

BRIEFING

EXPERIENCES AND DRIVERS OF LABOUR EXPLOITATION FOR YOUNG MIGRANT WORKERS

DECEMBER 2021

ABOUT US

Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) is a UK-based charity that works to end human trafficking for labour exploitation, both in the UK and worldwide. To achieve this, FLEX conducts research and advocacy to prevent labour abuses, protect the rights of trafficked persons and promote best practice responses to human trafficking for labour exploitation. Further information on FLEX's work and all our research publications and policy briefings can be found on our website at www.labourexploitation.org.

SUMMARY

In an examination of the experiences of young migrant workers in the UK, this briefing presents a sample of primary data collected as part of larger participatory research project, alongside existing literature. The young people engaged in the research were aged 16-25, working in low paid roles within the hospitality, cleaning and app-based food and goods delivery sectors and predominantly hold European Economic Area (EEA) country passports. Drawing on data from across all three sectors, this briefing discusses the specific role of age and migrant status on experiences of work. The impact of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic were an inexorable theme in discussions with participants and are also briefly examined here.

This briefing is part of a three-year research project seeking to address the knowledge gap concerning experiences and drivers of labour abuse and exploitation in under-researched, low-paid sectors of the economy. It forms part of a series of publications, of which three working papers have been published so far – on contract cleaning¹, hospitality², and the app-based delivery sector³. The findings outlined in the working papers demonstrate that these sectors are high-risk for labour abuse and exploitation, with workers experiencing frequent issues with pay and dangerous working conditions. They also highlight systemic and structural issues that create risk of labour exploitation, including low levels of union representation and barriers to seeking help which affect marginalised workers.

Little is known about the extent and impact of age as a risk factor for labour abuse and exploitation, but the issues outlined above, combined with abuse of power and authority in cultures of bullying can result in situations where young people feel forced into insecure, unsafe, and underpaid work, with a sense that they have little to no options for redress.

1 FLEX, *"If I could change anything about my work..." Participatory research with cleaners in the UK*, 2021

2 FLEX, *"To help workers, I would tell the Government to..." Participatory research with workers in the UK hospitality sector*, 2021

3 FLEX, *The gig is up: Participatory research with workers in the UK app-based delivery sector*, 2021

INTRODUCTION

As part of a three-year participatory research project that ran from 2019 to the end of 2021, FLEX has collaborated with workers from the hospitality, cleaning, and app-based delivery sectors to gather data on their experiences of work and risk of labour exploitation. All three of these sectors are reliant upon flexible and low-cost labour, often with a heavy dependence on migrant workers. The purpose of this briefing is to look at a specific subsection of this data, namely that which applies to young workers. To do so it focuses on two key questions:

1. What are the issues experienced by young people working in sectors like cleaning, hospitality, and app-based delivery?
2. What factors create risk of labour exploitation in sectors where young workers are overrepresented?

We are interested in the experiences of young workers because there is currently very limited research into the role of age as a risk factor for labour exploitation. We know that labour exploitation is a complex and dynamic problem, driven by diverse and intersecting vulnerabilities⁴, but the role of young age is not immediately obvious and requires further exploration. Though the main focus of this briefing is on young age as a risk factor, it also considers vulnerabilities related migration status, gender and ethnicity, as they too affect risk of exploitation. In addition, it also provides insight on the experiences of young workers in the context of the UK's departure from the EU (Brexit) and the Covid-19 pandemic, as the research was carried out against the backdrop of these events.

METHODOLOGY

This briefing is based on engagement with a total of 83 young workers, consisting of: 16 qualitative interviews and focus groups with a total of 24 young people working in cleaning, hospitality and as app-based couriers; and survey data from 43 young workers. Of all the workers engaged, 78% were migrants and 59% identified as women, 39% as men and 2% as non-binary. In addition, FLEX conducted four qualitative interviews with stakeholders from youth organisations supporting EEA migrants: Young Europeans Network – The 3 Million; Every Child Protected Against Trafficking (ECPAT); Young Women's Trust; and Sin Fronteras, a youth group supporting Latin American women and girls aged 14-21 coordinated by the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS).

Worker interviews and focus groups were carried out using a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) approach⁵, the purpose of which is to recognise workers as 'experts by experience' and facilitates their active participation as researchers. This data represents a small sample which was taken from a larger pool of data collected by Peer Researchers⁶, and was selected based on the criteria of workers being young – aged 16-24. The data was analysed using a process of inductive coding and the themes which emerged are broadly similar to the themes identified by workers themselves in the wider FPAR data analysis.

Most of the project participants come from outside the UK – from a range of European Economic Area (EEA) countries, or from outside the EEA, but with EEA passports. The project was designed in the context of Brexit, and it therefore seemed important to examine how the UK's departure from the EU may affect EEA nationals. EEA nationals also tend to be younger than the general population, both in London where almost a third of all EEA workers in the UK are based, and

⁴ Klara Skrivankova, *Between Decent Work and Forced Labour: Examining the Continuum of Exploitation*, JRF, 2010

⁵ FLEX, *Experts by Experience: Conducting Feminist Participatory Action Research with Workers in High-Risk Sectors*, 2021

⁶ Peer Researchers are workers from the relevant sector who are involved at every stage of the research process, from design to data collection and analysis.

in the rest of the UK, where the number of EEA-born 20–40-year-olds is almost double that of UK-born 20–40-year-olds.⁷ However, in the process of the research, it became apparent that while Brexit was certainly affecting workers, EEA nationals tended to be in a relatively better position than other groups of migrants. Consequently, we chose to expand the focus to EEA passport holders so that we could include a group at higher risk of exploitation whilst remaining within the remit of the planned project.

