
<b>2. Cleaning sector overview</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 Outsourcing in cleaning	11
<b>3. Background</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4. Key issues</b>	<b>16</b>
4.1 Working hours and pay	16
4.2 Leave and time off	17
4.3 Discrimination	18
4.4 Health and safety	20
4.5 Freedom of association	22
4.6 Access to remedy	23
4.7 Sexual harassment	24
4.8 Forced labour	26
4.9 Suggestions from cleaners	27
<b>5. Pilot design</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>6. Learnings</b>	<b>32</b>
6.1 Limitations	34
<b>7. Next steps</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>36</b>

# Acronyms / Abbreviations

<b>CoVE</b>	Commission on Vulnerable Employment
<b>CSR</b>	Corporate Social Responsibility
<b>EHRC</b>	Equality and Human Rights Commission
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FLEX</b>	Focus on Labour Exploitation
<b>FPAR</b>	Feminist Participatory Action Research
<b>HRDD</b>	Human Rights Due Diligence
<b>HSE</b>	Health and Safety Executive
<b>ICAR</b>	International Corporate Accountability Roundtable
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organisation
<b>IOM</b>	International Organisation for Migration
<b>LAWRS</b>	Latin American Women's Rights Service
<b>MSA</b>	Modern Slavery Act 2015
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>OHS</b>	Occupational Health and Safety
<b>ONS</b>	Office of National Statistics
<b>RBC</b>	Responsible Business Conduct
<b>SIC</b>	Standard Industrial Classification of economic activities
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
<b>UNGP</b>	United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights
<b>WSR</b>	Worker-Driven Social Responsibility

# Executive summary

This report details the findings and learnings from a project piloting worker engagement in human rights due diligence (HRDD) for outsourced cleaning services. The pilot was born out of the need to meaningfully engage workers to implement systems that respond to the needs and priorities of workers in practice. Drawing on existing research into the cleaning sector, regulatory frameworks, existing HRDD initiatives and, notably, the voice of workers, FLEX developed tools to assess company policies and practices as they relate to the procurement of cleaning services, in order to guide the ethical procurement of services and raise standards. FLEX then piloted the worker-informed tools with two UK based companies that were keen to better understand conditions for workers in their supply chains. The project is part of FLEX's efforts to develop and strengthen HRDD and bridge the gap between research and practice.

The UK cleaning sector offers an example of a high-risk sector characterised by widespread labour abuse and exploitation, with disproportionate representation of groups of workers facing additional vulnerabilities, including migrant and ethnic minority women. The shift towards the outsourcing of services, such as cleaning, has created a downward pressure on the wages and conditions of workers, increasing the risk of exploitation in domestic service supply chains (FLEX, 2021b, 2020). Two periods of worker engagement with cleaners in the UK informed this pilot. The first took place from July 2019 to June 2020, using FLEX's Peer Researcher Model. The second, more targeted form of worker engagement focused specifically on engaging women with experience working for outsourced cleaning services. For this worker engagement, FLEX partnered with the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS), who organised eight online thematic workshops between September 2022 and May 2023 with Spanish-speaking cleaners in the UK. This report aims to share findings and lessons learned from the pilot, in order to encourage more meaningful and effective worker engagement in the design and implementation of HRDD.

## Key issues

The key issues raised during the initial period of worker engagement informed the focus of each workshop led by LAWRS. An online workshop was devoted to each of the following themes: working hours and pay, leave and time off, discrimination, health and safety, freedom of association, access to remedy, sexual harassment and forced labour.

During the workshops, participants shared being forced to sign contracts immediately without having time to understand their working terms and conditions of employment. This led to workers signing contracts without realising they were agreeing to zero hour terms. Participants also explained

that they were often not paid for any additional time spent working or travelling to shifts across London. Many workers felt that their employers, in an attempt to save costs, were constantly reducing the number of hours or members of staff, meaning they always felt pressure to do more in less time. Workshop participants recounted being forced to work when unwell or injured. Those that had taken leave due to illness had been asked to find someone to cover their shift, whom they had to pay from their own pocket. Participants were also unaware of their rights and company processes concerning sick leave and holiday leave.

Workers also expressed that they received unfavourable treatment due to being migrants, such as being required to perform more work and under increased pressures. They also felt that having lower levels of English affected how they were treated and inhibited them from being able to complain. Not knowing where to get help, language barriers and fear of losing work were raised as significant barriers to reporting concerns and accessing remedy. Workshop participants also stated that supervisors are not usually trained to be able to deal with workplace issues.

Health and safety were of significant concern for cleaners in our research. This was largely due to having to perform heavy, physical work without breaks and under time pressure, having to use strong chemicals, and having limited knowledge of health and safety policies and precautions. Workers also highlighted increased risks for those working alone or late at night. Our research found widespread sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace, and a concerning lack of adequate training on sexual harassment and how to report it.

The low levels of unionisation in the sector were evidenced in the workshops, with only one participant stating they were a member of a union. Other participants felt that union membership can have adverse consequences on the treatment they receive from managers and co-workers, as well as their employability. Participants shared that cleaners are often unable to afford membership fees to join a union, especially for those without full-time work.

## Pilot design

The experiences shared by workers, along with additional research and reviews carried out on existing HRDD initiatives and legislation, were used to create an assessment 'toolkit'. This worker-informed toolkit provides a framework for assessing the procurement and continued engagement of outsourced cleaning services from a human rights perspective. The toolkit has then been piloted with the two commercial companies to assess their cleaning service procurement against specific guidelines and indicators. The indicators are divided into three different levels of compliance: Baseline, Integrated Strategy and Aspirational. This is to allow companies from different starting points to adopt recommendations and, incrementally, go beyond minimum compliance. Reports and recommendations are created for specific companies using the assessment tool. Wider learnings from throughout the project are shared in this report. The toolkit itself is a "living document" striving for continuous improvement and integrating lessons learned from its use.

## Learnings

### **1. There are significant gaps in knowledge among lead companies about the working conditions in service sectors supply chains**

