

RESOURCE GUIDE

Promoting Workplace Autonomy for
Garment Workers in Leicester, UK



You are not alone
We are a community

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section 01

1. Background and Purpose.....	03
1.1 Purpose.....	03
1.2 About THRREADS.....	04
1.2.1 What we do.....	04
1.2.2 Our findings (2023-26).....	05
1.3 What do academic studies say?.....	06
1.4 What are the benefits of Workplace Autonomy?.....	07
1.5 Leicester's Garment Sector – why now?.....	07
1.6 Our Goal.....	08

Section 02

2: What can you do to achieve Workplace Autonomy?.....	09
2.1 Know your rights in the UK.....	09
2.2 Safety Checklist (HSE-based).....	10
2.3 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the workplace.....	11
2.4 If things go wrong – Whistleblowing.....	13

Section 03

3: Local Support, Networks & Resources. Did you know about these contacts in Leicester?.....	15
3.1 FAB-L: Fashion Workers Advice Bureau Leicester.....	15
3.2 Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) Partnership Approach.....	15
3.3 Fair Work Agency (FWA)	16

Section 04

4: Case Studies on Workplace Autonomy.....	17
4.1 Workplace Autonomy: THRREADS case study - collective participation through social capital in Leicester's garment industry.....	17
4.1.1 Exploitation & Rescue: “Benjamin” – Hope for Justice.....	18
4.1.2 SMETA Audit: Factory in Leicester.....	19
4.1.3 Stronger together: → UK Apparel & General Merchandise.....	19
4.1.4 Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) and workers' rights in Leicester.....	20
4.1.5 Social Welfare Advocacy.....	20
4.1.6 Skills and education for fair work - Fashion- Enter and the Leicester Fashion Hub.....	21
4.1.7 Shama Centre.....	21
4.1.8 Wesley Hall Community Centre.....	22
4.1.9 Case Study from THRREADS Project, Dhaka.....	23

Section 05

5: Two local pathways to sustainable futures.....	25
5.1. Leicester Made.....	25
5.2. Apparel & Textile Manufacturers Federation (ATMF).....	25

Section 06

6: Tools & Templates.....	26
6.1 Payslip Checklist.....	26
6.2 ETI POI.....	27
6.3 FOA (Freedom of Association).....	28
6.4 ETI Audit (SMETA-aligned).....	29

Section 07

7: Final message.....	32
-----------------------	----

Abbreviations

- Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)
- Apparel & Textile Manufacturers Federation (ATMF)
- Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)
- Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)
- Citizens Advice (CA)
- Corrective Preventive Action (CAPA)
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)
- Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI)
- Fair Work Agency (FWA)
- Fashion-Enter Ltd (FEL)
- Fashion Workers Advice Bureau Leicester (FAB-L)
- Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA)
- Health and Safety Executive (HSE)
- Highfields Centre (HFC)
- Hope for Justice (HFJ)
- Leicester Law Centre (LLC)
- Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline
- Race Equality Centre (REC)
- SHAMA Women's Centre (SHAMA)
- Stronger Together (ST)
- Wesley Hall Community Centre (Wesley Hall)
- Worker Participation Committees (WPC)



Image source: AI generated

Section 1: Background and Purpose

1.1 Purpose

This resource guide equips garment workers in Leicester—many of whom are women, migrants, and from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds—with the knowledge and support to:

- Understand and assert workplace rights.
- Improve safety, fairness, and autonomy.
- Build collective voice and representation.
- Support long-term sector upgrading: economic, social, and environmental.
- Enhance community building through work and collective organisation.

Workers are at the centre, alongside employers, brands, and community organisations, to create a safer and fairer garment industry.

According to Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2018), Workplace autonomy is the degree of control and discretion workers have over how, when and in what order they do their work (a core element of job design and job quality). CIPD's Good Work Index tracks autonomy/empowerment as a key dimension of "good work".

1.2 About THRREADS

We are THRREADS – a collaborative initiative funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI ES/W013207/1) and led by the University of Essex, in partnership with the University of Derby, Manchester Metropolitan University, and Universal College Bangladesh, working alongside the Fashion Workers Advice Bureau Leicester (FAB-L). Please see details at: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/research-projects/transforming-responsive-and-relational-autonomy-in-the-garment-sector-threads>

Together, we are united by a mission: to build a fair, supportive, and empowering environment for garment and textile workers in Leicester and beyond.

Through a combination of rigorous research and frontline advice, we work to:

- Improve working conditions.

- Amplify the voices of workers at the heart of the industry.
- Work with the garment sector industry, policy makers, and community organisations.

1.2.1 What we do

We believe sustainable change in Leicester's garment industry begins with dialogue; therefore, our community conversation activities are the cornerstone of this effort, creating safe, inclusive spaces for workers, factory owners, designers, and advocates to come together. These facilitated discussions directly tackle the complex issue of work autonomy—the power to influence one's work conditions, schedule, and voice. Workers share their lived experiences and aspirations, while employers gain crucial insight into practical, dignified pathways toward better workplace practices. We move beyond top-down solutions, instead co-designing strategies that promoting meaningful work. By fostering this essential dialogue, we are not just talking about change; we are actively weaving a new fabric for the local industry – one built on mutual respect, collaboration, and shared prosperity. These conversations are the vital first threads in building a more equitable and autonomous future for Leicester's garment sector.

1 Listen

- Confidential interviews with workers, managers, employers. Build trust with interpreters and safe protocols.

4 Deliver

- Turn evidence from research into policy input, legal referrals, and brand engagement.
- Share findings with regulators and networks.



2 Analyse

- Evaluate forms of upgrading for sustainable workplaces.
- Explore evidence base of research findings.

3 Act/Implement

- Practical sessions for employers, reps, and community groups.
- Resource guides, checklists, and action plans on paid time.

Source: THRREADS Project

1.2.2 Our findings (2023-26)

Economic and competitive challenges

According to Apparel and Textile Manufacturers Federation (ATMF) and the industry leaders, the recent number of factories in Leicester is significantly decreased to less than 100 with approximately 1,500 workers (Douglass, 2026). This reflects broader economic challenges, pressures that suppliers face, and negative media attention, thus highlighting the pressing need for the current research we undertake.