BACKGROUND

There is a lack of data on the working conditions of young people in the UK's labour market, but young people are most likely to be working in sectors with the highest levels of precarious employment, temporary jobs, and casual contracts⁸, for example hospitality. Drastic changes in the shape of the labour market in the recent decades has led to a decline in routine occupations, meaning that those entering the labour market are “more likely to enter low-wage service occupations with inferior terms and conditions of employment, potentially reducing upward occupational mobility”.⁹

Occupational Health and Safety data also suggests that young people are more at risk of poor working conditions than their older colleagues.¹⁰ According to UNISON, young workers are particularly vulnerable to bullying, harassment, negligence by their employer, and physical and emotional stress¹¹, with workplace bullying and harassment being two of the most common problems faced by young workers.¹² Young workers are also more vulnerable in the sense that they are “more likely to become unemployed” and more likely to “suffer longer term damage following any spell of unemployment”.¹³ In addition, “younger people's labour market outcomes are more sensitive to any economic slowdown and young people are more likely to see their future outcomes scarred by negative labour market experiences”.¹⁴ Age discrimination against young people is common, which is attributable to structural causes, labour law and entrenched organisational practices. Young workers are currently suffering an increasingly wide generational pay gap¹⁵, and can be paid at lower minimum wage rates compared to older workers.

Despite all these disadvantages, only a tiny proportion of young people are unionised. Most young workers engaged in the research did not know where to seek support or redress for labour rights infringements, or if they did, a lack of faith in the system meant they saw little value in pursuing this. Migrant workers, especially in sectors characterised by low-paid and insecure work, also have low unionisation rates, as trade unions worldwide have struggled to organise these types of workers. However, there are some notable exceptions.¹⁶

The collection of UK enforcement bodies responsible for enforcing workers' rights is currently undergoing a significant overhaul, which intends to consolidate the Gangmaster's Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA), Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate (EASI) and HMRC National Minimum Wage/National Living Wage (NMW/NLW) team into a proposed Single Enforcement

⁷ Greater London Authority (GLA), *EEA workers in the London labour market*, 2018

⁸ EURwork, *United Kingdom: Working conditions of young entrants to the labour market*, 2013

⁹ C. Holmes and K. Mayhew, *The Changing Shape of the UK Job Market and Its Implications for the Bottom Half of Earners* (London: Resolution Foundation, 2012) cited in A. Blackham, 'Young Workers and Age Discrimination: Tensions and Conflicts', *Industrial Law Journal*, 48.1 (2019): 1-33

¹⁰ European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Preventing risks to young workers: policy, programmes and workplace practices*, 2009, p.14

¹¹ Unison, 'Young Workers', accessed 15 November 2021

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Low Pay Commission, *National Minimum Wage: Low Pay Commission 2018 Report*, viii, 2018

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Trades Union Congress (TUC), 'Generational pay gap' has increased by half in the last 20 years, warns TUC', 1 June 2018

¹⁶ European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), 'A worker is a worker': the trade unions organising migrants', 2019

Body (SEB) for employment rights. The thrust of the government's argument for consolidation revolves around replacing the current fractured regime with a more navigable system, with pooled intelligence, more efficient use of resources and a single recognizable brand more easily accessed by workers. This presents an opportunity to change the perception amongst young workers, and make rights visible, accessible, and relevant to young, low paid workers.

FINDINGS

1. WORKING CONDITIONS

In sectors dominated by young workers, occupations are often characterised by long shifts, heavy or hazardous work, and poor health and safety observance. Working environments can be rife with bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment. According to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, young workers in Europe are at higher risk of experiencing occupational injuries than older people. They may also be exposed to occupational diseases and physical and psychological complaints in their early experiences of work.¹⁷

In 2009 the Agency set out some key facts on the safety of young workers:

- Young workers are more exposed to the following physical work factors: noise, vibrations, heat and cold, and the handling of dangerous substances.
- Physically demanding work factors (such as working in awkward positions, handling heavy loads, and repetitive work) seem to be more common among young workers than in the workforce as a whole. As a result, young workers are at considerable risk of developing musculoskeletal disorders (including low back pain).
- Surveys suggest that young workers seem to be less informed about occupational risks than workers as a whole.
- Young people do more shift work and weekend work and have more irregular working hours than workers as a whole.
- Young workers are also more likely to report being the subject of unwanted sexual attention. Young women with precarious jobs in the hotel and service industry are many times more likely to be exposed to sexual harassment than the average worker.¹⁸

The above facts were echoed by the young workers engaged in our research, with most participants reporting negative experiences of health and safety. When asked about working conditions, adverse experiences of some kind were reported by 34 out of 43 (79%) of the young people surveyed and 14 out of 16 (87%) of those interviewed. A more detailed breakdown of the nature of these experiences is outline below.

Survey Results

- Young people working in hospitality:
 - 17 out of 18 (94%) of those surveyed had experienced some form of adverse health and safety conditions.
 - 13 out of the 18 respondents (72%) reported suffering one or more of the following at work or because of work: feeling burnt out; depression; anxiety; and/or; panic attacks.

¹⁷ European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Preventing risks to young workers: policy, programmes and workplace practices*, 2009, p.14

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

- Young people working in the cleaning sector:
 - Of the 10 young workers surveyed, six (60%) reported suffering back, neck or joint pain as well as cuts or bruises.
 - Five (50%) of the young workers reported feeling burnt out.
 - Six (60%) of the young cleaning workers surveyed reported being asked to work without proper equipment and/or protective gear.
 - Physical problems caused by work in the form of back pain, burns, cuts or bruises and skin problems were reported by 16 out 18 (89%) of those surveyed.
- Young people working as app-based couriers:
 - The most common experience reported was harassment – 10 of the 13 couriers surveyed (77%) reported having experienced several of the following whilst working: being threatened with physical violence, being shouted or sworn at or being bullied by members of the public, customers and/or restaurant staff.
 - Of the five young couriers surveyed who were female or non-binary, four (80%) reported experiencing sexual harassment by members of the public, customers and/or restaurant staff.
 - Three of the 10 young couriers surveyed (30%) reported being physically assaulted by a member of the public whilst working.