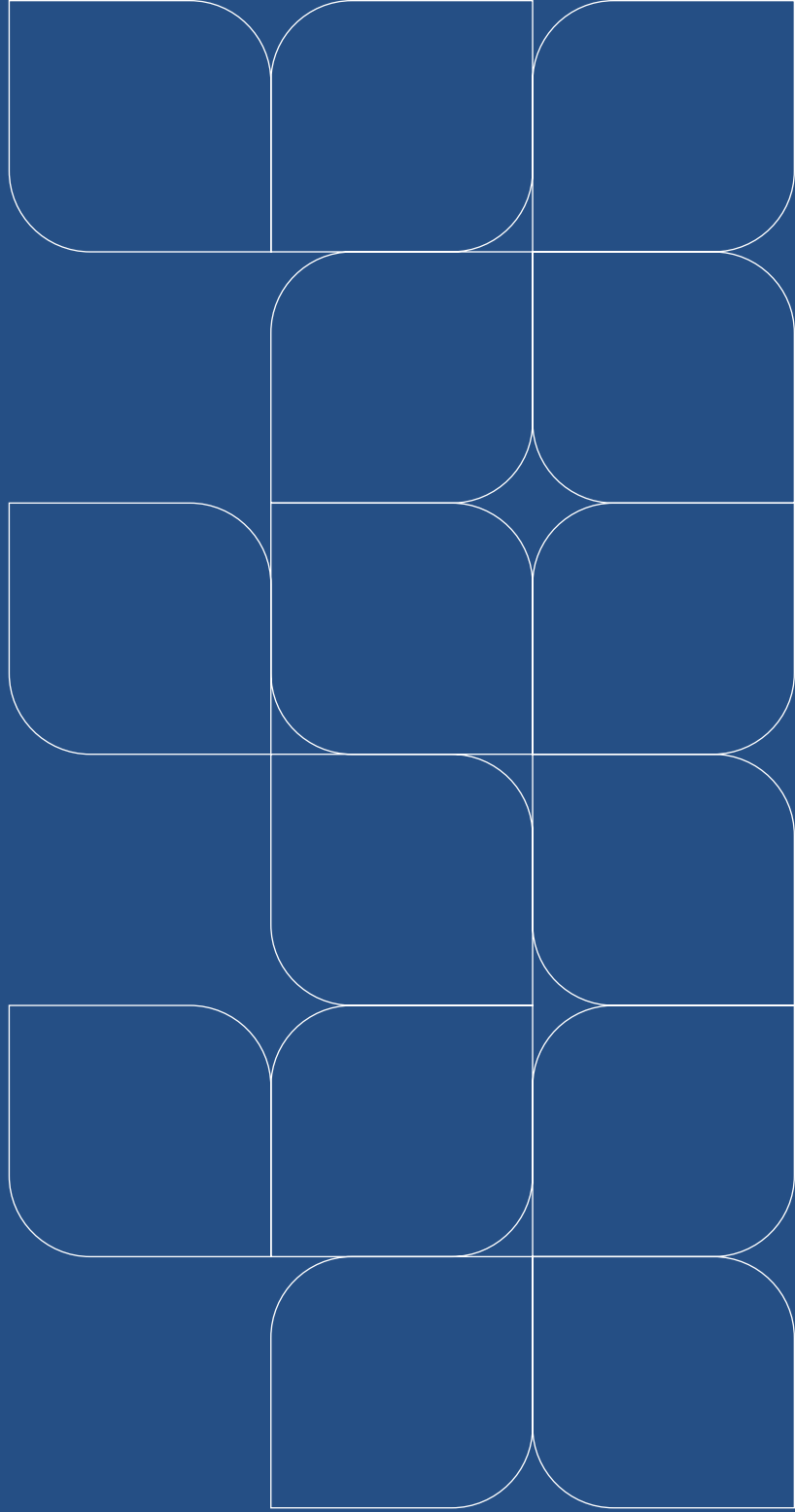
Despite current state legislation stipulating that employers are only responsible for their direct employees; companies should also be aware that their own structures and operations have a direct impact on the working conditions of their outsourced workers. Meetings with a significant number of companies during the planning phase of this project demonstrated that lead companies often lack proper insight on the conditions of outsourced workers on the ground. In most cases, companies expressed a strong interest in addressing these gaps.

### **2. Involving workers in defining the problem and shaping solutions can make efforts more impactful**

Workers in high-risk sectors can provide companies not only with information on the reality of working conditions in their supply chain but also with invaluable insight into how better to prevent and mitigate the risks they face. The worker engagement in this pilot takes lessons from FLEX research into feminist participatory action research, so that barriers to worker participation and the levels of power-sharing continue to be monitored and improved.

### **3. Driving up standards in cleaning requires increased accountability from lead companies given their role in shaping working conditions in the sector through their procurement and practices**

With increasing recognition being given to strengthening HRDD legislation, companies are identifying the need to make significant efforts to prevent and mitigate labour abuse and exploitation in their supply chains. Given the vital role that lead companies have in shaping working conditions through their procurement practices, increased accountability can make a significant positive impact for workers in their supply chains.



**“Most of us who have worked in cleaning have gone through a bit of exploitation .”**

Workshop participant, May 2023.



# 1. Introduction

## **This report details the learnings from FLEX’s project ‘Worker Engagement in Human Rights Due Diligence: Learnings from a Pilot in Outsourced Cleaning’ (henceforth ‘the pilot’).**

The pilot was designed to assess compliance with employment practices in the outsourced cleaning sector, and to guide the responsible procurement of services with the aim of driving up standards.

The purpose of this report is to both document findings and lessons learned from designing and implementing a worker-informed human rights due diligence (HRDD) framework for service sector supply chains, as well as to provide a sounding board for those interested in or already engaging workers in due diligence practices. The pilot was designed to assess compliance with employment practices in the outsourced cleaning sector, and to guide the ethical procurement of services with the aim of driving up standards. The project is part of FLEX’s efforts to develop and strengthen HRDD and bridge the gap between research and practice..

The UK cleaning sector offers an example of a high-risk sector characterised by endemic levels of labour abuse and exploitation, where groups of workers facing additional vulnerabilities, including migrant and ethnic minority women, are disproportionately represented. More specifically, the sharp rise in the procurement of outsourced services has created a downward pressure on the wages and conditions of workers, increasing the risk of exploitation in domestic service sector supply chains (FLEX, 2021b, 2020).

HRDD is the process companies carry out to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for how they address actual and potential risks in their operations and supply chains. Involving workers in this process ensures that workers are at the front and centre in identifying risks and developing solutions to the issues that affect them. In partnership with the Latin American Women’s Rights Service (LAWRS), FLEX engaged outsourced women workers in the cleaning sector to design a more sustainable and robust framework for ensuring responsible business conduct (RBC). Drawing on existing research into the UK cleaning sector, regulatory frameworks, multistakeholder initiatives and, notably, the voice of workers, FLEX developed a set of tools to assess company policies and practices as they relate to the procurement of services. FLEX then piloted these worker-informed tools with two UK based companies that were keen to better understand conditions for workers in their supply chain. While specific findings and recommendations are confidential to the companies, they inform the wider learnings shared in this report.

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The pilot was born out of the recognition of the need to meaningfully engage workers to implement systems that respond to workers' needs and priorities.

The pilot was born out of the recognition of the need to meaningfully engage workers to implement systems that respond to workers' needs and priorities. It builds on previous FLEX research into high-risk sectors and employment practices, meaningful worker engagement, transparency in corporate supply chains and emerging models (FLEX, 2021b, 2021a, 2020, 2018b). The engagement of workers in this project was informed by FLEX's ongoing efforts to ensure the experience, knowledge and perspectives of the group or community being researched are not just acknowledged but form the foundation of the project. FLEX has produced guidelines on approaching worker engagement in research in [Researching Labour Exploitation: A FLEX Guide to Research with Hard-to-Reach Migrant Workers in the UK](#) and [Experts by Experience: Conducting Feminist Participatory Action Research with Workers in High-Risk Sectors](#). Whilst FPAR was not conducted as part of this project, the worker engagement was informed by learnings from this approach.

The underlying goal of the pilot is to promote labour practices that are more favourable and centred on workers and their well-being by creating practical assessment guidelines to identify risks which can then be prevented, mitigated, and remedied. This report gives an overview of the academic literature, labour rights indicators and standards, and publicly available initiatives that were used in the design of the pilot. It will address the business models and power imbalances that limit corporate social responsibility initiatives' effectiveness. This report also compiles observations, limitations and recommendations from the pilot. In this way, we aim to share findings and lessons learned from this process, in order to encourage more meaningful, ongoing, and effective worker engagement in the HRDD process.

# 2. Cleaning sector overview

The cleaning sector remains one of the ten largest sectors in the UK, with recent figures showing that the industry contributes nearly £59.8 billion to the economy (BCC, 2024). The size and growth of the industry is predominantly the result of a shift in recent years from managing cleaning ‘in-house’ to outsourcing these services (BCC, 2019). The cleaning sector covers a wide range of activities including waste management and industrial cleaning, however, this pilot focuses on the procurement of cleaning services for general cleaning of buildings (Standard Industrial Classification code 81210) (Companies House, n.d.). The pilot focused on the experiences of cleaners working for outsourced service providers of general building cleaning, such as routine non-specialised cleaning of offices, hospitals, shops, universities, and other public and commercial spaces. The project learnings can, however, be applied to other service sectors marked by outsourcing.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to life the importance of the cleaning sector for public health while simultaneously exacerbating many pre-existing issues in the sector, such as high levels of redundancies and increased pressure to work in risky conditions.