Our research findings two forms of workplace autonomy. Relational autonomy recognises individuals as socially embedded decision-makers whose values and choices are shaped by relationships, interdependence, and context. Therefore, the ways in which workers are recruited, supported, and rewarded in the workplace are crucial. For instance, providing support for those with childcare responsibilities or language barriers is essential to fostering autonomy and creating healthy, inclusive workplaces.

Responsive autonomy refers to the degree of freedom employees have in their work, exercised within the boundaries of organisational expectations and responsibilities.

It enables workers to determine the most effective way to carry out their tasks, provided they meet established goals, deadlines, and performance standards. Our research identified real-world examples and good practices where workers were fully involved in task planning, setting production deadlines, and contributing to design decisions, participation that ultimately enhanced the achievement of organisational goals.

Women at the helm of production

A striking insight from our community conversations is the significant role women play in managing production. Female members often handle orders and manage the factory. This is attributed to women's strong planning skills, their ability to manage diverse emotions, and their collaborative approach to achieving production targets.



Image source: AI generated

Flexibility and family- centric work practices

A key factor that enables workers, particularly women, as well as those from migrant and BAME backgrounds, to remain in the garment industry is the flexibility it provides. The ability to balance work with family responsibilities, such school runs, caring for sick family members, and managing emergencies, is highly valued. This flexibility, combined with a collaborative work culture, helps foster a strong sense of community and shared responsibility among workers.

Worker rights and support systems

Employers in our community conversations stated that workers can address concerns (e.g., wages, hours, contract changes) through HR or directly with line managers and owners, suggesting an open-door policy. However, there is a noted lack of knowledge among workers, particularly those from migrant backgrounds, about their rights, consistent with findings from previous research, which may lead to challenges in advocating for improved working conditions.

1.3 What do academic studies say?

Autonomy involves making meaningful decisions while recognising responsibilities to others and the impact of one's actions (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Nedelsky 2011). To put it simply:

- **Identity is social:** Our goals and values develop through our connections with others based on our gender, ethnicity, religion etc.
- **We rely on each other:** True autonomy includes recognising interdependence, not just independence.
- **Decisions affect others:** Our choices consider the well-being of those we care about.
- **Responsibility matters:** We are accountable for how our actions impact our relationships.
- **Beyond “freedom from”:** Instead of just being free from outside control, autonomy means being able to act meaningfully within our social world.

1.4 What are the benefits of Workplace Autonomy?

This Resource Guide shows how Workplace Autonomy can contribute to, and in turn shaped by, three interconnected forms of upgrading in global value chains, following Gereffi (2019): social, economic, and environmental upgrading. Together, these forms of upgrading can help build a more sustainable garment sector while creating meaningful work for the many workers who sustain the industry. Importantly, Workplace Autonomy can also strengthen workers' ability to transfer skills and capabilities across sectors and throughout their working lives, supporting greater resilience, mobility, and opportunity over the life course.

Economic upgrading involves moving towards higher-value and higher-skill production. When workers can adjust methods and tools, problem-solving becomes faster, and quality improves. Capturing workers' ideas leads to better processes and products, while multi-skilling and the use of green and digital tools support pay progression and productivity.

Social upgrading focuses on better rights, meaningful work conditions, and a stronger voice. Decent and fair scheduling, influence over the pace of work, and reduced harassment or micromanagement all contribute to dignity at work. Stronger worker representation and clear grievance routes build trust, well-being, and retention through respect and participation.

Environmental upgrading promotes local, sustainable, and safer production. Workers are empowered to stop unsafe or polluting practices, contribute ideas to reduce waste, energy use, and harmful chemicals, and apply green skills that make continuous improvement part of everyday work.

After all, Workplace Autonomy can only be achieved when individuals and organisations are working together.

1.5 Leicester's garment sector – why now?

Leicester is home to one of the UK's richest garment traditions. Today, it faces:

- Low pay – past reports found low wages
 - Poor working conditions – unsafe environments, lack of contracts
 - Recovery needs – justice, accountability, and ethical renewal
-

Protecting worker rights, voice, and autonomy is crucial for maintaining dignity, securing fair wages, and ensuring safe working conditions—and for building a future- proof, sustainable garment sector. For more information on the Leicester garment sector, please read: <https://labourbehindthelabel.org/?s=good+jobs>

1.6 Our goal

To turn the lived experiences of Leicester's workers into lasting change across the UK garment industry, creating a future where dignity, justice, and fairness define everyday work.

We work closely with:

Highfields Centre (HFC): A Leicester community hub supporting education, training, and worker rights — community anchor since 1974, offering adult learning, youth services, arts and venue hire.

Fashion Workers Advice Bureau Leicester (FAB-L): Free and confidential support for garment workers on issues including pay, contracts, holiday and sick pay, health and safety, labour exploitation, and reporting concerns. Interpreters are available.

Contact



0116 253 1053



www.highfieldscentre.ac.uk/fab-l/



fab-l@highfieldscentre.ac.uk



Section 2: What can you do to achieve Workplace Autonomy?

Now that you understand what Workplace Autonomy means and why it matters, here are some practical steps you can take to achieve it in your own workplace:

2.1 Know your rights in the UK

Why do these matter for autonomy & upgrading:

Awareness is key:

Knowing and using your legal rights is the foundation of Workplace Autonomy. When workers can say “no” to unsafe or unfair practices and “yes” to fair pay and voice, it unlocks economic upgrading (better pay/skills), social upgrading (safer and fairer workplaces and voice), and environmental upgrading (the power to insist on safer and cleaner production).

Working conditions:

- Max hours: 48/week (60 with opt-in).
- Breaks: 30 mins unpaid lunch + two 10-min paid breaks.
- Contracts: Written statement required by Day 1.
- Holiday: 28 days/year (including bank holidays).

Minimum wage (from April 2025):

- 21+: £12.21/hour.
- 18–20: £10.00/hour.
- Under 18/Apprentice: £7.55/hour.