Interview and Focus Group Data

Poor working conditions and lapses in health and safety practices were frequently mentioned by the young workers engaged in this research. The specific nature of unfavourable conditions varied across of the three sectors, but there were common themes in relation to age, migrant status and gender. The majority of participants were EEA passport holders and many reported language barriers in training and health and safety monitoring as a significant obstacle to feeling safe at work. In hospitality, both back of house and front of house staff referenced long hours and toxic working environments. Over three quarters of the young people interviewed were unaware of external agencies available to seek help if they were to encounter a problem at work. Reticence about seeking help from within their company was also commonly expressed.

Kitchen/catering assistants in particular frequently reported heavy work taking place in hot and cramped working environments, with improper management of hazardous chemicals and long hours with a lack of sufficient breaks. As the role of kitchen/catering assistant tends to be the entry level into kitchen work, it is frequently taken up by young workers, often with a limited working knowledge of English and a lack of training or guidance in their own language.

I burned myself with BBQ sauce – boiling BBQ sauce – because the containers they were making us use to heat up the BBQ sauce in the microwave were ice-cream containers, which were like really soft plastic. So, when you boil BBQ sauce in them, I mean, they get really, really soft when you take them out. So, it's really easy to fall on you. And the rhythm they make you work, like always pushing me and everybody's screaming fast, fast, fast, fast, fast, fast, fast. It takes just a fraction of a second.

Florin, 26, Romanian Kitchen/Catering Assistant and Bartender (Focus Group, 05 June 2020)

For app-based couriers, working outdoors on bicycles and motorbikes brings hazards, including assaults by members of the public, adverse weather conditions, and long uphill routes. Couriers

may also have to take trips to neighbourhoods they feel unsafe in, but which are not revealed to the rider until after they have accepted the job, after which they feel unable to cancel it. A further issue for couriers arises from being disallowed from using the bathroom in restaurants. In a focus group, a courier outlined how, as a result of worker-led advocacy, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) produced a letter outlining couriers' legal right to use the bathrooms in restaurants they collect food orders from. However, when presenting this letter to restaurant staff, workers report limited success in some instances and no means to escalate the issue.

The toilet they had was only for staff members. They used to allow drivers and customers but then suddenly they stopped allowing drivers. They said that's the manager's decision, not up to them. And obviously I knew the law requires them to allow us to use the bathroom, but then [sighs], as most of the time, it's not worth my time arguing with them.

Nikolay, 24, Bulgarian App-based Courier (Interview, 27 November 2020)

2. PAY AND INSECURITY

After working conditions, complaints related to pay was the second most prevalent theme emerging from the interviews and focus groups, with 39 references to a problem with pay across the 16 interviews. Specific issues discussed by the workers include low wages, lack of sick pay and wage theft – often in the form of unpaid holiday entitlements and unpaid overtime. Workers from all three sectors reported instances of earning below national minimum wage. When asked if they feel they are paid enough for the work they do, nearly all workers across all three sectors consistently answered 'no'. Regarding age, many workers described a feeling of injustice at the pay gaps between themselves and older colleagues for the same work. In 2020 the government reported that 'fewer than one in ten workers aged 16-24 are paid at the relevant youth rate', however, this was not consistent with the responses in our sample. Insecurity was prominent in the responses of young people to this research and young workers who responded to our survey were more likely than their older counterparts to fear having their working hours or days reduced as a penalty for taking time off sick, refusing to do things outside their job description or turning down shifts.

Interviewer: And what is your opinion, because this £6.15 that you're getting is the minimum wage, do you think that's adequate pay for your work?

Interviewee: No, because I do exactly the same as the others but get paid less. So, I don't think it's adequate.

Jan, 19, Polish Kitchen/Catering Assistant (Interview, 16 June 2019)

Wage theft was commonly reported within hospitality and cleaning, with 50% of the young cleaners surveyed reporting occurrences of not being paid at all or not being paid for all of the hours worked. Lack of holiday pay or sick pay entitlements is another means by which young workers lose out on the money they are legally entitled to. This was also commonly reported by cleaners within qualitative interviews and focus groups. Lack of payslips and an absence of a written contract were also widely reported within cleaning and hospitality.

As a result of the pay structure for app-based couriers, hourly wages vary wildly from day to day, constituting an insecure income. Of our 16 young app-based courier survey respondents, 8 reported sometimes earning below the National Minimum Wage for their age group, with 4 reporting an hourly rate as low as £3.30 at times. Most couriers are classed independent contractors and as such aren't legally entitled to a minimum wage.

According to Young Women's Trust, 20% of young people are paid below National Minimum Wage, and this figure is even higher for young black people, at 25%.¹⁹ The pay disparity between under-30s and over-30s has increased significantly over the past two decades, standing at 21.9%, in 2017 compared to 14.5% in 1998.²⁰ This equates to a pay difference between older and younger workers of £1.51 per hour in 1998, which widened to £2.81 per hour in 2017.²¹ This increased generational gap tends to be accounted for by reference to a vastly different landscape of work, characterised by zero-hour contracts, casualisation, the gig economy and wage stagnation due to economic downturns.²²

Insecure contracts with no guaranteed hours and no promise of work beyond that particular week or month are endemic amongst sectors dominated by young workers. Structural changes in the labour market are partly to blame, with a lack of creation of new, secure jobs.²³ In 2013 the Resolution Foundation estimated that around 37% of employees on zero-hours contracts are aged between 16 and 24.²⁴ This figure appears to have remained steady, with the ONS reporting in 2018 that around 36% of zero-hours contracts are undertaken by young people.²⁵ Given that 6% of all employment contracts are zero hours²⁶, young people are vastly overrepresented. Whilst statistics on zero-hours contracts can give a reliable indication of patterns of insecure work, it is important to bear in mind that insecurity is also manifest in other types of contracts such as temporary, inconsistent or low minimum hours, for example 8 hours per week contracts or in cases where no contract exists at all.

Segmentation of the labour market entails an increasing shift away from 'standard employment' contracts and a proliferation of temporary and piecemeal work, with an increase in outsourcing and agencies or intermediaries.²⁷ Alongside unreliable and inconsistent income, another result of this structure is the need to take on roles with multiple employers, resulting in extended unpaid travel time, which was a serious issue for the cleaning workers engaged in this research.