In 2021, FLEX published a working paper called [\*“If I Could Change anything about my work...” Participatory Research with Cleaners in the UK\*](#) shedding light on the experiences of workers in the cleaning sector. Existing studies evidenced the poor working conditions, unsociable hours and dangerous working environments, including limited provision of protective equipment and low pay, with cleaners earning one of the lowest median pay rates of all sectors (ONS, 2023; Grimshaw et al., 2014; de la Silva, Granada & Modern, 2019; EHRC, 2014; CoVE, 2008; FLEX, 2021b). FLEX’s working paper noted that workers in low-paid sectors are often unable to object to the worsening of their working conditions. Minoritised groups, including women, migrants and ethnic minorities, whose options are more limited, remain in poor working conditions whilst those who can find better conditions and pay will leave (Weekes-Bernard, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic brought to life the importance of the cleaning sector for public health while simultaneously exacerbating many pre-existing issues in the sector, such as high levels of redundancies and increased pressure to work in risky conditions.

## 2.1 Outsourcing in cleaning

Outsourcing is when a company hires another company to provide a specific service that would have otherwise been performed in-house by directly employed staff. In the cleaning sector, cleaning service providers compete for contracts with lead companies, often intensifying the work and squeezing the pay of their employees in order to win contracts and maintain profit margins. FLEX’s research into the cleaning sector built on existing research of precarious working conditions and evidence of labour abuse, whilst calling attention to the structural factors, such as supply chains that are fractured by outsourcing and subcontracting, that drive risk of labour exploitation.

UK labour laws are designed to regulate direct employment and not the multi-layered supply chains generated by outsourcing, leaving lead companies that outsource services absolved of state regulation and left to regulate themselves.

FLEX research into the Worker-Driven Social Responsibility (WSR) model as a possible model for tackling labour abuse in supply chains highlighted the fact that fragmented workplaces, where workers in different areas for of the supply chain have different employers and employment terms, inhibit workers from being able to organise and collectively bargain (FLEX, 2020). In addition, the job insecurity created by part-time, temporary, fixed-term, casual and other precarious work arrangements common among outsourced service providers, make workers fearful of organising as this could lead to retaliation from their employer, such as not being allocated shifts (Bornstein, 2019). Moreover, UK labour laws are designed to regulate direct employment and not the multi-layered supply chains generated by outsourcing, leaving lead companies that outsource services absolved of state regulation and left to regulate themselves (FLEX, 2017).

Owing to the increasingly fragmented employment relationships in the sector, FLEX has long called for better responses to workplace abuse and exploitation that keep up with the changing working environment. Longer, more complex supply chains often allow companies at the top of the supply chain to deny liability for labour rights violations experienced by workers not directly employed by them (Huws & Podro, 2012; Weil & Goldman, 2016). Yet lead companies shape conditions in their supply chain through their structures and demands, for example, by demanding lower costs and tight delivery deadlines, fluctuating order volumes, and allowing unstable sourcing relationships (FLEX, 2020; LeBaron et al., 2019; Blasi & Bair, 2019). Lead companies looking to conduct their business responsibly often sign up to ethical trading principles or employ auditing firms in efforts to improve standards of service providers in their supply chain. However, FLEX research has previously highlighted that these initiatives can often overlook the ways in which lead companies' own business models and practices create risks of labour abuse and exploitation (FLEX, 2020).



# 3. Background

The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) stipulate a global standard for states and companies to prevent, address and remedy human rights abuses. This means that companies should strive to avoid infringing on all internationally recognised human rights, including labour rights and protection from human trafficking and forced labour (United Nations, 2011).

The purpose of HRDD is to help companies prevent and mitigate impacts on people. This process should also help them make decisions related to their operations, investments, and business relationships. Effective due diligence can improve their understanding of risks related to their purchasing practices, strengthen management of operational risks, and decrease the probability of incidents related to, for example, labour abuse and exploitation.

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In the context of the UK, businesses over a certain size are required by Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to report on what measures they put in place, if any, to address or prevent human trafficking and forced labour in their supply chains.

In the context of the UK, businesses over a certain size are required by Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to report on what measures they put in place, if any, to address or prevent human trafficking and forced labour in their supply chains. It calls on companies to effectively and meaningfully investigate, report and act on abuse and exploitation in their supply chain. However, this legislation has no current state-level monitoring or sanctions for non-compliance, leaving any monitoring to consumers and civil society.

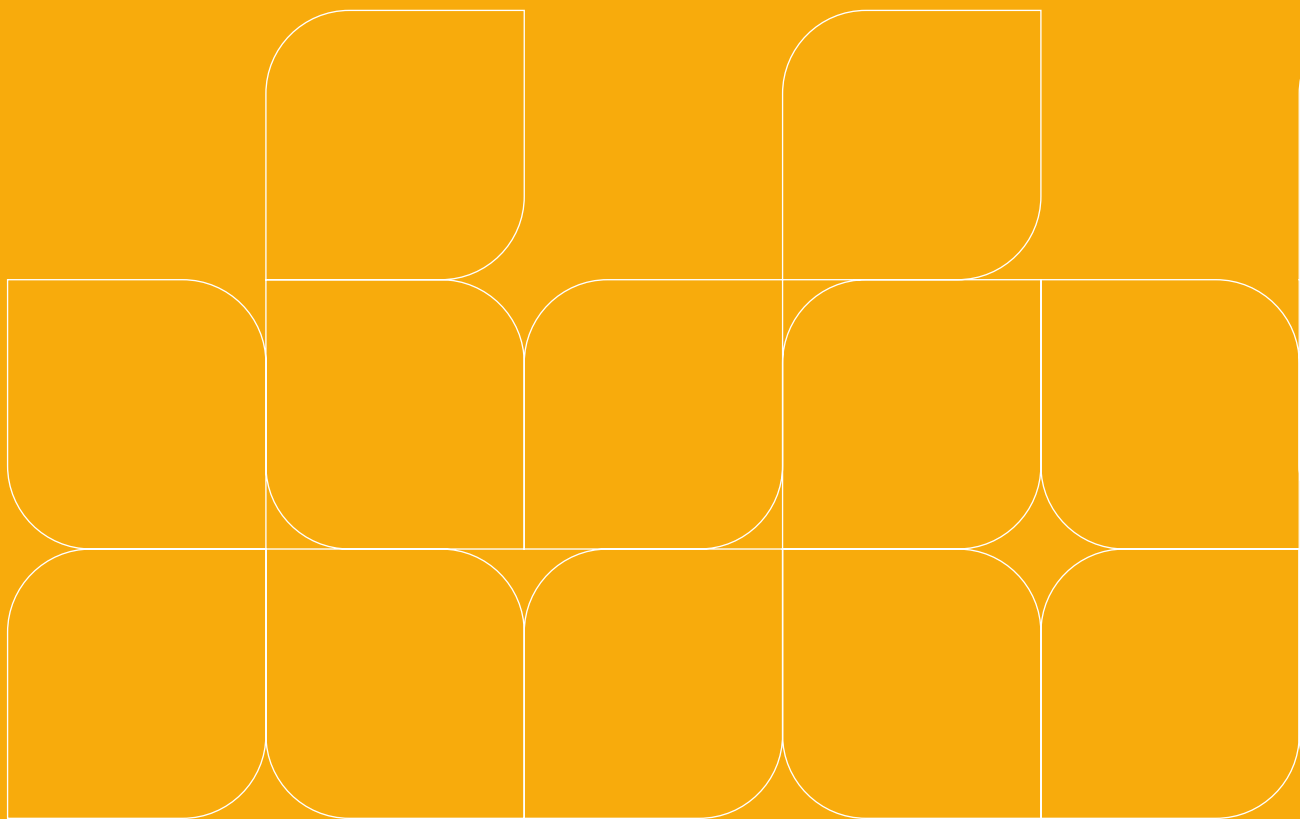
Many companies choose to join industry level initiatives or collaborate with relevant stakeholders to implement due diligence practices, pool expert knowledge, increase leverage in their business relationships, and/or build trust with workers in their supply chains.