Social protection:

- Sick Pay: Statutory Sick Pay from the first full day. of sickness absence (from 6 April 2026).
- Maternity: 52 weeks leave; 39 weeks statutory pay.
- Redundancy: Rights after 2 years.

Health, safety & dignity:

- Right to PPE and safe conditions
- Report unsafe work: HSE ☎ 0300 003 1647
- Protection from harassment and discrimination (Equality Act 2010)



Image source: AI generated

Find more about your rights at:

<https://www.gov.uk/maximum-weekly-working-hours> <https://www.gov.uk/rest-breaks-work> <https://www.gov.uk/employment-contracts-and-conditions/written-statement-of-employment-particulars>
<https://www.gov.uk/holiday-entitlement-rights> <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates> <https://www.gov.uk/statutory-sick-pay>
<https://www.gov.uk/maternity-pay-leave> <https://www.gov.uk/redundancy-your-rights> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>
<https://www.hse.gov.uk/contact/concerns.htm>
<https://www.hse.gov.uk/ppe/index.htm>

2.2 Safety Checklist (HSE-based)

- **Fire safety:** Are escape routes clear, alarms tested weekly, extinguishers serviced, and fire drills recorded?
- **Machines/needles:** Are guards fitted, emergency stop buttons working, and lockout/tagout procedures used during maintenance?
- **Air and dust:** Is ventilation adequate, and is local extraction used where dust or fumes are generated?
- **Chemicals/dyes:** Are safety data sheets available, storage areas clearly labelled, spill kits provided, and workers trained before use?
- **Manual handling:** Are trolleys or team lifting used for bales and rolls, and are loads kept within safe weight limits? Cutting tools: Are knives and scissors issued and stored safely, with cut-resistant PPE provided if needed?
- **Housekeeping & welfare:** Are floors kept clear, lighting sufficient, toilets and drinking water available, and PPE properly provided and replaced?

2.3 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the workplace

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) means creating fair workplaces where everyone is respected, valued and able to reach their full potential. Equality ensures fair treatment and access to opportunities.

Diversity recognises and values individual differences, while Inclusion means fostering a sense of belonging so that everyone feels respected, supported, and able to thrive in the workplace.

You can read more at: <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/factsheets/diversity-factsheet/>

Such diverse groupings are important for relational autonomy in the workplace and beyond.

Garment sector workers mostly come from these groups in the UK context, and some of the support services are included here.

Do you belong to any of these groups? If so, please refer to relevant support services.

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) workers

- Often concentrated in low-paid roles; protected under the Equality Act 2010 (race/ethnicity, religion).
- Language access and anti-discrimination rights apply; ask for interpreters where needed.
- Support: Leicester Law Centre (LLC).

Women & gender rights

Protected from harassment, pregnancy/maternity discrimination, and unequal pay; right to flexible working requests; pregnancy risk assessments required.

Support: Victim First - ☎ 0800 953 9595 | FreeVA/UAVA - ☎ 0808 802 0028

Migrant workers

- Even if undocumented: entitled to minimum wage and safe conditions; no passport/document retention.
- Support: Fashion Workers Advice Bureau Leicester (FAB-L) – 📞 0116 253 1053

Young workers (16-18)

- Stricter hours and night-work limits; enhanced H&S duties on employers.
- Support: ACAS – 📞 0300 123 1100 | FAB-L – 📞 0116 253 1053

Agency/temp workers

- Day-1 rights to itemised payslips, equal treatment after 12 weeks in the same role; no work-finding fees.
- Support: ACAS – 📞 0300 123 1100 | Citizens Advice (CA)

Disabled workers

- Right to reasonable adjustments (e.g., modified duties, equipment, hours).
- Support: Leicester Law Centre – 📞 0116 242 1120 | Citizens Advice

LGBTQ+ workers

- Protection from discrimination and harassment related to sexual orientation/gender reassignment.
- Support: Citizens Advice | Victim First – 0800 953 9595

Parents & carers

- Rights to parental leave, time off for dependants, and flexible working requests.
- Support: ACAS – 📞 0300 123 1100 | Citizens Advice

2.4 If things go wrong – Whistleblowing

What would you do if you wanted to raise a concern? Would you be worried about any possible backlash?

Whistleblowing occurs when a worker reports suspected wrongdoing within an organisation, particularly where the issue is in the public interest. This may include concerns relating to unsafe practices, illegal activity, discrimination, fraud, or other forms of malpractice. It enables employees to raise legitimate concerns without fear of victimisation, retaliation, or dismissal.

UK law (the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998) protects workers who make such disclosures when they are made in good faith and through the proper channels. You can read more about it at: <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/employment-law/whistleblowing/>

What's protected?

Are you raising a concern in the public interest (e.g., serious safety risks, illegal underpayment of minimum wage, forced/hidden labour, criminal activities, environmental damage, data/privacy breaches)? If yes, UK law (PIDA) can protect you from dismissal or punishment for reporting it appropriately.

This checklist covers all the points you as a worker can take into account when considering 'whistle blowing', including the effect on yourself and on colleagues.

How to do it (simple steps):

- 1 Write it down: dates, times, what happened, who saw it, photos/payslips.
- 2 Say the words: "This is a protected disclosure under PIDA."
- 3 Ask for confidentiality and keep copies of everything.
- 4 If unsafe to report inside the factory, go straight to the numbers below.

Source: THRREADS Project

Note: You can raise concerns internally (for example, to your manager, owner, HR, or a worker representative) or externally to an official body (called a “prescribed person”) such as the HSE or GLAA.

If you believe reporting internally is unsafe or nothing changes after you do, you can go directly to one of these external contacts you will find below.

Tip: After you call, note the reference number and add it to your record. Use your Worker Forum/WPC to track fixes. If you need language help, contact FAB-L (0116 253 1053) for interpreters.

One-glance escalation:

- For unpaid wages or holiday pay: contact the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) on 0300 123 1100.
- For unsafe work or accidents waiting to happen: call the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) on 0300 003 1647.
- For coercion, threats, or forced labour: call the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) on 0800 432 0804 or the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline (MSH) on 08000 121 700 (24/7).
- If immigration is involved or you are worried about your status: speak to the Fashion Workers Advice Bureau Leicester (FAB-L) or the Leicester Law Centre (LLC).