Interviewer: How many different jobs were you doing in one day?

Interviewee: Four in one night. Yeah. Because the first one was near Liverpool Station. And that is horrible. And then there is Piccadilly and the last one in Green Park.

Interviewer: And how many hours were you working? How many hours of the 14 did you get paid?

Interviewee: So I work in one company five hours and a company two hours and the last company two and a half.

Interviewer: So it was nine and a half hours paid work and then the rest is travel.

Gabriela, 22, Ecuadorian-Spanish Cleaner (Interview, 29 August 2019)

¹⁹ Press Association, '[One in five young people paid less than minimum wage – study](#)', Guardian, 27 December 2018

²⁰ TUC, '["Generational pay gap" has increased by half in last 20 years, warns TUC](#)', 1 June 2018

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Anoosh Chakelian, '[McStrike! How young food industry workers are reviving British trade unions](#)', New Statesman, 4 October 2018 updated 23 July 2021

²³ A. Blackham, 'Young Workers and Age Discrimination: Tensions and Conflicts', *Industrial Law Journal*, 48.1 (2019): 1-33

²⁴ M. Pennycook et al., 'A Matter of Time: The Rise of Zero-Hours Contracts', Resolution Foundation, 2013, p. 10

²⁵ ONS, '[Contracts that do not guarantee a minimum number of hours: April 2018](#)', 2018

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ ILO, '[Labour Market Segmentation](#)', accessed 15 November 2021

The TUC reports that almost 6 in 10 casual workers are under 34 years old, with most of them aged between 18 and 24 years old.²⁸ Agency workers are significantly more likely to be young and are more likely to belong to an ethnic minority and to be born outside of the UK.²⁹ Insecurity is a risk factor for labour abuse as the lack of security or guaranteed income fosters a situation whereby the worker is not able to turn down exploitative work.³⁰ Combined with the issues around pay outlined above, workers are left with no choice but to accept poor working conditions and low pay. This situation is succinctly summarised by a focus group participant working as a waitress:

We are getting exploited basically because they [employers] feel that we rely more on them. We rely financially on them. So then the abuse starts. [...] They can cut off our finances so easily and so we're back in square one, back in the same cycle of interviews and panicking for two or three weeks, trying to find a job with payment that does not exploit you. [...] Even a week off work is quite disastrous for a normal person. We cannot afford to be a week off work, especially in London. We cannot afford it, so we have to keep working, and keep finding solutions on the way.

Irina, 24, Romanian Waitress (Focus group, 5 June 2020)

The profound psychological impact of being powerless to reject low paid, insecure work with poor working conditions was expressed by many of the young research participants:

I'll do whatever jobs I get thrown if I have the capability to do them, so... I think there will always be someone who will pick up the scraps, and I think they use that. And it's so demoralising.

Phoebe, 25, British App-based Courier (Focus group, 18 January 2021)

The issues around pay and insecure work touched upon above constitute risk factors for exploitation, as low and irregular pay creates dependence on work for survival, especially for those with no access to benefits or in contexts where alternative employment options are not available. Young workers on low pay are less likely to be able to contest poor conditions for risk of losing income they depend on, which can be compounded by hierarchical structures and abuse of authority entailed in discrimination as discussed below. This situation is further exacerbated by a lack of awareness of or faith in means for redress, along with low levels of unionisation – discussed further on – with collective action undermined by cultures of fear and temporary, flexible roles with high turnover rates. This complex nexus of factors consequently acts to drive labour exploitation amongst young workers and even for labour abuses to become accepted as an unavoidable.

3. DISCRIMINATION

Young people are particularly vulnerable to discrimination in the contemporary labour market, which is attributable not only to structural causes, but also in part to age discrimination which is 'embedded in labour law and organisational practices'³¹. The European Working Conditions Survey 2015, which included nearly 44,000 workers in 35 countries discovered that age discrimination peaked at the ages of 20 years and again at 59 years. The Equality Act 2010 treats age differently than other types of discrimination as there are a wide range of scenarios in which discrimination is permitted, as can be seen in age-based minimum wage variations. There is a dearth of academic literature on the discrimination of young people in work.³² The UN Global

²⁸ TUC, ['Five reasons why young workers are getting a raw deal'](#), 7 November 2018

²⁹ Resolution Foundation, *The good, the bad and the ugly: The experience of agency workers and the policy response*, 2018

³⁰ FLEX, *No viable alternatives: Social (in)security and risk of labour exploitation during Covid-19*, 2021

³¹ A. Blackham, 'Young Workers and Age Discrimination: Tensions and Conflicts', *Industrial Law Journal*, 48.1 (2019): 1-33

³² *Ibid.*

Report on Ageism 2021 illustrates that young people in Europe report more perceived age discrimination than any other group, but the report highlights a strong need for more research into this poorly understood issue.³³ What is known is that ageism against young people interacts with sexism and thus young women are more prone to discrimination.³⁴

I always felt hurt, because they started to insult me, and they thought I couldn't understand. They asked me if I had a boyfriend, but like, they asked me all the time, and they asked me if I'd done it [...] and they started to call me 'lesbian'. They'd complain about me behind my back [...] they had more experience and to be honest they were older than me.

Diana, 21 Peruvian-Spanish Cleaner and Waitress, Interview, 14 October 2021

Indicators of discrimination pertaining to employment rates show that a "racialized unemployment hierarchy among under-25s suggests their life chances will be stereotyped through skin colour or other assumptions about group affiliations as well as by their social class"³⁵. Whilst ethnicity is by far the most prevalent factor in reports of discrimination, there also exists discrimination on the basis of perceived otherness, for example based on nationality.³⁶ The ILO reports that migrant workers are among the most affected during economic downturns, experiencing increased discrimination, as well as suffering due to the types of sectors they are usually employed in (for example construction or tourism) being those first hit.³⁷

The structural trends contributing to the increase of young people in insecure roles includes a decline in routine occupations, which 'has meant that new labour market entrants (including younger workers) are more likely to enter low-wage service occupations with inferior terms and conditions of employment, potentially reducing upward occupational mobility.'³⁸ However, studies on age discrimination against young workers do not consider specifically the case of young migrant workers, and it seems reasonable to assume that, at an intersection of vulnerabilities, young migrant workers may experience discrimination differently, or suffer multiple discriminations.