As part of this project, FLEX reviewed existing worker-informed, corporate responsibility initiatives. The review found that initiatives relying solely on documentary evidence (including responsible business procurement documents such as self-assessed compliance with Suppliers' Code of Conduct), as well as assessment exercises, such as social audits, failed to demonstrate tangible, positive outcomes on the ground. Such approaches would benefit from engaging workers' directly not only to corroborate the documentary evidence, but to identify priority areas as well (FLEX, 2018b; FLEX & ICAR, 2019; LeBaron, 2018). Nevertheless, the engagement of workers itself presents several challenges, especially regarding the possibility of workers being truly free to voice their opinions. These challenges have been addressed by some initiatives promoting tripartite collaborations among trade unions, management of service providers and lead companies through the mediation of an independent third party responsible for engaging workers directly in the assessment of the service provider's performance.

Like previous FLEX research, this review found that there is no blanket solution and that worker engagement in HRDD should be dependent on the context, sector and specific circumstances and needs of the company. For instance, whilst FLEX research on the WSR model found it to be a promising method for creating change, most notably since WSR agreements are legally enforceable in ways that collective bargaining agreements are not currently in the UK, and the WSR model provides easy and effective routes for reporting abuse and non-compliance, the research found the efficacy of WSR agreements highly context dependent (FLEX, 2020). The ways in which WSR is embedded into existing organisational structures and the motivations and strategies behind its implementation will affect the WSR models' ability to have a positive impact on worker conditions. Building on this research, this pilot aims to identify risks and develop recommendations for effective worker engagement in HRDD rather than promoting a 'one-size fits all' approach to HRDD.

**“That’s the beginning of labour exploitation, isn’t it? The bosses start by saying ‘look, help me with this, just for today’, but that becomes a habit.”**

Workshop participant, May 2023.



# 4. Key issues

The pilot draws on two instances of engagement with cleaners in the UK as experts in their experiences, with key insights into the risks they face and the solutions for them. The first one spanning from July 2019 to June 2020, using FLEX's Peer Researcher Model – an FPAR approach, which involves working with experts by experience as peer researchers over a sustained period of time to investigate drivers of labour exploitation and to develop better informed policy (FLEX, 2021a). In this instance of engagement with cleaners, qualitative data was collected through twelve peer-to-peer semi-structured interviews, three worker-led focus groups and one community researcher-led focus group, as well as ten worker interviews carried out by FLEX staff. Quantitative data was also collected from a comprehensive survey completed by 99 workers. From this engagement, issues with pay, the ability to take time off when ill, dangerous working conditions, and sexual harassment were revealed as key issues experienced by cleaners at work. The study also investigated the key drivers of risk and resilience to labour exploitation for cleaners. Chief among the drivers of risk for workers was outsourcing, with service providers competing for contracts with lead companies resulting in a downward pressure on wages and conditions (FLEX, 2021b).

**The second, more targeted form of worker engagement focused specifically on engaging cleaners with experience working for outsourced cleaning services. These were an independent group of outsourced cleaners, who, as far as we were aware, had no connection to the companies engaged in the pilot. For this worker engagement, FLEX partnered with LAWRS, who organised eight online thematic workshops between September 2022 and May 2023 with Latin American Spanish speaking women workers in the UK. Each session focused on key evidenced issues raised by cleaners during FLEX's participatory research with cleaners: working hours and pay, leave and time off, discrimination, health and safety, freedom of association, access to remedy, sexual harassment and forced labour.**

## 4.1 Working hours and pay

FLEX survey data showed that the majority of the sample of workers in cleaning (61%) had experienced issues with their pay, such as underpayment, late payments, not being paid for all the hours worked, illegal deductions and not being paid holiday or sick leave. The workshops organised by LAWRS supported these findings, with participants explaining that they were compelled to sign contracts very quickly, meaning they did not have time to ask for help understanding their employment terms and entitlements, leading to confusion over their rights to be paid sick pay, holiday pay and for all hours worked. Workers also recounted having signed contracts without realising these were zero hours.



All workshop participants had experienced working 6 hours or more without being entitled to a break.

“The work is always more than what we are paid. They always demand more from us”

Workshop participant, September 2022

Access to sick pay that is above the statutory minimum is low for cleaners, and even less common for those working part-time and on temporary contracts, working patterns which are prevalent in outsourced cleaning.

**“I found out later that my contract was zero hours”**

Workshop participant, September 2022

The negative impacts of long hours as well as long commutes and being assigned shifts across different areas of London were also raised by participants. All workshop participants had experienced working 6 hours or more without being entitled to a break, with one participant going as far to explain:

**“I did 12-14 hours for a deep clean and I ended up in hospital due to my back”**

Workshop participant, May 2023

Many participants also recounted that there was not enough time, or not enough staff to complete all the work they are assigned, and that they do not get paid for hours worked to complete the job beyond their contracted time.

**“The work is always more than what we are paid. They always demand more from us”**

Workshop participant, September 2022

**“There are also reductions in employees, sometimes there are less people to cover the same amount of work”**

Workshop participant, September 2022

## 4.2 Leave and time off

Access to sick pay that is above the statutory minimum is low for cleaners, and even less common for those working part-time and on temporary contracts, working patterns which are prevalent in outsourced cleaning. FLEX research showed that almost half of survey respondents (47%) reported receiving no sick pay when unable to work due to illness. This was also an issue highlighted during the worker engagement workshops. During a workshop held in September 2022, all eight participants were unaware of the conditions for sick leave, maternity leave, carer's leave or holiday leave.

**“I don't know my rights because it changes all the time. They give me holidays when it is convenient to them. Once I was sick and they wanted to count as holidays - if you are ill, how can you enjoy your holidays?”**

Workshop participant, September 2022

If taking sick leave or holiday leave, workshop participants recounted that the burden of finding a replacement fell on them, and would lead to issues with non-payment.

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“I was ill at the hospital and the manager demanded that I find someone to replace me at work. At the end they didn’t pay the person I found to cover me and I had to deal with that too.”

Workshop participant,  
September 2022

**“I was ill at the hospital and the manager demanded that I find someone to replace me at work. At the end they didn’t pay the person I found to cover me and I had to deal with that too.”**

Workshop participant, September 2022

**“I found someone to cover me when I went on holidays but the company didn’t pay this person correctly, so I had to pay from my pocket”**

Workshop participant, September 2022

Workshop participants also pointed to the fact that the physical nature of the job, and the exposure to chemicals involved in cleaning work can lead to sickness or injury, but participants felt they have no right to feel unwell, as they would be asked to come in even after having told their supervisors they were sick or injured.

**“I had a bike accident on my way to work, a glass got into my hand and I was bleeding. I sent a photo to my supervisor saying I would not be able to work but they asked me to come anyway as they had no one to cover me”**

Workshop participant, September 2022

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“no matter what, we need to carry on working.”

