

Review

Working Conditions in the Hospitality Industry: The Case for a Fair and Decent Work Agenda

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Abstract: This critical review presents a comprehensive examination of the prevailing working conditions within the global hospitality industry. It highlights pervasive issues such as inequitable pay structures, widespread underemployment, skills underutilisation, heightened work pressures, income instability, and constrained social mobility. These adverse conditions not only have significant societal ramifications but also exert detrimental effects on employee well-being and mental health, leading to a dearth of talent retention and recruitment challenges. Against this backdrop, the study advocates for the adoption of a Fair and Decent Work Agenda (FDWA) as a pivotal strategy to improve the lives of hospitality workers. Despite governmental efforts, such as the implementation of the FDWA on the global, regional and country level, meaningful change remains elusive. To address this gap, a comprehensive and targeted set of actions for successful FDWA implementation is proposed. Furthermore, the paper offers valuable insights for industry practitioners, policymakers, and researchers alike, aiming to trigger concerted action towards realising equitable and dignified working conditions within the hospitality sector. By embracing the principles of fairness and decency, stakeholders can foster a more sustainable and inclusive industry ecosystem, ultimately improving the lives of hospitality workers while fortifying the sector's resilience and competitiveness in the global marketplace.

Keywords: social sustainability; working conditions; Fair and Decent Work; hospitality industry



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1. Introduction

The hospitality industry, a vital economic sector, faces significant scrutiny regarding its labour practices. Issues such as low wages, weak union representation, a high proportion of migrant workers, and poor working conditions create an environment conducive to worker exploitation [1]. Lashley [2] describes this environment as ‘neo-slavery,’ highlighting the severe nature of these conditions. Worker exploitation in this context often involves underpayment and substandard working conditions [3,4], which are internationally unacceptable and condemned [5]. These substandard working conditions encompass aspects such as remuneration, working hours, leave entitlements, health and safety standards, and general treatment of workers.

To address these issues, comprehensive policy reforms are necessary to enhance wage standards, ensure reliable work schedules, and improve working conditions [6]. This paper emphasises the need for robust enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with labour laws and protect workers’ rights effectively. A collaborative approach involving government bodies, industry leaders, trade unions, and workers is crucial for implementing a Fair and Decent Work Agenda (FDWA). Improving working conditions not only helps hospitality companies remain sustainable and build a positive reputation but also supports larger societal objectives of economic equality and social justice [7]. Decision-makers can create a more supportive and equitable work environment by implementing targeted interventions that consider the impact of organisational practices and policies on employee experiences [8].

This conceptual paper addresses the contemporary societal problem of substandard working conditions in the hospitality industry, proposing tangible solutions. Theoretically, it expands the existing knowledge on these challenges and how the Fair Work Agenda can alleviate them. From a managerial perspective, adopting Fair and Decent Work practices can positively impact both employees and hospitality businesses, enhancing the industry's attractiveness, improving employee retention, and contributing to a socially sustainable and resilient economic sector.

2. Working Conditions in the Hospitality Industry

The hospitality industry is historically plagued by substandard working conditions, such as low pay, long hours, and little job security [9]. These conditions are widespread, indicating systemic problems impacting the rights and well-being of workers. Existing research highlights significant national and regional variations in hospitality working conditions on a global scale.

Díaz-Carrión et al. [10] conducted a comparative study of job satisfaction and working conditions among hospitality workers in 16 European countries, focusing on key aspects such as wages, working hours, and opportunities for advancement through cross-national analysis. The results show that working conditions and job satisfaction differ among European nations, with some countries having better conditions and higher satisfaction, while others face difficulties like low pay and few opportunities for advancement. Substandard working conditions and the exploitation of hospitality workers have been documented on a global scale, with examples extending beyond the European context to include Australia [11], the USA [12], Turkey [13], India [14], and China [15].

Economic disparities, labour market regulations, cultural differences, and industrial structures all play a role in determining working conditions and job satisfaction in different national contexts. Fernández-Macías et al. [16] argue that wealthier nations may offer higher wages and better working conditions due to stronger economic performance and investment in labour standards. Similarly, countries with strong labour legislation and enforcement mechanisms, such as Germany and Sweden, offer better protection for hospitality workers, leading to higher job satisfaction [10]. Cultural norms and values also vary across nations, with some focusing more on employee well-being. For instance, countries like Denmark and the Netherlands prioritise work–life balance and employee welfare, contributing to higher job satisfaction levels [17]. Furthermore, in countries where the market is dominated by corporate businesses, such as hotel and restaurant chains, working conditions in the hospitality industry tend to be significantly better. This is largely due to these companies' adherence to employment legislation and industry best practices [18].