[H]e also sexually abused female staff members. Like, he groped them and stuff like that. And he was quite racist toward some of our black co-workers. And a lot of the people there just couldn't escape the job because they needed the job. I know a couple of them were there illegally, and they had to stay in the job because they couldn't get anywhere else. Also, everyone else was stuck there for various reasons. And that guy just abused that power over all of us.

Luca, 25, English-Italian bartender (Focus group, 5 June 2020)

The #MeToo movement exposed a prolific and entrenched global culture of bullying, humiliation, discrimination and marginalisation by those in positions of power. With a significant proportion of this kind of behaviour taking place at work, the movement has helped to bring about the prospect of galvanising dramatic transformations of the workplace.³⁹ Inextricably linked with

³³ WHO, *Global Report of Ageing*, 2021

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81; C.E. Harnois, 'Age and Gender Discrimination: Intersecting Inequalities across the Lifecourse', *At the Centre: Feminism, Social Science and Knowledge*, 20 (2015): 85-109; M. Gander, 'The intersection of gender and age: an exploration', *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 18.1 (2014): 9-13

³⁵ Steve Jeffreys, 'The context to challenging discrimination against ethnic minorities and migrant workers at work', *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 21.1 (2015): 9-22, p.14

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ ILO, 'The economic crisis and discrimination against migrant workers', 1 August 2011

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Paula McDonald, 'What has the #MeToo movement achieved for workers?', *Futures of Work*, 2 December 2020

power and authority, young workers are especially prone to the type of gender-based violence and misogyny highlighted by #MeToo. The young people in our research who reported sexual harassment frequently expressed an impression that nothing would be done if they were to attempt to seek help from their workplace in dealing with the harassment. Worse still, those that did attempt to pursue redress report indifference and inaction.

I reported this [sexual harassment by a customer] to [name of delivery platform] and said, "Look, can you put some kind of marker on this guy's address, so no couriers can go... like, especially no female or non-binary couriers, this is not safe". And they... it was just some bullshit like... "Oh, yeah, you can report it, this is the help page where you go if you need report something".

Phoebe, 25, British App-Based Courier (Focus group, 18 January 2021)

CASE STUDY: MULTIPLE CASES OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT EXPERIENCED BY A YOUNG HOSPITALITY WORKER

Clara, one of our youngest research participants, had already experienced sexual harassment in two different jobs despite being only 18 years old. The first perpetrator was a chef at a restaurant in central London where she worked when she was 17.

One day I was in the kitchen, getting some food, and one of the chefs touched my butt. I felt really bad. I was really quiet all day, so one of the managers asked me what happened.

Clara told the manager, who spoke to the chef. The chef made excuses, saying the kitchen was small and that he had not touched her intentionally and the matter was left there. However, the manager then started sexually harassing Clara.

After telling my manager about the touching, he then started asking me, "When will you be 18 so we can go out for dinner?". I was very uncomfortable, always saying no, no, no.

After six months, Clara left the job, but the manager continued harassing her. He would send her text messages insinuating things and claiming that everyone thought they were in a relationship. Things were no different at Clara's next job, where the sexual harassment – once again perpetrated by a direct manager – started before she had even had her first shift.

When I just arrived to [the restaurant, a well-known fast-food chain], the manager was about ten years older than me. He had been working in the company for three years already and had the highest rank. I went to the interview and he said that he was happy about me, that I was very pretty.

He then followed Clara on Instagram, two weeks before she was meant to start working.

I followed him back and didn't pay much attention to it, but then he was always unfollowing me and then following me again. He did this many times. He was always doing it, and I never understood why. He would sometimes comment on posts: "You look very pretty", "You used to look better here", and things like that, so I ended up blocking him.

At the time of the focus group, Clara was still working at the fast-food restaurant and the perpetrator was still her manager.

He makes me feel very uncomfortable at work. When he sees me standing, he comes to see me. I have been there for four months and he's been doing that since I started. [...] I always feel bad at work, I feel like the new person, I'm always quiet. [...] It's really hell, I just want to leave.

The power dynamics underlying these specific instances also affect young workers in a broader sense, with cultures of impunity at work intersecting with the many factors which contribute to vulnerability to labour abuse. The broad impact of these power differentials described by

young workers can sometimes be as nuanced as a general 'feeling' or 'atmosphere', and is hard to define or measure, let alone address. Young workers from all three sectors engaged in this research reported feelings of powerlessness when confronted with older, more experienced management, colleagues or customers.

People who are managers in hospitality are usually about twenty-five, twenty-six plus. Usually, they're about thirty. And I've seen it, and had it, where they'll, because they're older than you, they'll push you around. And a lot of people in hospitality are quite young. So, obviously, if you're eighteen, nineteen, and a thirty-year-old man is telling you to do something, you'll probably do it.

Luca, 25, English-Italian bartender (Focus group, 5 June 2020)

In terms of seeking help in the face of bullying, harassment and abuse in the workplace, there appeared to be two key issues for the young workers engaged in this research. Firstly, there was a lack of awareness of routes for redress, combined with a lack of faith in the system. Secondly, there was a form of acknowledgement by many young workers that, when faced with such treatment, they had no real choice other than to just 'take it'. This powerlessness to push back against adverse treatment appears to have several sources. It can result from the issue of insecurity and a dire need to earn money with limited routes to do so, and relatedly, for some young workers there was a level of fear of losing their job, underpinned by feelings of being disposable and undervalued by their employer/platform.