Workshop participant,  
September 2022

**“We hurt ourselves, we overwork in a short given work time, we endure violence but no matter what, we need to carry on working. Not knowing our rights makes it even more difficult - we don’t know we can ask for help or for time off. Whenever we ask for it, we feel guilty and afraid of losing our jobs”**

Workshop participant, September 2022

Most participants did not feel they were entitled to take holiday leave and saw this as a luxury.

**“I’ve worked a year without taking or even knowing that I had the right to take holidays”**

Workshop participant, September 2022

## 4.3 Discrimination

Nearly half of survey respondents (49%) reported being treated differently due to a protected characteristic, which included experiences of bullying or abuse due to nationality and race. Workshop participants also recounted that being a migrant meant that managers and supervisors would treat them differently and would expect more from them.

“[being a migrant] affects it in a big way. Especially managers and supervisors who always want to take advantage, they give us more work in a few hours. And running around, you have no quality of life. It affects me greatly.”

Workshop participant,  
October 2022

**“[being a migrant] affects it in a big way. Especially managers and supervisors who always want to take advantage, they give us more work in a few hours. And running around, you have no quality of life. It affects me greatly”**

Workshop participant, October 2022

The workshop participants also felt that without being able to speak English, they were subject to further abuse, and could not complain.

**“I am an old person and in this country I have not studied, because I have always been working and I rarely went to school. When they abuse you have no one to complain to, because the managers usually speak in English. So you let them abuse you because you have to earn a living and you need the job”**

Workshop participant, October 2022

**“The biggest barrier is English. When they realise that you don’t know English, then they abuse you. They can even throw you out and what do you say? How do you complain?”**

Workshop participant, October 2022

Workers that participated in the workshops also felt the hardships they faced contributed to their difficulty in learning English.

**“I was experiencing family violence, I think that has affected my mental health, the issue of learning. I wasn’t able to learn, because of the concentration”**

Workshop participant, October 2022

“Many times, they tell you, I’ll give you a little job, but in exchange for sexual harassment. I’ve seen it. Immigration status aggravates the situation.”

Workshop participant,  
October 2022

FLEX’s previous research highlighted that having an insecure immigration status significantly increased worker’s risk of experiencing labour abuse and exploitation, particularly for those undocumented. People caught working in the UK without authorisation can be faced with an unlimited fine, six months in prison, confiscation of earnings and deportation. The threat of reporting someone to immigration authorities gives traffickers and unscrupulous employers unparalleled power for exploiting workers. Workshop participants also spoke about being highly dependent on others if undocumented and having no option but to accept risky or exploitative conditions.

**“I know people who work with borrowed papers, but they have to pay these people 50% of the work they earn. It is very difficult”**

Workshop participant, October 2022

**“Many times, they tell you, I’ll give you a little job, but in exchange for sexual harassment. I’ve seen it. Immigration status aggravates the situation”**

Workshop participant, October 2022

<b>Physical health issues</b>	<b>N.</b>	<b>%</b>
Back, neck or joint pain	63	64%
Cuts and bruises	42	42%
Rashes, dermatitis or other skin problems	29	29%
Slips or trips	27	27%
Burns or scalding (from chemicals)	15	15%
Burns or scalding (from heat)	9	9%
Broken or fractured bones	6	6%
<b>Mental health issues</b>		
Feeling burnt out	48	48%
Anxiety	33	33%
Insomnia (not being able to sleep)	20	20%
Depression	19	19%
Panic attacks	11	11%

**Table 1. While working in cleaning, have you ever experienced any of the following at work or because of work?\***  
 \*Total number of respondents: 99. Note, several respondents experienced more than one issue

## 4.4 Health and safety

Health and safety were of significant concern for cleaners in our research. 86% of survey respondents reported having experienced health issues that were related to their work.

Cleaners in FLEX research reported being particularly impacted by the need to rush under the pressure to do their work with more and more speed causing mental health issues such as anxiety and stress, as well as increasing risks of physical injury. Workshop participants also frequently mentioned the impact of working with heavy products and equipment.

**“I had to carry the two big buckets, and in the other one I had to carry the products. They didn’t let us use the lift, we had to go down the other stairs, and they are the big ones. They used a lot of products, there were about 5 of them, but they were full, heavy. So going down, going up, and it was very tiring. I asked the manager for a trolley that other colleagues had, but he told me that they didn’t have one, that there were only two, I told him that I could use**

**it because it was very heavy, but he said no. And I couldn't use the lift, only the staff of the building could use the lift. It affected my spine because it was too heavy. I was left with that pain. I was in a hunchback position, and my spine and part of my head hurt a lot. Until now. And straightening up hurt me a lot"**

Workshop participant, November 2022

Workshop participants also described injuries caused by the repetitive motions involved in cleaning work.

**"They say it's carpal tunnel, but the treatments haven't helped. The doctors ask me what my job is, and I am a cleaner, it is a repetitive movement of cleaning toilets, glass, mirrors. I tell them, but they don't say anything"**

Workshop participant, November 2022

"I had carpal tunnel surgery on my left hand. Thank God it went well but now for the last two years I've been in pain. And now they gave me an injection in my right hand, but they told me it's for vacuuming, cleaning and so on, and I've lost strength in my hands, sometimes things fall. You tell the manager and they say 'well, that's the way it is.'"

Workshop participant,  
November 2022

**"Me, the same. I had carpal tunnel surgery on my left hand. Thank God it went well but now for the last two years I've been in pain. And now they gave me an injection in my right hand, but they told me it's for vacuuming, cleaning and so on, and I've lost strength in my hands, sometimes things fall. You tell the manager and they say 'well, that's the way it is'"**

Workshop participant, November 2022

Participants also shared the negative impacts of having to use strong chemicals, such as skin irritations and allergies, respiratory and eyesight issues.

**"The gloves they give us are so thin that the water always gets in. We washed the cloth in the same water and the chemicals made my fingers split, my hands peeled from the chemicals. And the steam that came out made my head hurt"**

Workshop participant, November 2022

**"Chemicals also affect eyesight. I have friends who are losing their eyesight"**

Workshop participant, November 2022

During the workshops, participants also raised concerns around lone working, as well as the need for health and safety training. Participants shared their fears getting injured at work when no one else is onsite.

**"I was cleaning and there was something sticking out and when I raised my head I hit the corner of an iron, I felt like I was out of place, dizzy, an incredible pain and I had to sit on the floor because I don't know if I had lost consciousness or what, and I was alone in that building, there was no security, there was no one there. I still had two floors to go, I called the manager and told him I was leaving and he told me I had to finish, but I told him I wasn't well."**

**He told me he was already at home, that he had already left. Then I started thinking and I said no, I'm not going back alone"**

Workshop participant, November 2022

**"When you are with keys you go in alone, but if something happens to you, a fall, you cut yourself, you are alone, you don't know who you are going to go to because you are alone. You run a lot of risk. You can call but if you have a blow anything can happen at that moment"**

Workshop participant, November 2022

The workshop participants noted large discrepancies in the provision of training among the different cleaning companies they had worked for. One participant reported not receiving any training but being forced to sign a document saying she had completed training.

"he made me sign that they had given me training and they didn't even give it to me. [...] They didn't tell us anything about the products, probably so as not to scare us."

Workshop participant,  
November 2022

**"In this last job they didn't even give me training. I wrote to him through the translator and he made me sign that they had given me training and they didn't even give it to me. I complained that they made me sign and they didn't give me any. Then they taught me a few little things and nothing else. In other places they taught me. They didn't tell us anything about the products, probably so as not to scare us"**

Workshop participant, November 2022

Most workshop participants were aware of a health and safety manual, but since the manual is in English, they faced a barrier to understanding the health and safety guidelines.