Top tip: Always keep notes: dates, hours, payslips, photos and names.



Image source: AI generated

Section 3: Local support, networks and resources. Did you know about these contacts in Leicester?

3.1 FAB-L: Fashion Workers Advice Bureau Leicester

 **0116 253 1053**

Advice on pay, status, exploitation; Interpreters available in Gujarati, Urdu, Bengali, Bulgarian and Romanian (via FAB-L).

 **Highfields Centre (HFC): Worker/community support**

Community hub; training, space for meetings, referrals.

 **SHAMA: Women's training & employment programmes**

Skills, ESOL, routes to work for women.

 **Wesley Hall Community Centre**

Local support & signposting.

 **Legal & Advice Services: Citizens Advice (CA), Leicester Law Centre (LLC), Race Equality Center (REC)**

Work rights, benefits, debt, discrimination advice.

3.2 Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) Partnership Approach

The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) now operates through business-led, partnership-based initiatives to prevent labour exploitation and strengthen compliance within UK supply chains. This collaborative model replaces the former 2018 Apparel & General Merchandise Protocol. The GLAA is replaced by the Fair Work Agency (FWA) from April 2026.

Businesses, brands, and regulators now share intelligence directly through targeted collaboration projects, such as Operation Tacit and regional networks within Leicester's garment sector. These partnerships aim to identify risks early, promote ethical recruitment practices, and provide enhanced protection for workers.

 <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/fair-work-agency>

 0345 161 6000 (Mon-Fri, 9:00 am-5:00 pm)

 contact@fairworkagency.gov.uk

Brands and auditors share lawful intelligence to target enforcement and reduce worker exploitation.

3.3 Fair Work Agency (FWA)

The Fair Work Agency (FWA), introduced under the Employment Rights Act 2025, is now the UK government's central labour-market enforcement body operating under the Department for Business and Trade. Launched on 7 April 2026, the FWA has replaced and absorbed the functions of the GLAA, bringing enforcement relating to labour abuse, worker exploitation, unlawful underpayment and wider employment rights within a single national agency.

The Fair Work Agency (FWA) marks a shift toward unified, state-led enforcement of employment rights, replacing individual tribunal claims—often inaccessible due to financial and legal barriers—with a more proactive regulatory model. It consolidates functions previously spread across the GLAA, the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate, National Minimum Wage enforcement, and relevant HMRC activities, while also covering holiday pay and leave. This move creates a single, more coherent structure for investigating underpayment and non-compliance, replacing the UK's previously fragmented enforcement system.

The FWA is empowered to:

- Carry out inspections and demand documents from employers.
- Issue civil penalties of up to 200 per cent of any unpaid sums (capped at £20,000 per worker).
- Bring or support legal proceedings in employment tribunals, particularly in large-scale or strategic cases.
- Offer advice and legal guidance to both workers and employers.

FWA reports to Parliament through annual and three-yearly public reports. The Department for Business and Trade states that the FWA has now become a single point of contact for both workers and employers, with the aim of “levelling the playing field for compliant businesses” and protecting those who follow fair practices.

Hence, from April 2026, workers have a single national body to contact for pay, holiday, sick pay, and exploitation issues — replacing the GLAA. This means faster, more coordinated enforcement of basic rights, and greater protection where wages, hours, or safety are at risk.

Section 4: Case Studies on Workplace Autonomy

Although this resource guide is not designed with detailed instructions for achieving or measuring Workplace Autonomy, it does share good practices promoted by evidence of stakeholder initiatives that comply with legislation around preventing workplace exploitation and creating fair and responsible businesses.

Through Leicester-based case studies and examples from the wider garment sector, this guide illustrates:

- Real situations faced by workers and factories, and the specific challenges involved
- The concrete changes made in response (e.g., new grievance systems, improved wage practices, worker representation structures)
- Practical lessons other workers, employers, and factories can apply to their own contexts
- How social capital—trust, relationships, and community networks—was mobilised to drive change
- Barriers encountered and how they were overcome (or where progress remains incomplete)

These case studies are written in plain language so anyone can read and use them.

Privacy note: Names and identifying details are changed; cases are shared with consent, and where necessary, facts are combined to protect the anonymity of both workers and factories.

Source: THRREADS Community Conversations data (2025)

Find more at: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/research-projects/transforming-responsive-and-relational-autonomy-in-the-garment-sector---threads>

4.1 Workplace Autonomy: THRREADS case study - collective participation through social capital in Leicester's garment industry

A small Leicester garment factory that the THRREADS team visited in May 2025 shows how social and cultural capital can drive both productivity and worker wellbeing. There is good gender visibility in daily operations of the factory, and with a female supervisor from the family firm, the factory replaces top-down management with collaboration and trust.

Production targets are agreed collectively, and workers share skills to solve challenges—like when a tricky red dress sample was finished in days instead of weeks because one skilled worker trained the team. The factory also supports women’s caregiving roles by offering flexibility for school runs and family emergencies, which helps retain staff long-term. Recruitment relies on personal networks rather than formal ads, reducing barriers for foreign-born workers and strengthening community bonds on the shop floor. This mix of female leadership, teamwork, cultural sensitivity and flexibility has created not only an efficient operation but also a supportive workplace built on trust and mutual care.

Source: THRREADS Community Conversations data (2025)

Find more at:  <https://www.essex.ac.uk/research-projects/transforming-responsive-and-relational-autonomy-in-the-garment-sector---threads>

4.1.1 Exploitation & Rescue: “Benjamin” – Hope for Justice



Benjamin, in his 60s, was tricked into debt bondage after an ID error: his wages were stolen, his passport taken, and he was kept in overcrowded housing under threats of violence. Hope for Justice intervened, got him to safety and secured compensation; he is now thriving as a mature student. Warning signs in his case included no written contract, documents controlled by others, no payslips with unexplained deductions, housing tied to the employer, excessive hours without proper time off, and fear of violence or deportation. The lesson is simple: report early—intervention saves lives.