The lower end in this industry (i.e., low-star-rating hotels, fast food and casual restaurants, and contract catering), especially businesses with a more labour-intensive or exploitation-prone character (i.e., the 'gig economy'), may offer substandard working conditions and remuneration [19]. Social policies and welfare systems also play a significant role in determining working conditions and job satisfaction [20]. Understanding these variations alongside job characteristics is essential for policymakers and employers to enhance labour standards and employee well-being, address inequalities, and improve working conditions in the global hospitality industry [21].

In the UK, empirical evidence suggests that hospitality workers face several challenges, particularly concerning unfavourable working conditions such as long hours, low pay, and a lack of benefits [4]. Piso's [22] study provides a detailed examination of working hours in the UK hotel industry, focusing on scheduling procedures, overtime, and work–life balance. The study indicates that while flexible work arrangements are prevalent, they frequently result in extended hours and erratic schedules, which undermine employees' ability to achieve a satisfactory work–life balance. Furthermore, the economic turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread redundancies in the hospitality industry, often without fair compensation [23]. Migrant workers, even those with legal contracts, faced precarious circumstances due to overstaying visas, lower pay, and exclusion

from national pandemic responses [24]. The hospitality industry experienced a labour shortage as post-COVID-19 recovery exceeded expectations, exacerbated by Brexit in the UK [25].

3. Precarity and Worker Exploitation in the Hospitality Industry

3.1. Precarity

The existing literature highlights the importance of addressing structural problems and implementing policies that support the development of favourable workplaces prioritising fair treatment and worker well-being in the hospitality industry. French [26] notes that the hospitality industry's diverse range of activities, varying workplace sizes and locations, seasonal employment patterns, and the intrinsic nature of the work itself make it a complex sector to regulate. The prevalence of poor working conditions in the hospitality sector poses significant challenges for workers, including long working hours, low pay, and inadequate benefits [27]. These conditions frequently lead to high turnover rates, employee dissatisfaction, and deteriorated service quality [28]. Addressing these issues is essential for enhancing employee well-being and promoting fairness and decency within the industry [29].

Furthermore, the informal hospitality sector refers to the part of the hospitality industry that operates outside the formal, regulated, and often taxed economy. This sector includes a wide range of activities and services provided by individuals or small businesses that do not adhere to the formal regulatory frameworks governing the industry [30]. In addition, informal employment is a key characteristic of precarity, where labour is employed without a proper contract and without normal social security benefits [12]. Precarity in hospitality has been critically examined by numerous researchers (i.e., [28,31,32]), with evidence suggesting that precarity is increasing, especially in the post-COVID-19 era [6]. The industry's reliance on part-time, temporary, and zero-hour contracts leaves workers vulnerable to unstable incomes, negatively impacting employee morale, job satisfaction, and overall well-being [33]. Temporary workers, particularly migrants, are especially vulnerable to exploitation due to their dependency on employers and the power imbalances created by their immigration status [34]. Anderson [35] argues that immigration restrictions intended to protect immigrants and prioritise the local labour force may fail to achieve either goal, instead contributing to the precarious situations of low-wage migrant workers.

3.2. Worker Exploitation

Despite the extensive media attention (Figure 1), the existing literature has given limited attention to pressing issues such as labour exploitation, modern slavery, and forced labour within the hospitality industry, despite evidence of migrants being pressured into abusive working conditions (i.e., [26,36,37]). French [26] explores how neoliberal economic policies may increase the prevalence of modern slavery and exploitation in the hospitality sector, emphasising the difficulty of addressing these issues due to resource constraints and political factors. Lewis et al. [36] examine the impact of welfare policies, immigration restrictions, and neoliberal labour practices on migrant worker exploitation, introducing concepts like "hyper-precarity" and a "continuum of unfreedom". Giousmpasoglou et al. [19] investigate worker exploitation in the gig economy, focusing on dark kitchens. Their study reveals cases of wage theft and substandard working conditions, highlighting the need for legislative action to protect hospitality gig workers' rights and ensure fair treatment.

Skrivankova [38] describes an exploitation continuum, illustrating how decent work can deteriorate into forced labour. The hospitality industry often exemplifies this continuum, with its prevalent issues of long hours and shift work, unstable employment, low pay, and limited advancement opportunities. These conditions do not align with the principles of decent work, affecting the dignity of workers in hospitality jobs [39]. Winchenbach et al. [29] stress the importance of engaging critically with the concept of decent and dignified work, aligning with the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s

ethical tourism standards for fair wages, inclusive workplaces, employee engagement, and work–life balance [31].