**"In the company where I work, we don't receive training. We have very little contact with the managers. They give us a manual that is in English"**

Workshop participant, November 2022

**"The manual is a big folder that you have to sit down with time to read, but it is in English. You have to be aware of what you can and cannot do to avoid accidents. If you have an accident but it's in the manual, they are not liable for that"**

Workshop participant, November 2022

## 4.5 Freedom of association

FLEX research on cleaning found very low levels of unionisation in the sector, however workers who had organised and joined a trade union described several advantages of doing so, such as having a stronger more unified voice, protection against unfair dismissal, access to information about rights and companies being more likely to abide by their legal obligations (FLEX, 2021b).

Only one participant in the workshops said they were a member of a union and they described having received training from the union which had helped them to defend their rights and entitlements at work.

**“Along the years I’ve learnt that I did not have to do things I wasn’t hired to do like cleaning crystals, or lifting heavy things, or cleaning what a colleague didn’t clean. There are many things that many colleagues don’t know about, in the union you can find everything you have to do or not do. I am now very informed and I don’t let myself do things that are outside my duties”**

Workshop participant, March 2023

“Most of those who work full time are members. Those of us who have a few hours, can’t afford it.”

Workshop participant,  
March 2023

Low trade union membership in the cleaning sector could at least partially be a result of the fragmentation of workplaces from outsourcing services. Workshop participants also said the cost of joining a union was a barrier, especially for those working part time.

**“Most of those who work full time are members. Those of us who have a few hours, can’t afford it”**

Workshop participant, March 2023

They also described having to be careful about sharing details about union membership as this may affect their ability to get a job and might also affect the treatment they receive from managers and co-workers.

**“It’s not a very open topic at work. When they take on a new worker they ask if they belong to a union. It’s a very private thing between us”**

Workshop participant, March 2023

“It’s not a very open topic at work. When they take on a new worker they ask if they belong to a union. It’s a very private thing between us”

Workshop participant,  
March 2023

**“We can’t talk about it publicly because otherwise the companies... we are kind of frowned upon. We have to be careful, even our colleagues are not all in agreement and they themselves tell the boss or the manager and sometimes they see you as a problem. So it’s a bit like talking among ourselves or when we’re not on the clock”**

Workshop participant, March 2023

## 4.6 Access to remedy

Survey respondents also faced difficulties reporting problems at work. The survey data revealed that not knowing where to get help (32%), language barriers (24%) and fear of losing job (20%) were the most common issues that prevented workers in the sample from reporting problems at work. These issues were echoed by participants in the worker engagement workshops. Workshop participants also found that a lack of knowledge of their rights inhibited workers from being able to speak out when they faced concerns at work.

“we rather not take risks and report it. We are constantly afraid of losing our jobs”

Workshop participant, April 2023

**“When you don’t know your rights, it becomes really hard to navigate the system. Also identifying what is abuse or harassment is difficult, the fine line between what is right and wrong, so we rather not take risks and report it. We are constantly afraid of losing our jobs”**

Workshop participant, April 2023

**“The majority lack information and knowledge, especially because of the language barrier, we get intimidated by it. Also the fear of losing the job stops us from complaining”**

Workshop participant, April 2023

Workshop participants predominantly stated that their supervisors would be the first person they spoke to if they had a concern. Participants also shared that this is not always helpful, as supervisors are often given the role of being a supervisor on the basis that they can speak English, rather than having the skills or training to manage workers.

**“One thing I have always noticed in jobs is that when you know English, you are promoted as supervisor, just for it. They have no training on how to resolve conflict or even empathy for the workers, so they shout: I am your supervisor”**

Workshop participant, April 2023

**“Supervisors are the ones who shout the loudest, above us. They have no conflict resolution skills”**

Workshop participant, April 2023

## 4.7 Sexual harassment

“You feel terrible, to be looked at like that, you feel that they are undressing you with their eyes, and you feel that because you have migrated you have to put up with it.”

Workshop participant, April 2023

Sexual harassment is a key workplace health and safety issue in the cleaning sector. FLEX’s 2021 working paper on the cleaning sector highlighted the need for state bodies such as the Equalities and Human Rights Commission and the Health and Safety Executive to protect workers from sexual harassment. 33% of those that responded to the survey shared having experience of sexual harassment while working in cleaning. Workshop participants also recounted many experiences of sexual harassment at work and highlighted that the prevalence is heightened by power imbalances in the sector, caused by a number of factors such as low pay, insecure work and immigration status.

**“You feel terrible, to be looked at like that, you feel that they are undressing you with their eyes, and you feel that because you have migrated you have to put up with it”**

Workshop participant, April 2023

Participants in the workshops also discussed putting up with sexual harassment due to not wanting to receive any complaints that could put their job at risk.



**“I work in a hotel. I just had to do a room where a guest, an elderly person, entered the room (...) he goes to the bathroom and starts to change his dressing gown, he puts on his dressing gown and sits on the chair, naked, and I was scared (...) And I was almost finished and the guest said ‘come, sit on my lap’, (...) I didn’t look at him, I didn’t say anything, because you have to respect the clients, because if I say something, he gives me a complaint and gets me in trouble. The only thing I said is that if you need that service you should call reception, we only clean the room”**

Workshop participant, April 2023

**“It didn’t happen to me but I heard from close friends, work colleagues that the same thing happened to them and they often kept quiet because they didn’t want to lose their jobs”**

Workshop participant, April 2023

FLEX’s previous participatory research into the cleaning sector found that outsourcing can further complicate experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace, as while the harasser may be a manager, supervisor or co-workers from that same outsourced company, they can also be an employee or customer of the lead company. This can lead to confusion for the employer and employee over where responsibility for addressing and preventing sexual harassment lies. For example, the outsourced company may claim that the premises of the lead company are not within their control. FLEX’s 2021 working paper on the cleaning sector identified two cases where lead companies had intervened to mitigate and help resolve cases of sexual harassment in their supply chain. In both cases, it was an employee from the lead company who had witnessed an outsourced cleaner in distress and raised a complaint, highlighting the need for lead companies to engage directly with their outsourced workers.

Worryingly, none of the participants that joined the worker engagement workshops had ever reported sexual harassment or were aware of someone reporting sexual harassment. No participants knew whether the companies they worked for had a policy on sexual harassment or whether they could report any type of sexual harassment.

“Sometimes they do it as a joke, like they tickle, touch you... but I don’t know if that would be harassment.”

Workshop participant,  
April 2023

**“It’s information they never teach us”**

Workshop participant, April 2023

**“Sometimes they do it as a joke, like they tickle, touch you...but I don’t know if that would be harassment”**

Workshop participant, April 2023

Participants did raise issues around working conditions making them more vulnerable to sexual harassment. For example, being left alone with managers (who tended to be men) and having to change clothes in the same spaces as men co-workers.

“Even locker rooms are shared between men and women. Its very uncomfortable and we have been asking to change this, to separate the changing room”

Workshop participant,  
April 2023

**“Even locker rooms are shared between men and women. Its very uncomfortable and we have been asking to change this, to separate the changing room”**

Workshop participant, April 2023

**“In my experience, I’ve never seen forms of prevention. I’ve got the feeling that the situation can encourage an abusive act, like if there’s no prevention, like separate changing rooms - these are spaces where harassment can be encouraged and occur”**

Workshop participant, April 2023

## 4.8 Forced labour

Fear of losing work for workers who need to maintain their source of income at almost any cost is a major deterrent for reporting or leaving exploitative working conditions. Fearing retaliation in the form of losing work or having their hours reduced inhibited survey respondents from refusing tasks not part of their job (37%), calling in sick (23%), reporting bad working conditions or pay (21%), or harassment and abuse (21%). Participants in the worker engagement workshops shared similar fears of losing work as a repercussion of speaking out against poor working conditions.