Source:  <https://hopeforjustice.org/news/benamins-story-how-modern-day-slavery-can-hide-in-plain-sight/>

4.1.2 SMETA Audit: Factory in Leicester



Bureau Veritas carried out an SMETA 2-pillar audit across two Leicester sites. Auditors confirmed weekly BACS pay with itemised payslips, voluntary overtime, worker representatives, and no recorded accidents in the previous year; several workers described a friendly, family-like team.

However, the audit flagged clear fixes: a missing Fire Risk Assessment at one site; two exit doors opening against the escape direction; no recorded fire drills in 2022 or early 2023; an overdue fire-alarm service; and no formal policy or control system for sub-contracting.

A data-protection risk assessment was also missing. If management completes the fire safety actions, logs equipment checks, proves H&S training, pays the correct overtime premium, and adds a clear sub-contracting policy, the workplace becomes safer and pay becomes clearer for everyone. Workers should feel able to ask to see the fire-safety documents, last drill dates and the overtime policy; if exits are unsafe or drills are not happening, they can raise it internally and, if nothing changes report the safety issues to HSE.

Report to HSE

☎ 0300 003 1647

(Ref: SMETA 2023GBZAA423020801, Bureau Veritas CPS)

Source:  <https://www.sedex.com/audit-verifier/>

4.1.3 Stronger together: → UK Apparel & General Merchandise



Stronger Together (ST) is a not-for-profit programme, developed from the retailer-backed Fast Forward initiative, that helps brands and factories prevent hidden labour exploitation and improve recruitment and day-to-day practices. In Leicester, this involves simple, practical changes: no worker-paid recruitment fees; clear information for workers in their own languages; supervisors trained to spot and prevent coercion; and buyers agreeing to realistic lead times and fairer purchasing practices, so that pressure does not roll downhill onto workers. When factories use these tools, problems are identified earlier, fixed faster, and are less likely to recur, and workers know who to contact when something goes wrong.

Contact/info:

 stronger2gether.org

 fastforwarduk.org

4.1.4 Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) and workers' rights in Leicester



The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) brings together unions, NGOs, and brands around the ETI Base Code to improve working conditions and protect worker rights. In Leicester, ETI members have supported retailer working groups, provided supplier training on basics such as overtime and payslips, promoted more ethical purchasing (e.g., better lead times, on-time payment), and offered direct worker advice through FAB-L. These steps have led to clearer payslips, safer sites and more worker voice. Progress is real, but lasting change needs stronger enforcement, an active worker voice and continued ethical investment from buyers so factories are not squeezed into cutting corners.

Source:  <https://www.ethicaltrade.org/resources/blog/media-investigation-leicester-garment-trade-eti-response>

4.1.5 Social Welfare Advocacy: FAB-L – 250+ clients supported

A. FAB-L's Social Welfare Advocacy Worker has supported more than 250 walk-in clients with everyday welfare problems that hit workers hard: Universal Credit applications and sanctions, Council Tax arrears and reductions, Housing Benefit or Local Housing Allowance issues, and Personal Independence Payment forms, mandatory reconsiderations and appeals. The support is hands-on, involving form filling with interpreters where needed, building evidence packs, contacting councils and the DWP, arranging Discretionary Housing Payments to prevent rent arrears, challenging sanctions, and preparing appeal bundles for tribunals. The simple outcome is money in, stress down, and stability up— benefits awarded or backdated, evictions prevented, and clients more confident with letters, and deadlines. Interpreters are available, and people leave knowing their rights and what to do next.

B. A worker contacted FAB-L after three months without pay and no holiday pay. In another clear case, a worker at Soft Touch (managed by Imran) was owed £2,300, paid only £7.00 per hour (below minimum wage), told when to use the biometric clock and pushed into long hours. FAB-L helped each person gather evidence— rotas, messages, hours notes, payslips and bank statements—then wrote a firm letter before action and opened ACAS Early Conciliation within the time limit. The Soft Touch case was paid in full by BACS (£2,300), and the other unpaid-wage case was also resolved so the client could cover rent and bills again. The lesson is to keep simple records, act quickly and use ACAS; if an employer still refuses, a tribunal claim can follow.



4.1.6 Skills and education for fair work – Fashion-Enter and the Leicester Fashion Hub

Fashion-Enter Ltd (FEL) is a not-for-profit social enterprise recognised nationally as a centre of excellence for garment manufacturing and skills training. Through its educational arm, the Fashion Technology Academy (FTA), it offers accredited qualifications that combine technical learning with live factory experience. The Leicester Fashion Hub, based at Phoenix House, is FEL's upgraded campus and part of a UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) project with Leicester City Council. It supports people at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) through Level 1 and Level 2 courses in stitching, pattern cutting, and a pioneering Level 1 Award in Workers' Rights and Labour Exploitation. By linking practical skills with rights-based education, the Hub helps new entrants—especially women and young people—gain confidence, fair work awareness, and routes into employment. Industry-trained tutors deliver up-to-date teaching using technologies such as Kornit Digital printers, Zünd cutters and advanced CAD tools like Style3D and Optitex. This mix of technical excellence and worker empowerment contributes to fairer, higher-skilled and more ethical garment production in Leicester.



Image source: AI generated

Find more at: <https://fashion-enter.com/>

4.1.7 Shama Centre



Shama Women's Centre helps build new skills, improve your English, or move from garment work into other forms of employment. They offer women-only training, ESOL classes, and confidence-building programmes that open doors to better jobs and independence. This is also the case for F.A., an Indian woman who spent more than 20 years in Leicester's garment factories. The work suited her life because it offered school-hours shifts and steady jobs when needed, and she was often praised for her skills. She also knew the downsides: health and safety could be better, and breaks were short. When more than 70% of local factories closed, her family's income collapsed, and her mental health suffered, but she kept applying for roles across sectors.

Her English fluency and extensive practical experience proved to be transferable. With targeted confidence-building and interview practice, she secured a kitchen assistant position at Green Lane Primary School. This shows that the skills developed in garment work—speed, accuracy, teamwork, and reliability—can open doors beyond the factory floor when workers receive the right support.