[In response to sexual harassment by a restaurant owner] I don't want to say anything because I don't want to have a bad relationship with the restaurant, especially as this area is so small, like there are only a few places where you can pick up from. And a lot of the orders do come from that place, so ... I don't really want to make the situation awkward and have a bad relationship there, I don't know if the restaurant might make a complaint, I don't know if that's the sort of thing that they would do. But for me, that was pretty uncomfortable. I wanted to, kind of boycott it myself, but I didn't because, like I said, there aren't that many orders sometimes...I just took it.

Camila, 22 British App-based Courier (Focus Group, 18 January 2021)

The complexities of age discrimination against young workers may be poorly understood, but it is clear that discrimination is often based upon intersecting characteristics, and can form part of a damaging nexus alongside insecurity, poor working conditions and low pay. An intersectional approach to developing policy which addresses the diverse issues faced by young workers is missing. Understanding of such a nuanced and complex phenomenon can only be achieved through qualitative approaches which centre and amplify the voices of those affected:

We published a report around young woman's missing data and voices which is an audit of available data on employment around young women and we found that a lot of the data isn't really telling the full picture. Women, and young people are kind of clubbed together in these homogenous groups, but we know that there are specific groups of young women who are disproportionately affected by these issues. Thinking about things like race, ethnicity, and disability. We know that those groups of people face specific issues in the labour market so we're really keen to push this agenda of collecting more granular data and more intersectional data but also prioritising, a more qualitative approach to research and in policy development, of really valuing young women's voices when developing policies.

Research Lead at Young Women's Trust (Interview, 23 September 2021)

4. LOW RATES OF UNIONISATION

None of the young workers interviewed were trade union members, and the majority were not familiar with any unions or other sources of support with workplace problems. According to the TUC, only 9.3 per cent of core workers aged 21-30, working full- or part-time and earning low to average wages are union members.⁴⁰ Melanie Simms outlines some of the multiple factors contributing to this:

Organizing success is influenced by bargaining structures, occupational identity, labor market conditions, and support by union leaders and members. Innovative organizing tends to happen when unions combine new approaches with existing structures [...] Not only do young workers tend to spend far longer moving between precarious jobs in the formative stages of their working lives (Allmendinger, Hipp, & Stuth, 2013; Bradley & Devadason, 2008), but they are also less likely to come into contact with unions in the course of these unstable trajectories (Bryson & Gomez, 2005)⁴¹

In an examination of demand for union membership amongst young and adult workers in Britain, Canada, and the United States, Bryson et al. find that the gap in union membership between young and adult workers in all three countries is due to supply-side constraints as opposed to a lower desire for unionization by young workers, and that tastes for collective representation do not differ substantially among workers either by nationality or by age.⁴²

In sectors where there is low collective bargaining coverage and less union visibility, such as accommodation/food and agriculture, workers are at risk of being exploited due to inadequate enforcement of employment rules. Unionisation is particularly hard to achieve in sectors in which young people and migrant workers are overrepresented, due to high levels of insecurity which leads in part to high staff turnover and results in a vicious cycle. There have, however, been significant achievements made through grassroots organising by and for those in low paid, insecure work. Worker-led unions such as United Voices of the World (UVW) and Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB), two relatively new unions established by precariously employed migrant workers in sectors such as cleaning or the gig economy. The principles, accomplishments and tactics of these unions are the antithetical to kinds of treatment experienced by the young people engaged in this research. Whilst insecure work in these low paid sectors is characterised by oppression, disregard and inhumanity, the successes of these grassroots movements have been underpinned by empowerment, solidarity, and dignity. The below quote is from a young cleaner describing her experience of working with one of these grassroots unions to successfully negotiate better pay and conditions at an outsourced cleaning company.

[I]t was a hard time because of the bad things that were going on, but it was also a time in which I felt the feeling of being united around a single thing and that we were working towards a goal. And I really liked that feeling of being part of a team, all together to fight for something. And also that we weren't doing it on our own, we were with someone who was protecting us and, basically, teaching us at the same time, about how to do it in the right way. And, to be honest, it felt really great.

Diana, 21 Peruvian-Spanish Cleaner and Waitress (Interview, 14 October 2021)

⁴⁰ TUC, *"I feel like I can't change anything" Britain's young core workers speak out about work*, 2017

⁴¹ Melanie Simms et al., 'Organizing young workers under precarious conditions: what hinders or facilitates union success', *Work and Occupations*, 45.4 (2018): 420-450.

⁴² Alex Bryson et al., 'Youth-adult differences in the demand for unionization: Are American, British, and Canadian workers all that different?', *Journal of Labor Research*, 26.1 (2005): 155-167.

5. COVID-19

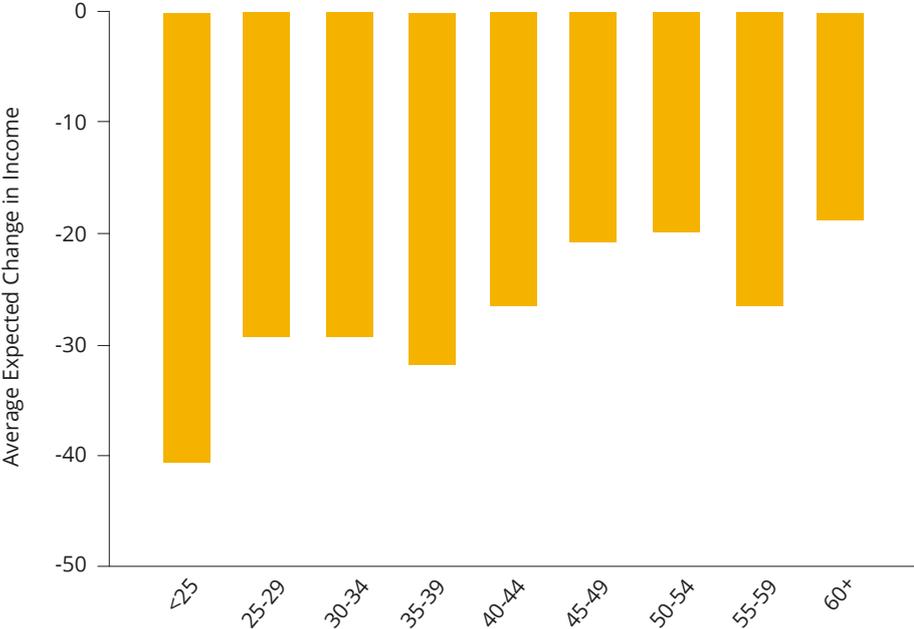
For young workers, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated many existing problems, with research showing that the youngest and most precarious have been disproportionately affected.⁴³ The shape of the labour market pre-Covid-19 left young people, who were significantly more likely to be working in insecure and low paying roles, more exposed to economic harm from the pandemic than other age groups.⁴⁴ Evidence gathered from over 20,000 workers shows that young people are “significantly more likely to experience a fall in their earnings”⁴⁵ as a result of the global pandemic. Reports by the young workers involved in this FLEX project echo the assertions by third sector organisations that precarity caused by problems around pay, migration status and working conditions are longstanding, but that the pandemic has made them even more stark.