“There are two ways, if you speak up you know that in the end they will fire you, and if you don’t speak up, you know that you are being exploited, so you keep quiet.”

Workshop participant,  
May 2023

**“There are two ways, if you speak up you know that in the end they will fire you, and if you don’t speak up, you know that you are being exploited, so you keep quiet”**

Workshop participant, May 2023

**“Companies always want to give you more work, more work, and if you don’t comply they tell you that they will fire you”**

Workshop participant, May 2023

Workshop participants all had some experience of enduring working conditions that are indicators of forced labour, such as being threatened, working extensive hours without breaks, withholding of payment and withholding of identity documents.

**“Often companies also keep the payment for some of our work, but for a long time. They do it to keep you on the job or to make you resign voluntarily and lose your rights, to strangle you financially. It is a very complex situation”**

Workshop participant, May 2023

## 4.9 Suggestions from cleaners

Throughout the eight workshops, participants raised suggestions for how risks of exploitation and abuse for outsourced cleaners can be mitigated and how their working conditions could be improved.

Workers suggested that their employers should provide the following:

- Training on the chemicals and products they use;
- More eco-friendly cleaning products without harmful chemicals;
- Functioning equipment that is in good condition;
- Enough time to do the work assigned to them;
- Carts or trolleys for transporting heavy products or equipment;
- Multilingual product labels and adequate training;
- On-the-clock English classes.

Workers also asked for:

- Better treatment and consideration for their wellbeing;
- Time to read and understand their contract (including their rights and entitlements) before having to sign;
- Permission to use the lifts in lead company buildings;
- Adequate emergency protocols;
- Women workers to not be left alone with men managers without safe grievance mechanisms;
- Safe spaces to change clothes;
- Supervisors and managers to be regularly assessed and evaluated.

### Box 1. Suggestions from cleaners



**“They look at us, they talk to us, they offer us things, they intimidate us, they take advantage of their power**

Workshop participant, April 2023.

# 5. Pilot design

Along with FLEX's previous research into high-risk sectors and emerging models, the pilot has involved various forms of data collection before the creation of a worker-informed HRDD assessment tool for service sector supply chains (henceforth 'the toolkit'). Building on FLEX's research, the pilot involved a thorough review of existing HRDD initiatives and legislation (including national and international regulatory frameworks, including UNGPs, OECD due diligence guidance, ILO conventions, IOM guidelines, labour laws, relevant UK legislation such as the MSA 2015 and the UK Companies Act, EU Non-Financial Reporting Directive, and current international due diligence laws and legislative proposals). To carry out the pilot, FLEX coordinated the following relationships: partnering with LAWRS to engage with Latin American Spanish-speaking women workers in cleaning, recruiting two commercial companies to pilot the assessment toolkit, which involved liaising with the appropriate teams and reviewing relevant company policies and procedural documentation, and contracting a business consultancy.

This toolkit provides a framework for assessing the procurement and continued engagement of outsourced cleaning services from a human rights perspective. The aim is to ultimately ensure that companies who procure outsourced cleaning services are invested in and remain engaged in ensuring decent working standards for these workers in their supply chain.

The project was informed by the voices and perspectives of cleaning sector workers operating predominantly in London. The engagement of workers from the outsourced cleaning sector is at the very core of the project, and it allows the mapping of the issues and experiences that workers face every day and their ability to access redress and support mechanisms. Another goal of such activities was to co-develop potential solutions directly with workers, keeping in mind businesses' realistic engagement and ability to take action.

Thematic reports were created based on the content of the workshop discussions. These reports contributed to a technical review, which comprises a thorough analysis of the findings of the reports, triangulated with international law instruments and principles, and the findings and methodologies used in other non-binding initiatives on the procurement of services and HRDD.

The findings from the literature review, workshops and technical review have all been used to create an assessment toolkit, which is to be used by experienced evaluators and not as a self-assessment tool. This toolkit provides a framework for assessing the procurement and continued engagement of outsourced cleaning services from a human rights perspective. The aim is to ultimately ensure that companies who procure outsourced cleaning services are invested in and remain engaged in ensuring decent working standards for these workers in their supply chain. The toolkit was then piloted with the two commercial companies to assess their cleaning service procurement against specific guidelines and indicators.

The toolkit is organised into a set of tables, each presenting bespoke, contextualised questions and indicators for the key topics identified by

outsourced workers in the UK cleaning sector.

The tables are divided per thematic areas as follows:

- Human rights due diligence, policies and processes (referring to general reporting legislation, and CSR);
- Terms of employment (workers' contracts);
- Issues with pay (underpayment, non-payment, late payment and deductions);
- Work-life balance (working time, rest periods, and private time);
- Ability to take time off (insufficient and inaccessible sick pay, holidays, maternity, carer's leave and bereavement);
- Dangerous working conditions (Physical and mental health safety in the workplace - OHS);
- Work-related violence (including sexual harassment in the workplace);
- Discrimination and extreme vulnerability (race, ethnicity, gender, language, and immigration status);
- Trade Union Membership Affiliations (freedom of association);
- Grievance Mechanisms (access to remedy).

A comprehensive list of indicators and related assessment guidelines for the evaluators have been created for each thematic area. The indicators are divided into three different levels of compliance: Baseline, Integrated Strategy and Aspirational. This is to allow companies from different starting points to adopt recommendations and, incrementally, go beyond minimum compliance.

The levels of compliance are categorised as follows:

- **Baseline:** This level represents compliance with mandatory norms and regulations, with a focus on promoting the basis for the existence of practices that drive a positive impact for workers. These standards may go beyond the minimum standard legally required, but they are not strategically integrated by the company into its business model;
- **Strategic:** This level represents a strategic integration of good governance standards into the company structure and practices. The company sees the improvement of labour standards for workers across the supply chain as a priority at the core of its business model. The systematisation of its standards ensures that compliance can be maintained in the long run;
- **Aspirational:** This level represents a proactive, ongoing effort of the company to be at the forefront of social sustainability practices, by continuously reviewing and improving its standards as well as engaging industry peers, authorities, and civil society actors to drive higher sector standards. The company adopts a worker-informed approach and systematically seeks workers' feedback to inform its strategies and drive its efforts for equal, improved labour conditions for all workers which also benefits the overall health of the company. Companies at this level also actively engage in advocacy activities and might be considered standard-setters.

The toolkit is a “living document” striving for continuous improvement and integrating lessons learned from its use.

Practical recommendations were developed for businesses that are assessed via the toolkit. These recommendations are tailored to the businesses specific circumstances and can be reviewed and validated with business partners to ensure implementation that maintains meaningful engagement with workers and promotes lasting change. The recommendations developed specifically for the two companies involved in the pilot toolkit remain confidential to those companies. It is important to highlight that the toolkit is a “living document” striving for continuous improvement and integrating lessons learned from its use. Takeaways that have emerged from various stages of the project are shared in the following section in an effort to continue to learn from and improve effective worker engagement in the HRDD process.



# 6. Learnings

Although current state legislation stipulates that employers are only responsible for their direct employees, companies should also be aware that their own structures and business set ups have direct implications for the conditions of their outsourced workers.

## **1. There are significant gaps in knowledge among lead companies about the working conditions in service sectors supply chains**

The workshop discussions demonstrated that there is a common tendency for companies to delegate all responsibility over the working conditions in their supply chain to outsourced services. Although current state legislation stipulates that employers are only responsible for their direct employees, companies should also be aware that their own structures and business set ups have direct implications for the conditions of their outsourced workers. Traditional auditing rarely uncovers more complex experiences of workers, for example, it may find that a service provider has provided contracts to their employees, but it does not show whether or not an employee has been given time to review their contract or has understood the terms and conditions of their employment. Often, social audits do not properly address the gap of information that exist between a lead company and the conditions of their workers on the ground.