Figure 1. Hospitality worker exploitation media coverage. Source: image created by the author.

Lashley [2] argues that the hotel industry’s heavy reliance on low-skilled migrant labour significantly contributes to labour exploitation and modern slavery. Hotels and similar businesses, characterised by complex supply chains, are particularly vulnerable to exploitative practices [40]. Identifying these practices is challenging due to the industry’s tiered structure and multi-layered hiring processes [36]. Despite the recognition of high-risk conditions, hotel companies demonstrate low compliance with international modern slavery regulations. A study by BHRRRC [41] found that only 25% of the 71 hotel companies surveyed met the minimum requirements, while 68% failed to disclose information regarding their supply chain and operational risks. An examination of modern slavery declarations from major UK hotel chains revealed insufficient efforts to combat modern slavery within their supply chains, raising concerns about the effectiveness of auditing procedures and the transparency of public reporting [42]. Furthermore, recent empirical studies (i.e., [43,44]) provided further evidence on labour exploitation in the hotel industry, emphasising the normalisation and moralisation of exploitation, and the diminished capacity of workers to assert their rights.

Based on the above discussion, it is argued that research and perspectives on hospitality worker exploitation reveal complex interactions among immigration regulations, labour market dynamics, and business practices. Addressing labour exploitation and ensuring fair and dignified work conditions in the hospitality industry require comprehensive approaches that consider policy, corporate practices, and societal attitudes towards migrant and low-wage workers.

3.3. Algorithmic Management and Robots in Hospitality

Algorithmic management and robotics are rapidly transforming working conditions in the hospitality industry, fundamentally reshaping how tasks are organised, monitored, and executed. While these technologies offer the promise of increased efficiency and productivity, they also raise serious concerns about the future of hospitality workers.

Parent-Rocheleau and Parker [45] argue that algorithmic management is one of the most disruptive forms of technological change currently being implemented in the workplace. Algorithmic management (AM) refers to the use of software and algorithms to oversee and direct employee tasks [46]. In hospitality, this often manifests through online platforms that schedule shifts, assign tasks, and monitor performance, e.g., gig work AM-powered platforms (i.e., Uber Eats and Deliveroo) can now remotely supervise workers and enable automated or semi-automated decision-making [47]. Algorithms can optimise labour costs by ensuring staffing matches demand, but they can also create unpredictable work schedules, leaving employees with little control over their time [48]. Hospitality workers may be subject to algorithmic surveillance, with their productivity continuously monitored and analysed. This constant tracking can lead to increased pressure, burnout, and a toxic work environment, as workers are pushed to meet performance metrics that prioritise speed and efficiency over employee well-being [49].

Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven decision-making is another growing trend in the hospitality industry. AI can streamline operations like customer service, reservations, and inventory management [50]. Newman et al. [51] suggest that algorithm-supported decision-making provides organisations with new opportunities by automating managerial tasks and enabling efficient, data-driven decisions. These algorithms are often more accurate than human managers, outperforming them in over 80% of cases [52]. However, while they enhance organisational effectiveness and productivity, they also raise concerns about fairness, ethical accountability, transparency, algorithmic bias, and worker anxiety [53]. Additionally, the dehumanisation of management could undermine the empathetic aspects of human resources, with potential impacts on employee well-being [46,54]. In this context, hospitality workers may be reduced to mere data points, judged solely on their ability to meet metrics rather than their overall contributions [48]. This can disproportionately impact low-wage workers in the hospitality sector, who often have little recourse to challenge automated decisions.

PricewaterhouseCoopers projects that by the 2030s, one-quarter of hospitality jobs in the USA will be automated [55]. Robots in hospitality are increasingly employed in roles such as cleaning, food delivery, and guest assistance. While they reduce human labour costs, this automation threatens job security, especially for low-skilled workers [56]. As robots take over repetitive tasks, human workers are often left with more precarious employment. The introduction of robots is therefore argued to contribute to a decline in wages, as hospitality workers are forced to compete with machines for the remaining jobs, further widening economic inequality.