Of course, there are more people who need the support now, but in terms of status, I think this problem will persist as long as we have people who have limited leave to remain in their immigration status, or people who have no access to public funds on their visas. This will be an issue that Covid or no Covid, it will affect a lot of people who are from migrant backgrounds, but of course it has become so much more obvious and impactful now, just because of the number of people who do need support.

Co-Manager, Young Europeans Network (Interview, 11 May 2021)

In terms of pay, workers aged below 25 appear to be worst affected, and are expected to have lost about 40% of their income as a result of the pandemic.⁴⁶

TABLE 1. MEDIAN EXPECTED INCOME LOSS IN THE NEAR FUTURE BY AGE



Source: [The large and unequal impact of COVID-19 on workers | VOX, CEPR Policy Portal \(voxeu.org\)](https://voxeu.org/article/the-large-and-unequal-impact-of-covid-19-on-workers), April 2020

⁴³ A. Adams-Prassl *et al.*, 'Inequality in the Impact of the Coronavirus Shock: New Survey Evidence for the UK', in Cambridge-INET Working Paper Series, No: 2020/10, 2020. in T. Novitz, 'COVID-19 and Labour Law: United Kingdom', *Italian Labour Law e-Journal*, 13.1S (2020)

⁴⁴ Resolution Foundation, *An intergenerational audit for the UK*, 2021, p.8

⁴⁵ A. Adams-Prassl *et al.*, 'Inequality in the Impact of the Coronavirus Shock: New Survey Evidence for the UK', in Cambridge-INET Working Paper Series, No: 2020/10, 2020

⁴⁶ A. Adams-Prassl, *et al.*, *The large and unequal impact of COVID-19 on workers*, VOX EU CEPR Policy Portal, 8 April 2020

Using Covid-19 as a case study, we have reported elsewhere how vulnerabilities related to employment, immigration and social security policy intersect to restrict people's options, compelling them into coercive working relationships and erode their ability to negotiate decent work.⁴⁷ The report set out why a well-functioning social security system is crucial for preventing labour exploitation and outlines key changes needed to ensure the UK's social safety net does not fail the growing number of people in low-paid and insecure work. The significant impact of the pandemic on the pay of young workers was evident in our interviews and focus groups, with young workers describing extreme financial hardship and even destitution as a result of the pandemic, often with no safety net. Such insecurity can lead to young workers feeling powerless to turn down badly paid or exploitative work, or unable to complain about poor working conditions.

Interviewer: So, you currently have Pre-Settled Status?

Interviewee: Yeah...But they declined my right to Universal Credit, two times. Two claims, they declined two claims I made. Due to Lockdown, I cannot find a job. It's like literally impossible to find a job right now. I've been unemployed for three months now.

Florin, 26, Romanian Kitchen Assistant and Bartender (Focus Group, 05 June 2020)

6. BREXIT

FLEX has previously highlighted the feelings of insecurity around rights and status experienced by workers in reaction to Brexit.⁴⁸ For young workers from within and outside of the EEA, the issue of pre-settled status brings a host of problems, including access to social security, which was felt acutely during the Covid-19 pandemic as discussed above.

One of the main issues at the beginning of the pandemic is people being denied benefits because of pre-settled status and legal challenges to this... This is a persistent problem and not necessary a Covid-19-related problem, but it may have more impact now... There is a lack of knowledge about the type of support available and limited information about rights, along with the challenge of finding information, fighting misinformation and filling out forms.

Co-Manager, Young Europeans Network (Interview, 11 May 2021)

Further discrimination may arise from difficulties in proving EU Settled Status, with the UK government refusing to provide physical proof of EU migrants' new immigration status.⁴⁹

The future implications of the UK's departure from the EU on newly arriving migrants working in the sectors discussed here is that workers will have no regular migration routes available to them other than possible restrictive short term visas, or potentially youth mobility visas⁵⁰, but there are currently no plans for this.

⁴⁷ FLEX, *No viable alternatives: Social (in)security and risk of labour exploitation during Covid-19*, 2021

⁴⁸ FLEX, *Lost in Transition: Brexit and Labour Exploitation*, 2017

⁴⁹ The3million, 'A physical backup to digital status', 2020

⁵⁰ Nicolas Rollason, 'Why it's time for youth mobility visas for EU nationals', Kingsley Napley, 4 October 2021

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM YOUNG WORKERS

The UK economy depends heavily on a young, often migrant, workforce within essential but undervalued sectors such as cleaning, hospitality and app-based delivery. The vulnerabilities of young workers are not well understood, let alone protected, and there is a significant amount of work to be done to forge a safer and more fair labour market. Issues around pay and dangerous working conditions are so common in these sectors that they are considered the norm by many workers.