The scoping exercise, mapping of resources, and the meetings held with a significant number of companies as part of the planning phase of this project have clearly demonstrated that most client companies are unaware of the working conditions of cleaners in their supply chains and that service procurement is not often considered when it comes to HRDD or other existing transparency initiatives. In some cases, however, there were initial efforts to give more attention to service procurement practices within their supply chains and in most cases, companies expressed a strong interest in addressing gaps in their existing HRDD processes. Industry stakeholders also have an important role to play in addressing gaps in knowledge. Given their role in shaping service procurement, there needs to be increased understanding across industry about working conditions in these sectors and the impact of poor procurement and poor monitoring practices. FLEX presentations on this project to industry stakeholders were well received and there was great interest in better understanding working conditions across the supply chain.

## **2. Involving workers in defining the problem and shaping solutions can make efforts more impactful**

Meaningful and ongoing worker engagement is fundamental to achieving fairness in supply chains and preventing labour abuse and exploitation. Workers in high-risk service sectors have vital insights into the risks they face as a result of their direct experiences. Their knowledge can not only provide companies with information on the reality of working conditions in their supply chain but can also provide invaluable insight into how better to prevent and mitigate the risks they are facing.



FLEX strongly believes that when those who are most affected by workplace issues can actively participate in research and advocacy, they can help generate knowledge that can bring about lasting change. At the same time, community-based models in the Business and Human Rights area are restricted in what they can achieve without company participation. Engaging people with lived experience of exploitation or at risk of exploitation to inform a due diligence framework has the potential to influence dialogue between companies and groups of workers affected by their operations.

The workshops organised by LAWRS provided valuable insights into the experiences of outsourced cleaners and tangible suggestions for solutions, which have directly informed the assessment toolkit and the company recommendations. Workers should also be involved in the design and delivery of the engagement activities and whilst this process was not part of the initial phase of this project, it will be integrated into the next steps of the project outlined in the final section of this report. When carried out with integrity, worker engagement allows companies to focus on the experiences of specific groups and addresses the risks and impacts they face. Worker engagement should seek to understand their concerns and aspirations for human rights realisation in a way that is free from pressure or coercion, accounts for language, and any additional barriers to effective participation. The findings from continued worker engagement should be integrated into all stages of the due diligence processes and the level of participation and power-sharing should be continuously monitored.

### **3. Driving up standards in cleaning requires increased accountability from lead companies given their role in shaping working conditions in the sector through their procurement and practices**

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Another key take-away from piloting worker-informed HRDD, is that, [...] Given the important role that client companies have in shaping working conditions in the sector through their procurement and practices, increased accountability can make a significant positive impact for workers in their supply chains.

Another key take-away from piloting worker-informed HRDD, is that, with increasing recognition being given to strengthening HRDD legislation, companies are identifying the need to make significant efforts to prevent and mitigate labour abuse and exploitation in their supply chains. FLEX recognises that experiences of labour exploitation can be understood as existing along a 'continuum', or spectrum, ranging from decent work through to breaches of employment rights and at the severe end, conditions of forced labour and trafficking (FLEX, 2024). Given the important role that client companies have in shaping working conditions in the sector through their procurement and practices, increased accountability can make a significant positive impact for workers in their supply chains.

The toolkit created in this pilot responds to this need for increased accountability and allows lead companies to assess the working conditions of those in their supply chain through the understanding of the continuum of exploitation. FLEX has also noted that advocacy around supply chain transparency have typically focused on sourcing goods internationally, yet FLEX's research demonstrates that there is still a lot of work to be done within the procurement of services domestically.

## 6.1 Limitations

- The workshops with workers in outsourced cleaning do not attempt to present a representative picture of the sector's workforce, as workers engaged in this phase of the project were an ethnically homogeneous group (Spanish-speaking Latin American women) residing in the London area.
- Worker engagement took place remotely through online workshops. Whilst online discussions allow participants to join from different locations and save participants time and money from travel, it can be challenging to establish a safe space for participants to share their experiences openly. Other risks include participants being exposed to connection issues and having limited media literacy, which may cause withdrawal from the discussion.
- Workers were consulted during working hours which may imply that participants had received permission to join the consultation from employers who are already aware of the importance of tackling the project key issues. Workers who were not allowed to join the activity might therefore represent the ones in the most vulnerable situation. However, even for those who were able to participate, the risks of not being directly or indirectly under the influence of the employer to provide certain answers rather than express their truthful opinion is to be considered.
- Engagement via a supporting organisation is prone to self-selection bias, where those with negative experiences are more likely to engage in workshop discussions and identify issues of concern, rather than concentrating on finding solutions. Workshops often tend to have some participants being more vocal than others, with some being influenced by those louder voices and some interacting very little to not at all. Efforts were made to include quotes from a variety of workshop participants, to avoid a focus on the experience of one or only a few participants.

### Box 2. Limitations of the worker engagement

- When using the toolkit to assess company practices, it is important to take into consideration that many companies might not possess a governance structure and human and financial resources needed to answer all the indicators and questions. It is therefore necessary to be ready to identify, collect and interpret different or "indirect" information and data for the assessment.
- While engagement remains entirely voluntary, the companies who are interested to engage in this project are likely to be the ones who are already aware of the importance of ensuring good working standards as part of the procurement process.

### Box 3. Limitations of the company engagement

# 7. Next steps

FLEX has completed assessments against the worker-informed toolkit for the two companies involved in this project, which will be used to inform bespoke reports and to issue recommendations that remain confidential to those companies. Learning from this initial phase of the pilot has informed the planning and development of the next phase. The next phase of the project will involve monitoring the implementation of the recommendations issued to companies, which will require FLEX to engage directly with a representative sample of cleaners working within the companies' own supply chains.

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As part of this engagement, it will be crucial to build trust with the workers, suppliers and companies to ensure that the outcomes are based on transparency and the realities of their supply chain.

Engaging workers in companies' own supply chains will help to identify risks specific to that workforce and receive input from all relevant parties to be able to prioritise the most salient risks and implement actions to improve the conditions of workers. As part of this engagement, it will be crucial to build trust with the workers, suppliers and companies to ensure that the outcomes are based on transparency and the realities of their supply chain. FLEX will also produce a worker-informed safeguarding protocol to help ensure that the workers are protected from retaliation for participating in this research (e.g. not being assigned shifts), not just by producing robust policies and procedures but also ensuring that these are truly applicable in practice. Continued worker engagement will help ensure that results are based on the feedback and monitoring of impacts for workers on the ground, rather than solely relying on written policy changes. Workers help assess that the recommendations from this process are implemented effectively, to keep companies accountable and to ensure that the recommendations create improvements in practice.

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As long as HRDD is not mandatory in the UK, it is crucial to find ways to bring labour exploitation in UK supply chains to the attention of lead companies, in efforts to bridge the gaps between research and practice.

It is important to reiterate that due to the lack of mandatory HRDD legislation and enforcement of labour laws in the UK, we become reliant on companies making a conscientious effort to understand conditions in their supply chain. The companies engaged in this project are willing to do more than the bare minimum and are eager to raise the standards for workers in their supply chains. They are bringing attention to the service sector aspects of their operations, to ensure that it is included in their human rights strategies. As long as HRDD is not mandatory in the UK, it is crucial to find ways to bring labour exploitation in UK supply chains to the attention of lead companies, in efforts to bridge the gaps between research and practice. Ensuring FLEX's independence when engaging with private companies and ensuring workers within the companies' own supply chain are effectively safeguarded will guide the next phase of the pilot.

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# **FOCUS ON LABOUR EXPLOITATION**

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