Shama Women Centre

You can find more at: <https://shamawomenscentre.co.uk/>

4.1.8 Wesley Hall Community Centre



Wesley Hall Community Centre provides a welcoming space with practical help — from food parcels and wellbeing advice to free classes that help rebuild confidence and find work again for those facing hardship, unemployment, or needing community support, as illustrated in the following case study. Client A, a woman of South Asian background with years in garment work, fell into crisis during COVID-19: she lost her job overnight and then tragically lost her husband to the virus. With two young children and no income, she faced grief, debt and fear. At Wesley Hall, the response was practical and compassionate: food parcels and emergency essentials were provided first, followed by legal advice and wellbeing support, so she had space to cope. Free English and sewing classes rebuilt her skills and confidence. With that base, she worked on a CV, learned to search and apply for jobs online and practised interviews until she felt ready. She secured a job with Zara and is now financially independent, able to support her children and looking ahead. The change came from meeting immediate needs, supporting mental health, building skills and opening a clear pathway back to work.

Wesley Hall Community Centre

You can find more at: <https://www.wesleyhallcc.co.uk/>

4.1.9 Case Study from THRREADS Project, Dhaka

In Bangladesh, the THRREADS research team (THRREADS Community Conversations data, 2025) worked with factories such as DBL Group where Participation Committees are elected (with over 50% worker representatives) and meet monthly to raise and fix issues on pay, benefits, safety, productivity and welfare; this led to subsidised meals and transport, wider healthcare for workers and families, better ventilation and lighting on lines, and essential household items added to the Bandhan Fair Price Shop. Workers speak through their elected representatives; the Compliance Team ensures that committees are properly formed, meet on time, and respect worker rights, so that problems are recorded and followed up on. The result is a trusted, regular way to solve real problems and keep improving day-to-day conditions.

Worker Participation Committees (WPCs)

What they are:

WPCs are mixed worker-management groups for discussing conditions, safety, wages, and training. They give workers a structured and safe way to raise concerns, share ideas, and help shape fair and sustainable workplaces.

Key Features:

- 50% worker-elected members
- Regular paid-time meetings
- Transparent agendas and outcomes
- Training in rights, communication, and safety
- Links with unions and grievance mechanisms

Read more here:  <https://dbl-group.com/>



Image source: AI generated

Section 5: Two local pathways to sustainable futures

5.1 Leicester made

What it is:

A Leicester initiative supporting ethical manufacturing, sustainability, and innovation in the local fashion/textiles ecosystem. It helps workers and small factories transition to cleaner, circular production—repairing and reusing, reducing waste/energy/chemicals—and develop green skills. Cleaner and safer production protects workers' health, gives people the right and confidence to stop dirty/unsafe work, creates green skills (such as repair, reuse, and safer chemicals) that lead to better jobs, and saves factories money on waste/energy, allowing them to meet legal pay and hours requirements.

What they offer (at a glance):

- Ethical manufacturing: fair labour and more transparent local supply chains.
- Sustainability: eco-friendly and circular practices (repair, reuse, waste reduction).
- Innovation: support for tech adoption and new design/production models.

Who it's for:

- Garment workers and small factories in Leicester.
- Designers, makers, community groups, and local suppliers.

Use this resource to:

- Find local ethical/sustainable manufacturing networks.
- Learn about greener production ideas you can raise in your workplace.
- Connect with partners for skills, pilots, or showcasing local work.

How to access / contact:

 Fashion Hub, Phoenix House, 1 Kings St, Leicester

 leicestermade.co.uk |

 0116 436 2560

5.2 Apparel & Textile Manufacturers Federation (UK) (ATMF)



What it is:

A supplier-led UK trade association for garment and textile manufacturers (Leicester-based office), giving factories a collective voice and support on ethical, fair, and inclusive supply chains.

What they offer (at a glance):

- Compliance & audit guidance (ETI/SMETA readiness), training, and marketing help.
- Leads & networking connects factories with designers/brands; trade-show partnerships (e.g., Source Fashion).
- Order handling & factory directory, plus ThreadChain (an ATMF online platform that helps factories sell or share surplus stock directly with buyers).
- Leicester supply-chain strengthening via the UKSPF project with the City Council.

Who it's for:

- UK garment/textile factories (especially in Leicester).
- More UK designers and brands are choosing to make their products locally again – often connecting with Leicester factories through ATMF programmes, trade shows, and buyer-supplier matching events. This helps small factories find reliable buyers and reduces reliance on overseas intermediaries.

Use this resource to:

- Get audit-ready: policies, evidence, and Corrective Preventive Action (CAPA).
- Find buyers and industry events.
- List your factory in local directories.
- Create income from surplus stock through ThreadChain, ATMF's online resale and reuse platform connecting factories with buyers.

How to access / contact:

📍 Unit 3 Curzon Works, Curzon Street, Leicester, Leicestershire, LE1 2HH
🌐 atmf.co.uk
✉ info@atmf.co.uk
☎ 0116 367 1935

Section 6: Tools & Templates

The templates in this guide are simple, ready-to-use tools designed to help you take control of your work life – whether that means checking your payslip, reviewing safety standards, or preparing for an audit. They turn complex rights and standards into quick, practical steps you can use every day. Each template supports Workplace Autonomy by helping you record information, spot issues early, and raise them confidently through worker forums or management meetings. Use them to stay organised, protect your pay and safety, and build a stronger, fairer workplace together.

6.1 Payslip Checklist

- Gross/net pay shown
- Hours clearly stated
- Deductions explained

Use this checklist to make sure your payslip is correct – that your hours, deductions, and pay rates are clear and match your own records.

Factory Self-Audit

✓ Minimum wage paid | ✓ Contracts issued | ✓ Safe exits | ✓ Breaks given

This is quick, simple check to see if your factory meets basic legal and safety standards – helps you spot issues early and plan fixes.