4. The Fair and Decent Work Agenda

The concept of Decent Work (DW) was developed within the framework of the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s Decent Work Agenda (DWA) in 1999, also known as the Fair and Decent Work Agenda (FDWA). This concept emphasises values such as freedom, equity, security, and human dignity, aligning with UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goal No.8, which promotes inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all [57]. The FDWA is directly connected to social sustainability and social justice, topics that have often been marginalised in research in favour of the environmental sustainability agenda [32]. Social sustainability plays a pivotal role in the hospitality context by enhancing working conditions, which helps hospitality companies remain sustainable and build a positive reputation while benefiting individual employees [58]. Furthermore, Budd [7] argues that advancing the FDWA promotes important societal objectives such as social justice and equality in the workplace.

The benefits of the FDWA's implementation for individuals and organisations are well documented [59]. Previous research, such as that of Wan and Duffy [60] established a precedent for examining the relationship between the FDWA and turnover intentions of new-generation workers. Elements of the FDWA such as decent wages, comfortable working conditions, leisure and recreation, healthcare, and inclusive work values effectively predict worker intentions and turnover rates [61]. Studies show that the existence of an FDWA at the workplace negatively impacts younger employees' intentions to leave [62], particularly among China's youth workforce, who are more aware of fair employment opportunities and work-life balance due to the country's economic growth [63].

Baum [27,64] suggests that the FDWA has played a significant role in improving working conditions for the hospitality industry over the years in refining the industry's image and reputation. Burchell et al. [65] highlight that the FDWA takes a broad approach, addressing crucial subjects like work-life balance, labour relations, employee rights, and gender disparities, aiming to provide a sustainable understanding of work in both social and environmental contexts. However, operationalising the FDWA has proven challenging due to its societal focus and its limitations in addressing issues like gender inequality and the quality of employment for migrants [66]. According to Robinson et al. [37], one of the key barriers to adopting better work-related practices and creating a sustainable work environment is the precarious nature of work as an embedded characteristic of the hospitality and tourism industry and the existing business model. In addition, Janta and Ladkin [24] contend that despite increased attention to promoting fair, sustainable, and respectable work, the precariousness and uncertainty faced by migrant workers in the industry have increased due to changing industrial relations and global trends. According to the ILO [57], precarity and worker exploitation are more prevalent than ever in human history across many service and production industries, including restaurant and food services, domestic work, agriculture, nail bars, and car washes. It is therefore argued that key stakeholders and decision-makers in the industry need to prioritise actions related to the improvement in working conditions in the hospitality industry through the FDWA's implementation.

Critiques such as those of Blustein et al. [67] and Deranty and MacMillan [68] argue that the FDWA insufficiently addresses the professional lives of its members. In response, researchers have been developing tools that integrate psychological, social, and economic aspects with self-reported measures of the FDWA [66]. However, these instruments often overlook workers' psychological perspectives, focusing primarily on visible elements of quality work. Recent efforts to capture the FDWA's multidimensionality have emphasised aggregates and secondary data, lacking the inclusion of workers' psychological viewpoints [69]. Additionally, these metrics typically treat all economic activity uniformly, failing to differentiate between various industries, such as hospitality [70].

5. The Roadmap to FDWA Implementation

The hospitality and tourism industry is a major pillar of the global economy, employing millions and significantly contributing to the GDP of many developing countries. According to the WTTC [71], the sector accounted for 9.1% of global GDP, equating to just over USD 9.9 trillion in 2023. Additionally, the travel and tourism workforce expanded by 27.4 million jobs, bringing the sector's total employment to nearly 330 million worldwide. Despite its significance, based on the discussion above, it is easy to conclude that the global hospitality workforce is often faced with issues such as lack of fairness and dignity. The need for equitable and decent working conditions in this sector is pressing, not only for the well-being of employees but also for the sustainability and reputation of the industry itself. So far, this paper has explored the necessity for Fair and Decent Work in the hospitality industry, examining the barriers to the FDWA's implementation (i.e., substandard working conditions, low pay, precarity, lack of career progression opportunities), and the benefits of improved working conditions. The discussion will now focus on the key components and strategies for effective FDWA implementation (Figure 2).