Systemic and structural issues create risk of labour exploitation, including low levels of union representation and barriers to seeking help which affect marginalised workers. Furthermore, abuse of power and authority in cultures of impunity can lead to young people feeling forced into insecure, unsafe and underpaid work, with a sense that they have little to no options for redress. The proposed Single Enforcement Body for employment rights holds potential to make accessing labour rights a reality for young, low paid workers, but reform will only be truly effective if the voices of those who will be most affected are held centre stage.

The below recommendations by young workers in the cleaning, hospitality and app-based delivery sectors get to the core of changes which need to be made to dismantle drivers of labour exploitation. This is entirely unsurprising, as these young people are experts in their own circumstances, yet their voices are so rarely heard within policy development.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT AND EMPLOYERS, ACCORDING TO YOUNG WORKERS:

‘IF YOU COULD TELL THE UK GOVERNMENT WHAT THEY SHOULD DO TO HELP WORKERS, WHAT WOULD YOU TELL THEM TO DO?’:

THAT THERE SHOULD BE MORE INSPECTIONS TO SECURE THAT WE HAVE GOOD WORKING CONDITIONS, HOLIDAY PAY, ENTITLEMENT TO SICK LEAVE. BECAUSE GETTING ILL IS SOMETHING THAT WE DON'T EXPECT.

Maria, 24, Brazilian Cleaner (Interview, 13 October 2019)

THEY SHOULD MAKE SURE THAT EVERYONE WHO WORKS GETS A CONTRACT SO THAT THEY CAN FOLLOW THE LAW. AND NOT, AS THEY SAY, UNDER THE TABLE WITHOUT ANY PROTECTION.

Diana, 21 Peruvian-Spanish Cleaner and Waitress (Interview, 14 October 2021)

THAT SOMEONE HAS TO CONTROL THE WORKPLACES, THAT EVERYTHING SHOULD BE IN LINE WITH THE RESPONSIBILITIES ASSIGNED AND NOT TAKING SOMEONE ELSE'S RESPONSIBILITIES.

Lucía, 24, Ecuadorian Waitress (Interview, 6 October 2019)

GIVE US LEGAL EMPLOYED STATUS SO WE CAN ACCESS BENEFITS LIKE SICK PAY, HOLIDAY PAY, EASIER TAX STUFF. TELL THEM TO LOOK AROUND AT THE WORLD TODAY AND JUST NOTICE HOW MANY PEOPLE THIS IMPACTS AND NOTICE HOW TIRED AND WORRIED SOME OF THESE PEOPLE ARE.

Survey response, 24, British App-based Courier

THAT WE DESERVE TO EARN MORE...

Survey response, 24, Ecuadorian-Spanish Cleaner

ENFORCE THE LIMITS ON BEDROOMS (BEDS) WHICH SHOULD BE CLEANED AND MADE.

Survey response, 22, Polish Hotel Room Attendant

REGULATE COMPANIES FOR UNFAIR TERMINATION.

Survey response, 23, Bulgarian App-based Courier

MAKE THEM [PLATFORM COMPANIES] PAY THE NATIONAL MINIMUM WAGE.

Survey response, 23, Portuguese App-based Courier

EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS FOR FULL TIME RIDERS INCLUDING MINIMUM WAGE, AS WELL AS INTRODUCING A STATUTORY RIGHT TO APPEAL DEACTIVATION.

Survey response, 24, British-German App-based Courier

THAT WE ARE WORKERS LIKE EVERYONE AND THAT WE EARN A DECENT LIVING, AND WE DESERVE TO BE TREATED EQUALLY.

Survey response, 23, Mexican-Spanish Cleaner

'IF YOU COULD CHANGE ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR WORK, WHAT WOULD IT BE?':

THAT WE ALL HAVE THAT UNIVERSAL RIGHT TO BE TREATED WITH DIGNITY WHILE PROVIDING A SERVICE.

Survey response, 23, Bolivian-Spanish Hotel Room Attendant

FIXED HOURS, BETTER PAY.

Survey response, 22, Venezuelan/Portuguese hospitality worker

HIGHER SALARY (LONDON LIVING WAGE MINIMUM, AFTER TAXES).

Survey response, 24, Romanian Kitchen/Catering Assistant

I THINK THE ZERO-HOUR CONTRACT SHOULD NOT EXIST.

Survey response, 23, Bolivian-Spanish Hotel Receptionist

NOT OVERLOADING PEOPLE WITH WORK. THIRTY BEDS TO MAKE, IT'S FAR TOO MUCH FOR ANYONE. BEING TREATED WITH RESPECT AND RECEIVING INCENTIVES FOR HARD WORK.

Survey response, 22, Polish Hotel Room Attendant

MORE TRANSPARENCY FROM [THE PLATFORM COMPANY], A LIVING WAGE + COSTS, PROPER PPE, NO ENDLESS WAITING TIMES, EASIER ACCESS TO FINANCIAL SUPPORT, HOLIDAY AND SICK PAY.

Survey response, 21, British App-based Courier

NOT BEING TREATED DIFFERENTLY ON OCCASIONS FOR BEING A WOMAN.

Survey response, 22, British App-based Courier

THAT THEY DON'T TREAT ME AS IF I AM INFERIOR JUST BECAUSE I AM FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY AND I DON'T SPEAK THE LANGUAGE.

Survey response, 19, Spanish Kitchen/Catering Assistant

BETTER PAY AND MONEY AVAILABLE FOR WORKERS TO REPAIR AND MAINTAIN THEIR VEHICLES. MONEY AVAILABLE FOR GOOD WET WEATHER GEAR AND IF A COMPANY UPDATES THEIR APP AND YOUR PHONE BECOMES "INCOMPATIBLE" THEY SHOULD PROVIDE YOU WITH A SUITABLE PHONE FOR THE JOB.

Survey response, 24, British App-based Courier

I DON'T WANT TO BE MENTALLY BURNED OUT.

Survey response, 23, British Waitress

EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS FOR FULL TIME RIDERS INCLUDING MINIMUM WAGE, AS WELL AS INTRODUCING A STATUTORY RIGHT TO APPEAL DEACTIVATION.

Survey response, 24, British-German App-based Courier

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