Templates Payslip

Employee No.	Employee	Date.	National Insurance No.
1	FULL NAME	29-Aug-2025	XXXXXXXX
Payments	Units	Rate	Amount
Basic Pay			1000.00
Holiday Pay			100.02
Total Payments			1100.02
Deductions			Amount
Income Tax			PAYE
National Insurance			NI
NEST Monthly			PENSION
Total Deductions			TOTAL
NAME		Totals This Period	Totals Year To Date
FULL ADDRESS		Total Payments 1100.02	Taxable Gross Pay YEAR TO DATE
		Total Deductions DEDUCTIONS	Income Tax 1,000.00
			Employee NIC 100.00
			Employer NIC 500.00
[COMPANY NAME HERE]			
Tax Code: 1257L NI table: A Dept: Finance & Mngmnt Tax Period: Aug-2025 Payment Method: BACS			
NET PAY £ NET			

6.2 ETI POI (Ethical Trading Initiative – Performance Improvement) FLOW – 4 SIMPLE STEPS

Why these matter? This is the loop factories and brands use to fix problems and keep workers safe and paid.

Now use this 4-step loop every month:



Commit Write the rules down and put them on the wall in the languages people use. [name a responsible manager and no punishment promise]

Identify Problems Check real papers: payslips, timesheets/rotas, fire-drill log, training list. Look at pay, hours, safety, contracts, status (employee/worker/agency)

Track & Tell Keep a very simple list: what's wrong → who fixes → by when → done/not done.
Post Worker Forum/WPC minutes so everyone can see.

Fix & Prevent Pay any money owed.
Change rotas, repair guards, give/replace PPE, book training. Agree actions and deadlines in Forum/WPC the worker meeting.

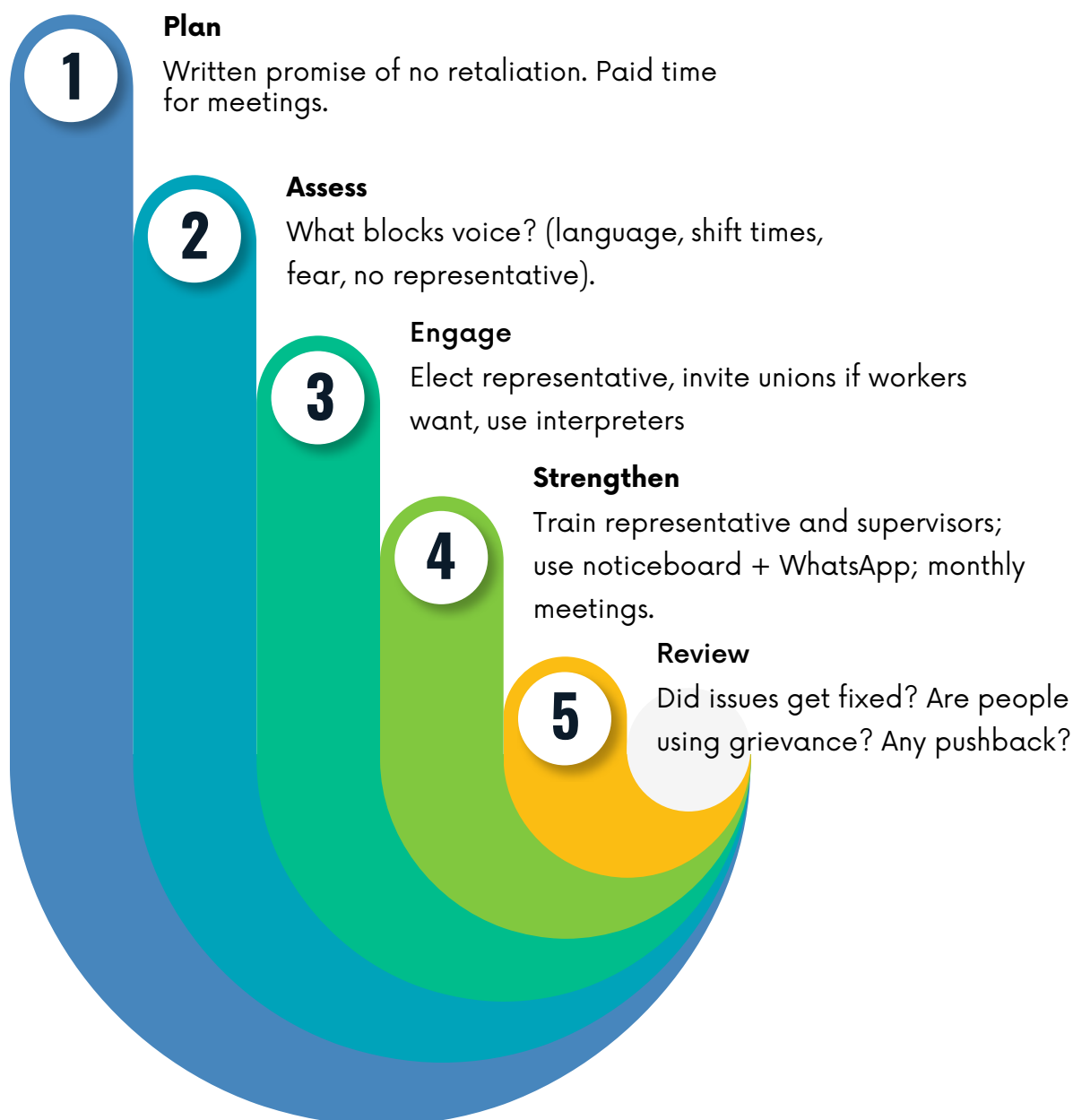
Source: THRREADS Project

Read more at: <https://www.ethicaltrade.org/eti-base-code>

6.3 FOA (Freedom of Association) – 5 STEPS TO PROTECT YOUR RIGHT TO ORGANISE

Goal: Workers speak up safely and get results.

A practical 5-step guide to help workers use their voice safely — how to raise issues, take minutes, and track progress through Worker Participation Committees (WPCs).



Source: THREADS Project

Tip: Put every issue into Minutes with owner + deadline. Check next month.