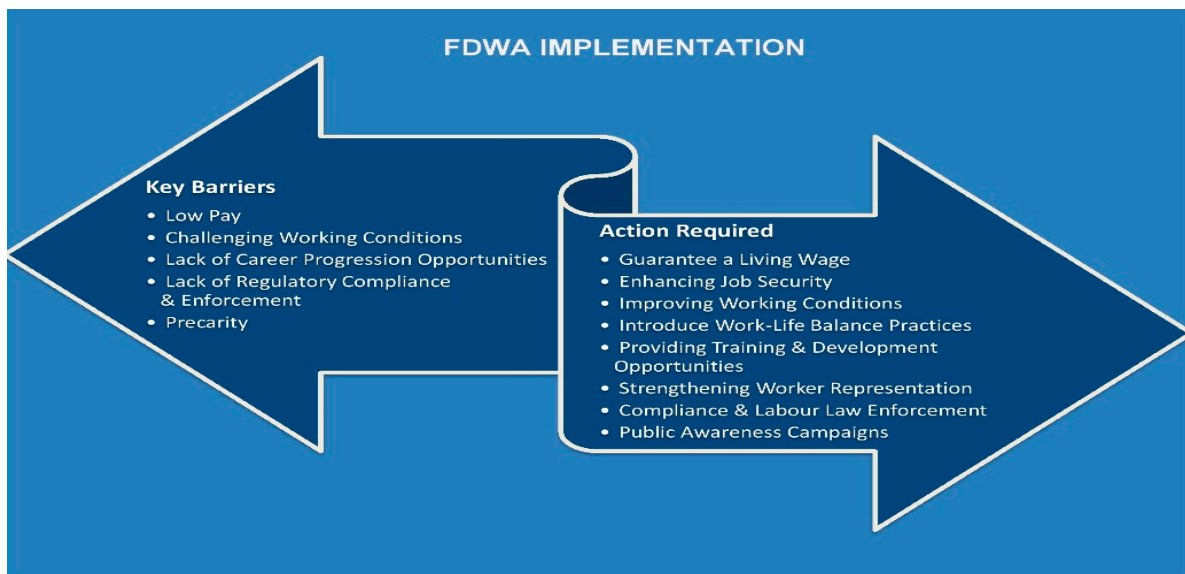


Figure 2. Key barriers and actions required for the FDWA's implementation.

Improving working conditions in the hospitality sector requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both wages and broader labour practices. One key strategy is ensuring all workers receive a living wage, which reflects the actual cost of living rather than the national minimum wage. This helps create financial stability for workers, reducing poverty and allowing them to meet basic needs. Regular wage assessments and transparency are crucial to maintaining fair pay structures within businesses. Strengthening worker representation through trade unions and councils can empower employees to negotiate better wages and conditions. Collective bargaining and participatory management practices give workers a voice in decision-making, improving job satisfaction and engagement.

In addition to fair wages, enhancing job security is vital. Reducing reliance on precarious contracts (i.e., part-time, temporary, zero-hour contracts) and providing stable, permanent employment can significantly improve workers' financial predictability and overall well-being. Employers should prioritise offering contracts that guarantee a minimum number of hours, allowing employees to plan their lives with greater certainty.

Improving working conditions is also essential to addressing substandard labour practices in hospitality. Employers must implement policies that ensure reasonable hours, sufficient breaks, and safe working environments. It is essential to focus on family-owned businesses and independent operators, ensuring they are educated on the benefits of maintaining good working conditions. By understanding how fair treatment positively impacts both employees and business outcomes, these operators can create healthier and more efficient work environments. Fostering an inclusive, non-discriminatory workplace is equally important, with a focus on promoting diversity and equality across gender, race, and ethnicity. Additionally, clear procedures for reporting workplace bullying and harassment are necessary to ensure a supportive environment for all employees.

Promoting work–life balance is another critical aspect of improving working conditions. The demanding nature of hospitality jobs often leads to emotional exhaustion and eventually burnout, so flexible scheduling, adequate rest, and paid leave provisions are crucial to improving hospitality workers' quality of life. Family-friendly policies, such as childcare services and accommodating work hours, can further support employees in managing personal and professional responsibilities.

Investing in employee training, reskilling, and development is also key to creating a more sustainable and satisfying work environment. Continuous professional development not only benefits service quality but also helps workers advance their careers. Providing training in areas like the use of new technologies for health and safety, customer service, and management can enhance employees' skills and career prospects, benefiting both

the workforce and the business. The introduction of robots and AI-driven tools in the hospitality workforce is now a reality and presents an opportunity to reskill employees for more complex, value-added tasks. As machines take over repetitive and manual work, employees can focus on roles that require critical thinking, creativity, and customer engagement, enhancing both job satisfaction and productivity.