6.4 ETI Audit (SMETA-aligned) – QUICK CHECK

Quick Intro:

- What is this? A simple tick-sheet to see if your workplace matches the ETI Base Code (the standard many big brands use).
- Who can use it? Anyone: a worker, a rep, a supervisor, or the owner.
- Why use it? If you pass this check, you are close to passing an outside audit called SMETA. If you don't pass, this sheet shows exactly what to fix.
- How long? 10-20 minutes.
- How to do it:
 - a. Take this sheet + 1 recent payslip + timecards + H&S drill/training logs.
 - b. Walk the site (exits, machines, chemicals, PPE, drinking water).
 - c. Ask 2-3 workers (use interpreters if needed).
 - d. Tick the boxes. If you tick "No", write a fix in the Action column.
 - e. Bring this to the Worker Forum/WPC and agree who fixes what by when.

What is SMETA?

A common audit used by brands. Auditors check your factory against the ETI Base Code and UK law.

- 2-pillar = Labour + Health & Safety
- 4-pillar = Labour + H&S + Environment + Business Ethics
- You get a report and a Corrective Action Plan. This one-pager helps you get ready.

Scope today (tick): ☐ Labour ☐ Health & Safety ☐ Environment ☐ Business Ethics
ETI Audit (SMETA-aligned) – tick what is true now



Image source: AI generated

ETI clause	Quick test (say it out loud)	What to look at	OK?	Action to fix (who + by when)
1. Employment is freely chosen	"No passport or ID is kept by the boss. No deposits. I can leave with notice."	Onboarding steps; ask 2 workers.	☐	...
2. Freedom of association & bargaining	"We elect reps. Meetings are on paid time. No threats for speaking up."	Election notes; minutes on wall/WhatsApp.	☐	...
3. Safe & hygienic work	"Exits clear, drills done, guards on machines, PPE given and replaced, drinking water."	Risk assessment; drill log; maintenance; PPE issue list.	☐	...
4. No child labour	"We check age. If a child is found, we move them to school, not night/hazard work."	Age-check steps; remediation form.	☐	...
5. Living wages are paid	"Payslip shows hours. All hours paid. OT paid extra. Deductions explained."	Payslips; timecards; OT policy; piece-rate maths.	☐	...
6. Working hours not excessive	"Contract $\leq$ 48 hrs/wk. OT is a choice. Total $\leq$ 60 hrs/wk. 1 day off in 7."	Time records for a busy month; OT consent.	☐	...
7. No discrimination	"Hiring, training, promotion and firing are fair. We have an anti-harassment policy."	HR policy; grievance outcomes.	☐	...
8. Regular employment	"Written contract on Day-1. Agency terms clear. No fake apprenticeships."	Contracts; KID (agency); RTW checks (no holding docs).	☐	...
9. No harsh/inhumane treatment	"No abuse or threats. Discipline is written and fair."	Disciplinary log; worker interviews.	☐	...

Worker voices checked (tick): ☐ men ☐ women ☐ migrants/interpreters ☐ agency ☐ young workers

Site walk (tick): ☐ exits ☐ alarm tests ☐ guards ☐ chemicals/SDS ☐ PPE ☐ toilets & water

*Keep these for 2+ years: contracts, payslips, hours/OT, H&S training, fire drills, accidents/near-miss, rep elections, grievances.

CAPA — Corrective & Preventive Action (use with WPC)							
What is wrong	ETI clause	Root cause (why)	Fix (what to do)	Owner	Due date	Done	Proof (photo/file)

This is follow-up tool to record what went wrong, why, and how it will be fixed — used to keep improvements on track and visible to everyone.

Plain tip: Put this sheet and the CAPA table on the noticeboard. At each Worker Forum/WPC meeting, read the Action column and mark Done/Not yet.



Image source: AI generated

Section 7: Final message

You are not voiceless. You are not alone. We are a community.

This Resource Guide helps you to understand about Workplace Autonomy. This is more than knowing your rights — it's about belonging, trust, and shared responsibility. Every fair decision, respectful conversation, or small act of courage adds up to something bigger: a culture where dignity and fairness are the norm, not the exception.

The garment industry has deep roots of skill, care, and creativity. By strengthening workers' voices and building respectful relationships across factories, communities, and brands, we honour that legacy and shape a future built on fairness, not fear.

Autonomy flourishes where people are listened to, where experience is valued, and where work supports both family and community life.

When workers, employers, and partners share this vision, change lasts — not for a week or a season, but for generations to come.

Your work matters. Your voice shapes the future. The garment workers' stories continue — stronger, fairer, and together.

Remember:

- **You have rights now** (minimum wage, safe work, paid holiday, protection from discrimination).
- **You have protection when you speak up** (whistleblowing and reps/union support).
- **You have power together** — small actions, documented, and repeated with others change workplaces.

Your labour has value. Your dignity matters. It adds to Workplace Autonomy and to achieve organisational goals.

Solidarity — not silence — is your strength

Contact Details (THRREADS team)

SHOBA ARUN

University of Essex

 shoba.arun@essex.ac.uk

SAMSUL ALAM

University of Derby

 m.alam@derby.ac.uk

FAB-L (worker advice):  0116 253 1053

 highfieldscentre.ac.uk/fab-l/

THANK YOU

References

- Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). (2018). Employee empowerment and control. <https://www.cipd.org/en/knowledge/bitesize-research/employee-empowerment-control/>
- Douglass, R. (2026). Leicester Made gears up for expanded edition amid efforts to rewrite the city's manufacturing reputation. FashionUnited UK. <https://fashionunited.uk/news/fairs/leicester-made-gears-up-for-expanded-edition-amid-efforts-to-rewrite-the-citys-manufacturing-reputation/2026042187580>
- Gereffi, G. (2019). Economic upgrading in global value chains in Ponte, S., Gereffi, G., & Raj- Reichert, G. Introduction to the handbook on global value chains. In Handbook on global value chains (pp. 1-27). Edward Elgar Publishing. (pp. 240-254).
- Mackenzie, C., & Stoljar, N. (Eds.). (2000). Relational autonomy: Feminist perspectives on autonomy, agency, and the social self. Oxford University Press.
- Nedelsky, J. (2011). Law's relations: A relational theory of self, autonomy, and law. Oxford University Press.