Lastly, compliance with labour laws and public awareness campaigns play a pivotal role in driving systemic change within the hospitality industry. Government intervention—through raising minimum wages, enforcing health and safety regulations, and offering incentives for fair labour practices—ensures that businesses uphold and maintain decent work standards. Equally important is the involvement of professional associations and NGOs, which can advocate for workers' rights, promote best practices, and provide essential support in enforcing these standards. Public awareness campaigns are another powerful tool in this effort. By informing consumers about the working conditions within hospitality businesses, these campaigns can create consumer-driven pressure for change. When customers choose to support businesses that prioritise fair treatment of their employees, it encourages companies to adopt better labour practices. Additionally, highlighting successful initiatives can inspire further action across the industry. Table 1 below provides a few examples of successful campaigns and actions towards the FDWA's implementation.

Table 1. Public awareness initiatives and actions towards the FDWA's implementation.

Initiative	Short Description
<i>The Real Living Wage Campaign</i> https://livingwage.org.uk/ (accessed on 25 September 2024).	The Real Living Wage campaign in the UK has successfully encouraged numerous employers to pay their staff a wage that reflects the true cost of living. This voluntary initiative has seen businesses in various sectors, including hospitality, commit to paying a higher wage, resulting in improved employee satisfaction and retention.
<i>The Fair Hotel Campaign</i> https://www.fairhotel.org/ (accessed on 25 September 2024).	The North American trade union <i>Unite Here</i> has initiated an ambitious system that allows customers to select their accommodation on the basis of information on the labour conditions of the staff. Choosing a <i>FairHotel</i> is a way for consumers to make a difference in the lives of hardworking people who make their beds or prepare the meals. Unite Here works to improve wages and benefits in the hospitality industry, creating jobs that sustain families and communities.
<i>The World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance</i> https://sustainablehospitalityalliance.org/ (accessed on 25 September 2024).	The World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance addresses critical social and environmental issues through collaboration in one of the world's biggest industries. The Alliance provides a non-competitive platform for hotel industry leaders to share ideas, build relationships and work collaboratively to make this one of the world's most responsible industries.
<i>Celebration without Exploitation</i> https://www.iom.int/news/iom-supports-grassroots-initiatives-2010-fifa-world-cup-south-africa (accessed on 25 September 2024).	The 'Celebration without Exploitation' initiative has been set up by IOM in advance of the South Africa World Cup, to prevent and respond to worker exploitation and trafficking in persons before, during, and after the 2010 FIFA World Cup.
<i>The Food, Farm, Hotels and more Global Union</i> https://www.iuf.org/ (accessed on 25 September 2024).	The International Union of Food Workers (IUF) and other sectors of the industry such as hotel and tourism-sector workers started an international campaign, through union organisations, to denounce the conditions of exploitation and labour instability of hotel housekeeper workers. The campaign has had an impact in different countries on all continents, starting with Argentina where the Union of Workers in Tourism, Hotel and Gastronomic services was a pioneer in bringing the problem to public attention.

6. Conclusions

The rise of the gig economy and in flexible work arrangements, particularly during and after COVID-19, has increased worker vulnerability within the hospitality industry [19]. Businesses have increasingly turned to casual employment and subcontracting to reduce labour costs. Although flexibility initially emerged in the lower end of the industry, particularly in small family-run businesses and SMEs with limited resources, it has since expanded

across all types of hospitality enterprises. This shift blurs the lines in employer–employee relationships, leading to inadequate enforcement of labour standards and normalising exploitative practices [1]. To address these challenges, macro-level policy reforms, stronger labour law enforcement, and comprehensive structural oversight are essential.

In parallel, the introduction of algorithmic management, AI-driven technologies, and robotics offers operational efficiencies but also heightens the precariousness of hospitality jobs [48]. These technologies, if unregulated, can undermine job security, increase surveillance, and erode workers' rights, particularly for low-wage and low-skill employees. The risk of exploitation intensifies as automation and data-driven management prioritise cost-cutting and productivity over worker welfare. Therefore, it is crucial to balance technological innovation with ethical considerations, ensuring that these advancements do not come at the expense of workers' dignity and livelihoods. Safeguarding fair treatment and labour standards must be central to this evolving landscape.

The need for fair and decent work in the global hospitality industry is undeniable. Tackling challenges such as low wages, job insecurity, poor working conditions, and limited career progression is not only an ethical imperative but also beneficial for the economy and society as a whole. Implementing strategies such as paying a living wage, enhancing job security, improving working conditions, promoting career development, and strengthening worker representation can create a more sustainable and equitable future for the industry. Government intervention through compliance monitoring, labour law enforcement, and public awareness campaigns also plays a crucial role in this transformation. Together, these efforts can ensure that the global hospitality industry remains vibrant, resilient, and fair for all its workers.

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